



Projectionism, Realism, and Hume's Moral Sense Theory

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Hume Studies Volume XV Number 1 (April 1989) 61-92.

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PROJECTIONISM, REALISM, AND HUME'S MORAL SENSE THEORY[†]Introduction

The character of Hume's moral theory is currently a topic of considerable discussion.¹ We find in the recent literature essentially two sorts of interpretation of Hume's theory. On the one side there is the view that, for Hume, the distinction between virtue and vice is reducible to the moral sentiments of approval and disapproval. Associated with this view is the further claim that Hume ascribes to us the belief that virtue and vice exist as the counterparts to these sentiments; and, in addition, that this belief is, for Hume, a mistaken one.² For reasons which will become obvious this may be described as the Projectionist account of Hume. On the other side, there is the attempt to represent Hume's moral theory as a form of realism, i.e., a theory according to which there are moral properties belonging to actions, or the agents who perform them, which provide objective correlates of the feelings which those actions, or the agents concerned, induce in us as spectators.³ Now clearly an important part of what is at stake between these different interpretations is the question of how seriously we should take Hume's own description of this theory as one according to which moral distinctions are derived from a moral sense. It is characteristic of the Projectionist interpretation to suggest that 'sense' is equivalent here to 'sentiment',⁴ and, indeed, that Hume's moral sense theory is tantamount to the denial that there is anything in 'objects' themselves corresponding to our moral (or aesthetic) sentiments.⁵ The Realist interpretation, on the other hand, stresses the importance of Hume's references in

the Treatise to a moral (and aesthetic) sense, and the precedent provided in this respect by Hutcheson,⁶ and it takes seriously the idea that this sense enables us to become acquainted, via the sentiments involved, with the qualities of virtue and vice. My own interest in these different interpretations concerns their disagreement about the way in which we should understand Hume's notion of a moral sense. I wish to argue against the Projectionist interpretation, and its dismissive treatment of Hume's references to a moral sense, though it is a further question whether the view of Hume which emerges deserves the name of 'Realism'.

1. The Projectionist Interpretation

It seems clear that the notion of a moral sense cannot be intended literally, i.e., as though there is a form of moral sense-perception strictly comparable to the modes of perception provided by the external senses. It is, presumably, part of the definition of a sense that it is a faculty whose function depends upon stimulation of an organ or, at least, receptors peculiar to that sense; and, furthermore, in the case of the various external senses there is -- except for the contact sense of touch -- a distinctive medium of perception. For both these reasons moral sense theorists can only be proposing an analogy with the external senses.⁷ In Hume's case in particular, however, there appear to be reasons for doubting whether the analogy can be more than superficial. Perhaps the most obvious of these lies with Hume's insistence on the action-guiding character of the distinction between moral good and evil (see e.g., T 437-462). For it seems clear that sense-perceptions as such can have no direct influence upon our actions.⁸

Then there is Hume's denial that morality consists in any matter of fact (T 468; EPM 292). If virtue and vice are to be considered the objects of some form of moral sense-perception their existence presumably does become a matter of fact. Finally, a moral sense theory seems to imply that judgements of virtue and vice are straightforwardly true or false, according to whether or not we perceive veridically; while Hume's own discussion sometimes points to a non-propositional view of moral utterances as the expression of certain feelings or sentiments.

These last two points remind us that Hume often appears to deny that values belong as intrinsic properties to the objects evaluated. This is obviously true of the following, much quoted, passage:

Take any action allow'd to be vicious: Wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call vice. In which-ever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You can never find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. Here is a matter of fact; but 'tis the object of feeling, not of reason. It lies in yourself, not in the object. (T 468-469)

It is natural to compare this passage, in support of the Projectionist or anti-Realist interpretation,⁹ with Hume's earlier comments about causal necessity:

Tho' the several resembling instances, which give rise to the idea of power [= necessary connection] have no influence on each other, and can never

produce any new quality in the object, which can be the model of that idea, yet the observation of this resemblance produces a new impression in the mind which is its real model.... Necessity, then, is the effect of this observation, and is nothing but an internal impression of the mind.... (T 164-165)

In each case there is a question as to whether a certain quality -- on the one hand, vice, on the other, power or necessity -- belongs to the 'object' or, on the other hand, to its observer; and in each case, it seems, Hume comes down in favour of the latter. Now, Hume is certainly aware of the apparently paradoxical nature of what he has said about causal necessity. He recognises that "we suppose necessity and power to lie in the objects we consider, not in our mind that considers them" (T 167); and he accounts for this by referring to the "great propensity" of the mind "to spread itself on external objects" (T 167). Hume similarly recognises the objectifying character of our moral and aesthetic responses:

...with regard to beauty, either natural or moral, ... the agreeable quality is thought to lie in the object, not in the sentiment. ("The Sceptic" 218)¹⁰

It is noticeable, however, that in this latter case he makes no reference to the spreading propensity of the mind, contrary to what one would expect if the 'agreeable qualities' of beauty or virtue belonged to the responses of the observer rather than the object evaluated.

The anti-Realist interpretation of Hume is apparently bolstered by the sentence which follows on immediately from the passage cited above from Treatise Bk III:

So that when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it. (T 469)

This seems to commit Hume to a meta-ethical theory about the meaning of moral utterances or 'pronouncements' which amounts to a form of logical or conceptual subjectivism, i.e., that these utterances merely state that the speaker has certain feelings, or give expression to these feelings. But there are various reasons for supposing that Hume cannot be credited with such a theory -- or, indeed, with any considered view of the meaning of moral utterances.¹¹ For one thing, Hume's interests in developing his moral theory clearly lie with our perceptions -- our impressions and ideas -- rather than the vocabulary in which they are reported or expressed. But, in any case, Hume cannot attribute to us the view that moral qualities lie in the object -- as he does, e.g., in "The Sceptic" -- while also suggesting that we use the vocabulary of virtue and vice only to refer to our feelings or sentiments. A similar point applies to what he says about necessary connection. It is not always noticed that here, too, Hume seems to commit himself to a kind of logical or conceptual subjectivism which is quite at odds with his recognition that we attribute necessity to objects themselves.

When we say, therefore, that one object is connected with another, we mean only that they have acquired a connexion in our thought, and give rise to this inference, by which they become proofs of each other's existence.... (EHU 76)

Considered as an account of what we mean when we say that two objects are causally related or connected

this is, of course, no more plausible than the corresponding account of our moral utterances; and it is doubtful whether Hume is seriously to be credited with such an account. As to why he should write in such terms, both here and in his discussion of virtue and vice, the most likely explanation seems to be that he is guilty of a degree of rhetorical exaggeration. The passages I have cited each occur towards the end of Hume's attack on a certain type of 'rationalist' viewpoint, i.e., one according to which, on the one hand, the power or energy of a cause is "discoverable by the mind" (EHU 63); and, on the other, moral distinctions are discoverable by reason alone (T 457). It is, I suggest, Hume's desire to emphasise his repudiation of this kind of viewpoint, and his alternative explanation of our causal and moral judgements (i.e., that they rest in impressions rather than ideas) that leads him to provide a misleading subjectivist account of the meaning or force of such judgements. We should also take note of Hume's expressed reservations about the subjectivism to which he appears to commit himself in each case. In a letter to Francis Hutcheson he asks, apropos of what he has said in the Treatise about our judgements of virtue and vice, if this is not "laid a little too strong."¹² Similarly, he recognises that his remarks on causal necessity may appear "extravagant and ridiculous," to the extent that they locate the efficiency of causes in the mind rather than in objects; and that they must therefore be qualified with the recognition that "the operations of nature are independent of our thought and reasoning" (T 167-168).

It therefore seems that Hume is not, after all, committed to a non-propositional account of moral

utterances; and, on the contrary, that he recognises their use to ascribe virtue and vice to the objects concerned. But the possibility remains to be considered that, for Hume, this is simply another instance of the 'spreading propensity' which leads us to attribute causal necessity to objects themselves. Even if Hume fails explicitly -- at least, in the Treatise¹³ -- to endorse a Projectionist account of our moral pronouncements, such an account may nevertheless seem to be implicit in his discussion of virtue and vice. For instance, the conclusion which Hume reaches in the previously quoted passage about "wilful murder" is that the only relevant matter of fact in the case concerns the feelings or sentiments of the spectator. Indeed, Hume goes on to compare virtue and vice with the secondary qualities which, as he notes, "modern philosophy" considers to be "perceptions in the mind" rather than "qualities in objects" (T 469; cf. "The Sceptic", p. 219 n.). It is not surprising that proponents of the Projectionist interpretation should seize upon this comparison as pointing to a denial by Hume of the objectivity of values.¹⁴ But I hope now to show that Hume's comparison with the secondary qualities does not imply that his position on the status of virtue and vice amounts to a form of ontological or metaphysical subjectivism.

Consider the distinction drawn by Hume between qualities that objects possess absolutely, and those that they possess only relatively. Hume writes as follows, e.g. in "The Sceptic":

...beauty and worth are merely of a relative nature. (217)

Good and ill, both natural and moral, are entirely relative to human sentiment and affection. (221)

The distinction is also found in the Treatise Bk III, where Hume refers to beauty as being a relative rather than an absolute quality (T 577). What Hume appears to mean by this is that we ascribe a quality such as beauty to an object only in relation to the sentiments produced in us by that object. Thus, to use Hume's own example ("The Sceptic" 219; EPM 291-292), we may contrast the beauty of a circle, as relating to the effect which the circle produces on us, with the geometrical properties of the figure which it possesses independently of its effects upon the mind. Now it might seem that the natural way of expressing this is to say that beauty and virtue are those qualities of objects which dispose them to give rise in us to the appropriate sentiment, i.e., of approbation. Yet Hume himself persists in writing of these properties as though they belong to the mind, rather than to objects themselves.

The beauty is not a quality of the circle.... It is only the effect which that figure produces upon the mind. (EPM 291-292)

Such remarks are at least misleading in regard to the status of beauty and virtue as relative qualities. Hume seems to equate his view of these qualities as being a matter of the way in which objects of certain kinds give rise to certain distinctive sentiments in the mind, with the view that they are, therefore, qualities of the mind itself. But, if so, this is a confusion which obviously plays its part in the tendency to read Hume's account of virtue and vice in accordance with Projectionism. A similar confusion is found in Hume's comments on the Lockean account of secondary qualities like colour (i.e., that on this account, such qualities may be ascribed only to our

perceptions). As recent discussion has established,¹⁵ even if it is supposed that the colour ascribed to a certain type of object reflects, or is relative to, the way we perceive it, this does not prevent us from regarding colour as a property of the object itself. Whatever the object in question may be, it is a fact about that object that under normal circumstances it looks some particular way to us; on the view of colour as a relative quality, this is just what it is for the object to have the colour it does. And the object's being such as to present this colour appearance is independent of its actually looking that way to anyone on any particular occasion. On this view, then, the colour of an object is a dispositional property which it possesses independently of the way it is perceived in any particular instance, though not, of course, of the way it is perceived in general. Even if it is true that the colour of an object has to do with -- is relative to -- the way in which we experience that object, it does not follow that its colour is merely a feature of the experience itself. So while there may be some sense in which secondary qualities like colour are to be considered more subjective than the primary qualities, their comparative subjectivity is not a matter of such qualities belonging only to the perceiving mind.¹⁶

A similar conclusion may be drawn in the case of moral and aesthetic qualities. Even if it is true -- as it surely is -- that we appraise actions as virtuous or vicious, and the objects as beautiful or 'deformed', as a result of the sentiments which they produce in us, this by no means shows that such qualities belong only to our sentiments. If Hume is confused on this point, it is because he is operating

with an oversimple dichotomy between the properties which belong to objects, and those which belong to perceptions. It is as though he has moved from the premise that beauty and virtue are not absolute properties of the objects concerned, to the conclusion that they must therefore belong, as such properties, to perceptions themselves. But this fails to do justice to his own distinction between relative and absolute properties. As Hume seems obscurely to recognise, a relative property of an object is nonetheless a real property of that object.¹⁷ It is a property in virtue of which the object is disposed to affect us in certain ways, and which is ascribed to the object on the basis of these effects. One way of putting this is to say that beauty or virtue consists in a complex state of affairs, one involving not only the object itself, but also observers so constituted that the object affects them in the way it does. We should note that Hume himself is capable of writing in such terms. Consider, e.g., the following discussion of the crime of ingratitude, which contains striking echoes of the notorious "wilful murder" passage from Treatise Bk III:

Enquire then, first, where is that matter of fact which we here call crime; point it out; determine the time of its existence; describe its essence or nature; explain the sense or faculty to which it discovers itself.... (EPM 287)

And Hume then continues:

...the crime of ingratitude is not any particular individual fact; but arises from a complication of circumstances, which, being presented to the spectator, excites the sentiment of blame, by the particular structure and fabric of his mind. (EPM 287-288)

(Hume writes in similar fashion about beauty as something which is not to be found in any parts of the object concerned, "but results from the whole, when ... presented to an intelligent mind" (EPM 292).) The explanation which Hume gives here of his denial that vice or crime consists in any particular matter of fact surely enables us to see the "wilful murder" passage in a different light: as allowing the possibility that vice may, after all, be ascribed to the action itself as part of the "complication of circumstances" in which a sentiment of disapprobation arises in the spectator.

I have noted that an obstacle to taking Hume's references to a moral sense at all seriously, i.e., as suggesting more than a very superficial analogy with the external senses, is his denial that morality consists in any particular matter of fact. But what we have now seen is that this denial is not, after all, tantamount to a form of ontological subjectivism about values. The distinction between relative and absolute qualities allows us to see Hume's own comparison with sounds, colours, etc., as pointing to the view of beauty and virtue as properties of objects which dispose them to affect us in certain ways. Neither beauty nor virtue consists in any particular matter of fact but, as with, e.g. the colour of an object, their existence is a complex matter involving both the objects to which they are ascribed and also observers so constituted that these objects affect them as they do. The Projectionist interpretation errs, I suggest, by focusing on this latter aspect of Hume's position at the expense of the former.

An illustration of this last point is provided by Fogelin's recent discussion which makes use of the

essay already referred to, "The Sceptic."¹⁸ Hume here concludes a discussion of our moral and aesthetic appraisals by saying that their "objects have absolutely no worth or value in themselves" (219; cf. also 224). This kind of remark, taken by itself, obviously favours Fogelin's interpretation of Hume. But I think there is reason to be suspicious about Fogelin's reliance on "The Sceptic" for what he says about Hume's moral theory. This is not merely because, as Fogelin himself concedes, this essay has a problematic status,¹⁹ (the question at issue being whether Hume is here engaged in the literary exercise of 'personating' a certain character, or writing in propria persona). The point is, rather, that the balance of the discussion in "The Sceptic" is directed towards revealing how far the sentiments which lead us to ascribe values to objects depend upon the fabric and constitution of the mind (218, 221). It is significant that Fogelin does not compare this discussion with another essay in which Hume deals again with the relation between values such as beauty and virtue and the sentiments of the observer: namely, "Of the Standard of Taste."²⁰ The topic here is one which arises directly from the position taken by Hume in "The Sceptic." If beauty (and virtue) are matters of sentiment, and "all sentiment is right" (268) -- i.e., because sentiments are non-representational -- it seems that there can be no issue concerning the real ethical or aesthetic value of an object. Yet in spite of the proverbial fruitlessness of disputes concerning taste, we often give more weight to the opinions of some in these matters than to those of others. In other words, we do not, in practice, subscribe to the "principle of the natural equality of tastes" (269). Hume is therefore

concerned with the principles of approbation or blame which will provide the standard of taste and mark "the natural boundaries of vice and virtue" (284). To this point, Hume emphasises that if our moral and aesthetic sentiments reflect the structure of the mind, they also depend upon features of the object concerned. Thus, even if beauty and deformity belong to sentiment rather than to objects themselves, there are nevertheless qualities in the objects which naturally give rise to these feelings (273). The reason, therefore, why we give special weight to the value judgements of certain persons lies in the ability of these people to discern those qualities which are naturally fitted to give rise to sentiments of approval or disapproval. This makes it possible to talk of the "proper" sentiment (272), and "suitable praise or blame" (275), and to ascribe the occurrence of inappropriate sentiments to some defect of the observer himself (277-278).

I would also draw attention here to Hume's discussion in Treatise II.i.8, "Of beauty and deformity". It is clear from this discussion that beauty, for Hume, has to do with the object rather than the sentiments to which it gives rise. Beauty is "an order and construction of parts" -- or, more generally, "a form" -- which is fitted to give pleasure (T 299). This enables Hume to identify the beauty of a palace with the "figure and appearance" of the building as well as its "order and convenience" (T 299). The same part of Hume's discussion may also help to explain how, nevertheless, he is able to write as though beauty (like virtue) consists in the pleasurable sentiment of approbation. Thus, within a few sentences of each other we find the following:

Pleasure and pain, therefore, are not only necessary attendants of beauty

and deformity, but constitute their very essence. ...[t]he power of producing pain and pleasure make ... the essence of beauty and deformity (T 299)

Clearly, the essence of beauty cannot consist both in pleasure and also in a power, in virtue of its form, to produce pleasure. My own suggestion towards resolving this apparent incoherence in Hume's position is that Hume means by referring to pleasure as the essence of beauty no more than that it is part of the nature of beauty to give rise to this sentiment. Thus, he subsequently writes that beauty "of itself produces pleasure" (T 375; my emphasis). His position is, therefore, that beauty consists in a certain order or form in the object and that this, of itself, constitutes a power to produce pleasure. (Compare what Hume says about wit: viz. that true and false wit are distinguished by taste, the former producing a sensation of pleasure and the latter of uneasiness; while the "power of bestowing these opposite sensations is, therefore, the very essence of true and false wit" (T 297).) In most cases, according to Hume, this power of certain objects to produce the pleasure associated with beauty depends upon sympathy, by which we are able to enter into the pleasure or satisfaction derived from the ownership or use of these objects (T 363-364). The gist of Hume's remarks about beauty in the Treatise -- that it is a power of objects discerned by a taste or sense through the occurrence of certain pleasurable sentiments which, in many cases, depend upon the operation of sympathy -- seems to me to be reflected also in what he has to say about virtue.²¹

Before I go on to explore the relation in Hume's writings between the moral sense and the exter-

nal senses, I must say something about the point that, for Hume, a crucial aspect of moral distinctions is their action-guiding character. How is this to be reconciled with the idea that such distinctions are founded in a sense (or something which functions in a way which may appropriately be compared to an actual sense)? It is clear that, for Hume, part of the function of a sense is to convey impressions (see, e.g., T 34). These impressions Hume classifies as 'original' (T 275), and comprise not only the 'external' impressions associated with the sense proper but also the 'internal' impressions of pain and pleasure (T 192). Now Hume would no doubt agree that the occurrence of external impressions would not, by itself, incline the perceiver to act in any particular way. What motivates us to action, rather, is the pleasure (or pain) associated with the things we perceive and the consequent desires (or aversions) towards these objects (cf. T II.iii.3). To turn then to the moral sense: the crucial feature of the sentiments with which it is associated is that they are themselves varieties of pleasure and pain. Virtue conveys a sentiment of pleasure; and vice, a sentiment of pain (T 471). Furthermore, while impressions conveyed by the external senses provide us with ideas of objects and their qualities, the moral sentiments, as particular pleasures and pains, are "the distinguishing impressions by which moral good or evil is known" (T 471, cf. T 475). This provides us with a short answer to the point about the essential relation of morality to action. What this point establishes, for Hume, is that moral distinctions are discerned by impressions rather than ideas, and impressions which are themselves sentiments of pleasure or pain. But

the function of a moral sense is precisely to convey such impressions to us. In this way our sense of morals becomes at the same time an active principle (T 458).²² Of course, the fact that the moral sense is distinguished in this way from the external senses leads to the question of how far Hume means the comparison between them to extend; and it is to this question that I now turn.

2. The Moral Sense and the External Senses

I should perhaps begin by acknowledging that the phrase 'the (a) moral sense' does not occur with any frequency in the Treatise. Apart from the title of Treatise III.i.2, "Moral distinctions deriv'd from a moral sense," there is a reference to "the foregoing explication of the moral sense" (T 588), and to the approbation of moral qualities proceeding "entirely from a moral taste" (T 581; cf. EPM 294). (We may note, in addition, that Hume does refer to "the (a) sense of virtue" (T 471, 475, 496); "the sense of vice and virtue" (T 616, 619); the "sense of virtue or vice" as something which animals lack (T 326); "a sense of morals" (T 458); and "the sense of moral good and evil" (T 499).) However, if Hume refers only infrequently to the moral sense in so many words, it does seem reasonable to regard Treatise III.i.2 and III.iii.1 as providing an account or 'explication' of the way in which it operates. Apart from this, we shall see that there are various places in which Hume draws a quite clear parallel between the operations of the moral sense and those of the external senses. We should notice, incidentally, that Hume evidently wishes his account of our moral distinctions to apply, mutatis mutandis, also to the aesthetic distinction

between beauty and 'deformity'. Our sense of beauty (T 576; cf. 394, 395 and 618) is explained in very much the same terms as the moral sense itself, and I will be taking account of this in what follows.

There are some points of resemblance between the moral sense and the external senses on which I have touched already. If sight, touch etc., provide us with our ideas of body, so also the moral sense enables us to become aware of virtue and vice. The information with which we are provided in each case depends upon the occurrence of certain impressions. We should further notice that just as the impressions experienced in external perception vary with the nature of what is perceived, so also our moral sentiments vary in accordance with the different virtues, e.g., of which we become aware (T 607). And the sentiments we experience in each case are natural, i.e., it is part of human nature to experience the sentiments of morality to which Hume refers (T 474), as it must also be to experience the impressions of sensation conveyed by the external senses. We should notice also that the moral sense is supposed to provide a form of epistemologically direct perception ("We do not infer a character to be virtuous because it pleases: But in feeling that it pleases after such a particular manner, we in effect feel that it is virtuous" (T 471)) -- Hume would presumably take a similar view of external sense-perception. Another, crucial, point of comparison is that in the case both of the moral sense and the external senses there is a distinction to be drawn between appearance and reality. The impressions that we experience, whether 'external' or 'internal', are subject to correction according to the circumstances in which they occur.

If the role of the moral sentiments is to enable us to become aware of virtue and vice it follows that the relation between moral distinctions and the corresponding sentiments cannot be one of identity.²³ In fact, it is hard to see how any reading of Hume's account in Treatise III.iii of the natural virtues and vices could reach a different conclusion. (It is noteworthy that Fogelin, e.g., fails to refer to this part of Hume's discussion -- or even to Hume's presentation of his own account of the 'derivation' of moral distinctions in Treatise III.i.2). The gist of what Hume has to say about the natural virtues and vices is that they consist in qualities of mind or character, fitted in the one case -- virtue -- to give rise to the sentiment of approval as well as the indirect passions of love or pride; and in the other case -- vice -- to give rise to the sentiment of disapproval, together with the indirect passions of humility or hatred. (See T 471-473, 574-575, 580-581, 584-585, 588-591; and cf. EPM 261, 268, 277-278, 289, 336.) This is to say, in effect, that virtues and vices may be social or personal, depending on whether they are useful or agreeable, harmful or disagreeable, to the person concerned or to others. Now, while the Projectionist interpretation (as propounded, e.g., by Fogelin) seems to regard a moral sense theory as amounting to a denial of the reality of moral distinctions, I would suggest that the point of Hume's moral sense theory is, rather, to provide an alternative account to 'rationalism' of the way in which moral distinctions are apprehended: by sense (impressions) rather than reason (ideas). The moral sense makes us aware of these distinctions by means of sentiments which determine the occurrence or existence of virtue

and vice as 'mental qualities'. It is surely significant that Hume does not in the Treatise invoke propensities of the imagination as an additional alternative in accounting for the moral distinctions we make -- as we should expect him to do if he is committed, in his account of moral distinctions, to an 'error' theory.

I turn now to what seems to me a crucial point of resemblance between the moral sense and the external senses, viz., the process of correction which is required in each case.²⁴ We all know that a sense provides its possessor with information only to the extent that the system to which it belongs is able to adjust for differences in the appearances presented by objects according to the circumstances under which they are perceived. Indeed, in some cases the senses are sources of mistaken belief -- especially, for instance, where illusion is involved. Hume himself is obviously aware of the potential for scepticism provided by perceptual illusion. But it is notable that he does not see any basis here for ceasing to depend on the senses as sources of information; rather, what is revealed about the senses is that "we must correct their evidence by reason," so that they become "proper criteria of truth and falsehood" (EHU 151). There are at least two sorts of cases in which, on Hume's account, the senses require correction. One has to do with the constancies, as they are now called, i.e., the fact that objects look more or less the same in respect of properties like shape, size and colour, in spite of the varying conditions under which they are perceived -- in particular, e.g., the distance of perceiver from object. Hume recognises that while the retinal image projected by an object varies in size according to our distance from it, we do not

believe that the object itself changes (EHU 151-152). It seems unlikely, in fact, that size-constancy is a feature added to perception by processes of reasoning, but one can see why Hume should have regarded this as a case in which the sense, as concerned with the 'momentary appearances' of things, stand in need of correction. (Note also Hume's remark -- surely inspired by Berkeley -- about the perception of distance itself: "Even our sight informs us not of distance or outness (so to speak) immediately and without a certain reasoning and experience" (T 191; cf. 56).) The other kind of case in which the senses require correction is that of illusion, so-called -- e.g., the crooked appearance of an oar partially immersed in water, and the double images which result from pressing one eye (EHU 151). In this kind of case it does seem that we learn from experience to make allowance for the particular circumstances under which objects are perceived, and hence avoid the errors which would result from depending on 'the senses alone'.

Now considerations of this kind also apply, on Hume's account, to the moral sense. Perhaps this point may best be brought out in the following way. In the case of the bodily senses we should distinguish between the varying appearances which objects present and stable, enduring features of those objects -- in terms of the 'philosophical system', between the discrete impressions with which we are provided, and the external objects from which they arise (T 67, 211-216, 239; cf. EHU 152). The crucial distinction in the case of the moral sense is between the actions we appraise and their underlying, mental causes. Strictly speaking, our moral appraisals are concerned

with the intentions of the agent rather than his bodily behaviour; while these features of the agent also contribute towards the occurrence of the indirect passions:

By the intention we judge of the actions, and according as that is good or bad, they become causes of love or hatred. (T 348)

There is an obvious connection here with Hume's account of moral responsibility. A person is responsible for his actions only to the extent that they proceed from something durable in him (T 349) -- namely, an intention which connects those actions with that person as someone with certain qualities or mind or character. This, incidentally, provides Hume with an explanation of why we do not blame those who perform "evil" actions "ignorantly and casually," and attach less blame to such actions when they are performed in haste and without premeditation (T 412). It is, in a word, the character of the agent that determines whether he is virtuous or vicious. If we return for a moment to the "wilful murder" passage: we can see why the vice escapes us as long as we consider only the action itself. The action, given its results, is a criminal one only in so far as it is also proof of a criminal mind. The vice of an action which may genuinely be characterised as one of wilful murder belongs essentially to the mind or character of the agent: not, we should notice, to the sentiments of the observer.

The function of the moral sense, then, is to enable us to discern the qualities of character which render actions virtuous or vicious, rather as the bodily senses -- suitably corrected -- provide us with information about the enduring features of objects

which underlie their momentary appearances. In brief, the way in which the moral sense operates here -- e.g., in regard to virtue -- is this: a certain quality of mind is agreeable or useful to the person concerned or to others; its agreeable or useful effects are communicated to us via the mechanism of sympathy, by means of which we are able to experience the pleasure or satisfaction of the agent himself, or of others, as our own; these impressions then give rise, by association, to the pleasurable sentiment of approbation, together with the agreeable passions of love or pride. (Note that sympathy functions here as something like a perceptual mechanism: it enables us to experience the feelings of others in the form of impressions or, at least, quasi-impressions. See, e.g., T 317-319.) Now just as there are factors which make it necessary to correct the bodily senses, so also the moral sense itself can operate successfully only if it is subjected to a similar process of correction. It must allow, e.g., for the fact that the relation between a certain sort of character, and the actions with which a character of that kind is normally associated, may break down (rather as an object may, for various reasons, fail to appear as it really is). Hence, our moral judgements are founded on the tendencies of characters (T 579-580, 588-589; cf. EPM 228fn.), bearing in mind that circumstances may prevent these characters from achieving their usual effects. "Virtue in rags is still virtue" (T 584). Similar considerations apply to beauty: certain forms or qualities which would normally be associated with pleasure or satisfaction may, for various reasons, fail to produce such results (T 584; cf. "Of the Standard of Taste," T 271). In each case we proceed

from cause to customary effect under the influence of general rules.

In this process of correction we find an especially strong parallel with the case of perceptual constancy: in particular, that of perceived size in relation to distance. In fact, Hume himself makes the connection quite explicit:

...judgement here corrects the inequalities of our internal emotions and perceptions; in like manner, as it preserves us from error, in the several variations of images, presented to our external senses. (EPM 227)

Hume recognises that sympathy, as the source of our approval of those qualities of character which have beneficial tendencies, is itself variable: it operates more strongly in regard to people who are acquaintances of ours, than those people, like strangers or foreigners, whose actions are unable directly to affect us (T 580-581; cf. EPM 229). Yet, rather as an object like a table is judged to remain the same size in spite of variations in the impressions it produces according to the distance from which it is perceived, so also, to use the example cited by Hume, we give the same approbation to the same moral qualities in China as in England, notwithstanding the variation in moral sentiments according to "the distance or contiguity of objects." The point is that, as Hume goes on to say, "Our situation, with regard both to persons and things, is in continual fluctuation" (T 581). But there is, in spite of this, a constancy in our approbation of moral qualities as there is in our perception of such characteristics as the size of an object. It is worth emphasising this aspect of the perceptual model, for it is precisely here that difficulties with the model might be thought

to arise. Surely, it might be argued, there is a variation in the way in which the same actions are evaluated, both within and between different cultures, which is of a different order from any cultural variations there may be in the way in which the world is perceived. Hume's position on this point is sufficiently complex to merit discussion in its own right. But it does seem clear that, on the one hand, he is anxious to emphasise the degree of uniformity and agreement in our approval or disapproval of certain actions;²⁵ while, on the other hand, he identifies as causes of variation in sentiment features like education, custom and prejudice ("The Sceptic" 217) which, we might add on Hume's behalf, account also for those variations which may be acknowledged to exist in the way that different people perceive the world. In each case, we may aspire to overcome the resulting variation by arriving at a perspective which enables us to achieve a constancy of sentiment.

There are two questions which arise here: first, how is this constancy achieved? And second, how do we account for the fact that we should wish to correct the moral sense in this way? The answer to the first question is that we arrive at stable moral judgements by fixing on some steady and general points of view -- ones which abstract from features peculiar to our present situation (T 581-582, cf. 472; EPM 272). As we should expect, Hume makes a similar suggestion about our aesthetic judgements ("Of the Standard of Taste," T 276). As to why we should adopt this point of view, the explanation is partly, as we have seen, that by doing so we are able to avoid hasty, and perhaps mistaken, judgements arising from the fact that a person's actions may fail to reflect

durable features of his mind or character. (In this latter case there is an obvious parallel with perceptual illusions which arise when an object appears differently from the way it really is.) This is a manifestation of what Hume refers to in "Of the Standard of Taste" as "good sense." But why should we be interested in avoiding error and inconsistency? The answer, for Hume is, I think, that our existence as social beings ultimately depends on adopting a common view which allows for the "correction of appearances, both in internal and external sentiment" (EPM 228). This is a condition of the very possibility of language, as something which by its nature has a general use, and therefore of social intercourse itself. How could we share a common vocabulary of praise and blame if we allowed our judgements in these matters to be determined by our nearness or remoteness to the person concerned, or the "continual fluctuation" of our situation with regard to other persons? It would be similarly impossible to share a common vocabulary of objects or things, bearing in mind our fluctuating position in regard to them also (EPM 228; T 582).

I have drawn attention to two crucial aspects of the moral sense, as Hume employs this notion. One is that it must be corrected to enable us to penetrate the 'momentary appearances' of things: in this case, overt bodily behaviour. And the other is that this process of correction depends upon taking a general or common view of what is appraised. These points are clearly connected. It is only if we adopt this point of view that we will be able to discern those qualities of mind or character which make a person virtuous or vicious, and which enable us to appraise his

actions accordingly. In the terms employed by Hume in "Of the Standard of Taste" good sense makes possible "delicacy of imagination." In similar fashion, our perceptual judgements are characteristically concerned with objects, rather than the impressions of sensation to which they give rise; but for this to be possible, such judgements must transcend the momentary appearances which those objects present to the senses. In each case, objectivity of judgement depends upon objectivity of viewpoint.

Hume's view appears clearly to be that the occurrence of the moral sentiments itself depends upon taking the general view:

'Tis only when a character is considered in general, without reference to our particular interest, that it causes such a feeling or sentiment, as denominates it morally good or evil.
(T 472)

We should take into account here Hume's distinction between the impressions of pleasure and pain experienced via the moral sense and the characteristic moral sentiments of approval and disapproval. Feelings of pleasure or pain are liable to arise independently of the general point of view, and their occurrence on contemplating certain actions or characters is not by itself sufficient to excite moral praise or blame (T 472). Our sentiments of approval and disapproval, on the other hand, are distinctively associated with the general view; and as secondary, reflective impressions they are amenable to the influence of reflective reasoning. This is what makes it possible for Hume to refer in the case of the moral sentiments to the process of correction. We find, once more, a parallel for what Hume has in mind in the operation of the external senses. Take the case of

size-constancy: while an object's phenomenal size (i.e., the size it appears to be in relation to the retinal image it projects) is relative to the distance from which it is perceived, there is a sense in which it continues to appear more or less the same size in accordance with our knowledge of its actual size and the fact that this is unaffected by our distance from it. Similarly, then, our relation to the object of moral appraisal is liable to affect the pleasure or pain arising from that object, but our approval or disapproval of it takes account of the particular features of our situation. In each case the correction involved is a product of "reflexion" (T 603). As Hume puts it, reason "pave[s] the way" for sentiments of praise and blame, and in order that our moral judgements should achieve the objectivity associated with the general view distinctions need to be made, conclusions drawn, comparisons formed, relations examined, and facts ascertained (EPM 173). Reason alone, of course, will not suffice for moral approval or disapproval: the latter depend upon the occurrence of impressions of sensation in a way which gives point to Hume's notion of a moral sense. But the moral sense itself -- like the external sense -- operates as a source of information only with the support of reason or understanding.

3. Conclusion

My main purpose has been to explore Hume's account of the moral sense in order to provide a corrective to the Projectionist interpretation which denies that, for Hume, moral characteristics may be ascribed to actions or agents themselves. While Hume does sometimes appear to locate virtue and vice in the

sentiments of the observer, I have tried to show in the first part of my discussion that only a superficial reading would attribute this type of subjectivism to Hume as an account of moral distinctions. In particular, Hume's denial that morality consists in any particular matter of fact (and, more especially, any matter of fact which can be discovered by the understanding) does not, of itself, imply a form of ontological subjectivism about values.²⁶ On the contrary, I have argued that virtue and vice are, for Hume, qualities naturally fitted to give rise to the corresponding sentiments of approval and disapproval. In the second part of the discussion I have therefore been concerned with the way in which the moral sense enables us to apprehend these qualities, and the resemblances which we find here with the external senses.

I have suggested that the key to understanding Hume's moral sense theory lies with his distinction between relative and absolute qualities. The point of the distinction, imperfectly grasped though it is by Hume, is that certain qualities -- moral and natural beauty, as well as features like colour -- are ascribed to objects only in relation to the sentiments which those objects produce in us: the possession by objects of such qualities is inseparable from the way in which they are disposed to affect us. Thus vice, e.g., does not consist in any particular matter of fact but a complex state of affairs involving intentions or motives, as well as actions, and effects of the actions registered by the observer in the form of pain or distress. The latter explains Hume's reference here to a sense and one which, like the external senses, operates successfully only when corrected in

accordance with beliefs arising from reason and experience. The moral sense performs its function when it enables us to discern those qualities of mind or character which make an action (together with its tendencies) virtuous or vicious. In doing so it provides us with information about actions -- about their causes and effects -- in a way which prevents us from equating Hume's theory with the denial that there is anything in these actions corresponding to our moral sentiments. I hesitate to draw from this the conclusion that Hume's moral theory may be described, without qualification, as a form of 'Realism', since this might seem to suggest that virtue and vice are, for Hume, qualities possessed by objects without any essential relation to the perceptions which they produce in us. But if there is a point to describing Hume as a moral realist, in opposition to the Projectionist interpretation, this derives from the role of the moral sense in making us aware of virtue and vice as qualities of mind or character.

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* A version of this paper was read at the XVth Hume Conference, Marburg, West Germany, in August 1988. I have benefited greatly from discussion with my commentator on that occasion, Geoffrey Sayre McCord.

1. Among recent publications in which Hume's moral theory is discussed we may note the following: J. Harrison, Hume's Moral Epistemology (Oxford, 1976); B. Stroud, Hume (London, 1977); J.L. Mackie, Hume's Moral Theory (London, 1980); D.F. Norton, David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician (Princeton, 1982); and R. Fogelin, Hume's Scepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature (London, 1985). The writings of Hume to which I will be referring are these: A Treatise of Human Nature (here-

after, 'T'), ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge and P.H. Nidditch, (Oxford, 1978); An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding (hereafter, EHU) and An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals (hereafter, EPM), ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge and P.H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1976); The Philosophical Works, ed. T.H. Green and T.H. Grose, (London, 1886); and The Letters of David Hume, ed. S.Y.T. Greig, (Oxford, 1969).

2. Stroud op. cit., p. 184; Mackie, op. cit., pp. 71-72; and Fogelin, op. cit., pp. 143-145.
3. Norton, op. cit., Ch. 3, section IV. The phrase 'objective correlates' is one that occurs in Norton's own discussion. I have been persuaded by the comments of Geoffrey Sayre McCord that the issues at stake between the Projectionist and the Realist are not well captured by means of such a phrase -- rather, it is a question of whether virtue and vice (beauty and deformity) are to be identified with sentiments of pleasure or pain, or with the causes of those sentiments. It is this question, in any case, with which I am concerned in this paper.

I should add that Norton has provided important clarification of his claim about Hume's moral realism in his paper "Hume's Moral Ontology," Hume Studies, (1985, Supplement), pp. 189-214.

4. Mackie, op. cit., p. 66; Harrison, op. cit., p. 115.
5. Fogelin, op. cit., p. 125.
6. See Norton, op. cit., Ch. 2.
7. Harrison, op. cit., p. 115; cf. Norton, op. cit., p. 77.
8. Harrison, ibid.; Mackie, op. cit., p. 68.
9. Both Stroud, op. cit., pp. 176-177, and Fogelin, op. cit., p. 140, utilise the following comparison in support of such an interpretation.
10. See Green and Grose, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 213-231.
11. Stroud, op. cit., p. 183; Mackie, op. cit., p. 68.

12. See Greig, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 40.
13. The one passage in which Hume does appear to present a Projectionist view of our judgements of value is in the first Appendix to the second Enquiry, where he writes as follows:

...[taste] has a productive faculty, and gilding or staining all natural objects with the colours, borrowed from internal sentiment, raises in a manner a new creation. (E 294)

I will return briefly to this passage later.

14. Stroud, op. cit., p. 181; Mackie, op. cit., p. 72.
15. See, e.g., J. McDowell, "Values and Secondary Qualities," (in Morality and Objectivity, ed. T. Honderich, (London, 1985), pp. 111-113); and D. Wiggins, "Truth, Invention, And the Meaning of Life," (British Academy Lecture, Vol. LXII, 1976), pp. 348-349.
16. What I have been saying here about the secondary quality of colour may help in making sense of Hume's remark that "there is just so much vice or virtue in any character, as everyone places in it" (T 547). If it is true that for something to be a certain colour is for it to look that colour, then there is a sense in which we cannot be mistaken about the colour of things. Yet someone may, on some particular occasion, misperceive the colour of an object; and similarly, someone may fail to recognise the virtue or vice of a character. In the second part of the paper I will be saying more about this latter possibility.
17. See "The Sceptic," p. 219 n.
18. Fogelin, op. cit., pp. 117-122.
19. Fogelin, op. cit., p. 117.
20. See Green and Grose, op. cit., Vol. III, pp. 266-284. The circumstances of the composition of this essay are described by Hume in a letter to William Strachan: see Greig, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 253. The essay is discussed at some length by

Peter Jones in "Cause, Reason, and Objectivity in Hume's Aesthetics," (in Hume: a Re-Evaluation, ed. D.W. Livingston and J.T. King, (New York, 1976), pp. 323-342).

21. This may be the appropriate point at which to comment on the apparently Projectionist passage from the second Enquiry referred to above (n. 13). I think that when Hume refers to taste raising "in a manner a new creation," he is doing no more than to make the point that in the absence of the moral and aesthetic sentiments we would not find virtue and vice, beauty or deformity, in 'objects'. It is the occurrence of these sentiments that also makes possible the "new sentiment of blame or approbation" (EPM 294).

22. Compare Norton, op. cit., pp. 71-72, on the motivating aspects of the moral sense as depicted by Hutcheson.

A passage that well illustrates Hume's position is the following:

Taste, as it gives pleasure or pain
... becomes a motive to action. (EPM
294)

23. See Norton, op. cit., p. 111.
24. This is a matter in which Hume again follows Hutcheson's account of the moral sense. See Norton, op. cit., pp. 75-76.
25. See, e.g., EPM 272; "The Sceptic," p. 219 n; "Of the Standard of Taste," p. 272; T 547.
26. This last point should perhaps be stressed. Hume writes, e.g., that in the choice or approbation resulting from our moral deliberations there is "No new fact to be ascertained; no new relation to be discovered" (EPM 290). But from the context it is clear, I think, that Hume's point is this: that in drawing moral distinctions we take account of the circumstances in which the action occurs (circumstances which determine, e.g., whether or not it is an act of "wilful murder," and which certainly concern matters of fact); but that having done so, there is no new fact to be ascertained by reason or the understanding. The only additional fact concerns the effects of the action upon us as spectators.