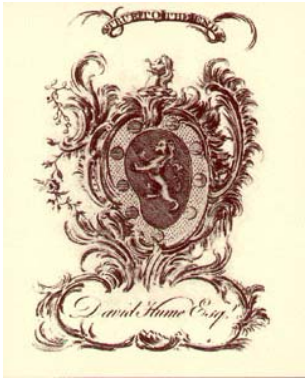

Hume on Human Excellence
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Hume was, in important respects, still very much a part of the classical ethical tradition. This is something we tend to overlook because we come out of a distinctly modern moral tradition, and we normally approach Hume looking for answers to a set of questions that are distinct, and often far removed, from the central questions of the classical tradition. Yet, the classical aspects of Hume's ethics are not irrelevant to contemporary moral debates. There is evidence in recent years of a growing discontent with all the permutations of the two dominant strands of contemporary moral thought, Kantianism and utilitarianism. The sort of radical critique found in the works of MacIntyre, the increasing popularity of communitarian theories, and the resurgence of interest in virtue ethics in general, and Aristotelianism in particular, are all indications of this discontent.

What I wish to suggest is that Hume's moral thought might prove a rich source for those who are dissatisfied with the direction of modern moral theory, and especially for those who believe that there is something within the classical tradition of virtue ethics worth salvaging. For Hume is a virtue ethicist, albeit one in modern dress, who, poised between the ancients and moderns, self-consciously chose to align himself with the ancient tradition, asserting its superiority over the modern. The ancient moralists are, Hume claims, the "best models,"[1] morals being the one science "in which they are not surpassed by the moderns" (E 330).

The aim of this paper is to take an initial step towards refocusing our view on the largely neglected classical aspects of Hume's moral thought. The relationship between Hume's moral thought and the classical tradition is both extensive and complex, and I do not pretend to do anything more in this paper than present the tip of the iceberg. But the tip I shall examine is central to all that lies below; it is Hume's conception of human excellence.

Virtue or Human Excellence

Perhaps Hume's most complete description of human excellence occurs in the conclusion of *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. Hume presents us with the fictional character, Cleanthes, as one whom "a philosopher might select ... as a model of perfect virtue" (E 270). He is, Hume claims, "a man of honour and humanity," one of whom "[e]very one, who has any intercourse ... is sure of *fair* and *kind* treatment." His

"assiduous application ... [and] quick penetration ... prognosticate the greatest honours and advancement." His company is enjoyed by all because he has "so much wit with good manners; so much gallantry without affectation" and "so much ingenious knowledge." His "cheerfulness ... runs through the whole tenor of his life, and preserves a perpetual serenity on his countenance, and tranquillity of his soul." Finally, "[h]e has met with severe trials, misfortunes as well as dangers; and by his greatness of mind, was still superior to all of them" (E 269-70).

In the *Treatise*, Hume offers a less specific, yet similar portrait of human excellence:

> when we enumerate the good qualities of any person, we always mention those parts of his character, which render him a safe companion, an easy friend, a gentle master, an agreeable husband, or an indulgent father. We consider him with all his relations in society; and love or hate him, according as he affects those, who have any immediate intercourse with him. And 'tis a most certain rule, that if there be no relation of life, in which I cou'd not wish to stand to a particular person, his character must so far be allow'd to be perfect. If he be as little wanting to himself as to others, his character is entirely perfect.[2]

Although there are numerous passages throughout Hume's works that paint the same general picture, I will offer only one more, his description of an ideally virtuous disposition from his essay, *The Sceptic*:

> that which leads to action and employment, renders us sensible to the social passions, steels the heart against the assaults of fortune, reduces the affections to a just moderation, makes our own thoughts an entertainment to us, and inclines us rather to the pleasure of society and conversation, than to those of the senses.[3]

What is common to all these descriptions and what constitutes the basis of Hume's conception of human excellence are "honour and humanity" or the virtues of greatness of mind and extensive benevolence. These are the two main categories of the natural virtues, a fact made evident in Hume's *Treatise* account, where his main classificatory scheme is the division between the artificial virtues discussed in part 2 and the natural virtues discussed in part 3. Two of the three main sections where Hume discusses the specific natural

virtues are titled "Of greatness of mind" and "Of goodness and benevolence." These remain the basic categories of the natural virtues in the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, although there this fact is obscured by Hume's switch to the "useful and agreeable" as his main classificatory scheme. The third main section of the *Treatise* account of the natural virtues, "Of natural abilities," does not represent a separate category, but rather, contains an extended argument against what Hume considered the modern error of refusing to count natural talents and abilities among the virtues. In what follows I shall examine Hume's account of greatness of mind and benevolence and show how he aligns himself with the classical tradition both in his conception of virtue as excellence and in his rejection of what he considered the fundamental error of the moderns, namely, making voluntary action the locus of moral evaluation.

Greatness of Mind

Greatness of mind is not a particular virtue, but a category of what Hume refers to as the "heroic" virtues. It includes (but is not limited to) "[c]ourage, intrepidity, ambition, love of glory, magnanimity" (T 599-600), and also "undisturbed philosophical tranquillity" (E 256). All of these are founded on what Hume calls "a steady and well-establish'd pride and self-esteem" (T 599). Pride, considered simply as a passion, is a feeling (impression of reflection) of pleasure or satisfaction towards oneself; humility is a feeling of pain, dissatisfaction, or "uneasiness" toward oneself. Virtues and vices, however, are not simple passions, but character traits or dispositions. Thus, while anyone may, on occasion, feel the passion of pride or humility, only a steady and well-established propensity to feel such, that is, only a disposition towards one or the other, can be considered a virtue or vice.

Hume recognized that, in the Christian catalogue of virtues, pride was considered a vice, humility a virtue. But he rejected this "modern" view in favour of the classical, preferring, he claimed, to take his catalogue of virtues from Cicero's *Offices*, rather than from the popular Christian devotional, *The Whole Duty of Man*.[4] Yet Hume did allow two respects in which the disposition of pride can properly be considered a vice. First, the disposition itself is a vice when it is not "well-founded," that is, when we over-value ourselves or value ourselves for qualities we do not really possess. Thus, Hume describes vicious pride as "an over-weaning conceit of our own merit," and as an "ill-grounded conceit of [our]selves" (T 596). Virtuous pride, on the other hand, he describes as a "*sentiment* of conscious worth" (E 314), "dignity of character" (E 252), "self-esteem" (T 598), and "hav[ing] a value for ourselves, where we really have qualities that are valuable" (T 596).

The second respect in which pride can be considered a vice is when "pride" is used to refer, not to the disposition itself, but to its ostentatious display. According to Hume, the *passion* of pride is always highly agreeable for the person experiencing it; the *passion* of humility highly disagreeable. Humbling experiences may be highly instructive, but they are never pleasant. Human beings all naturally desire a sense of self-esteem or self-worth, and this, combined with the fact that "[n]o one can well distinguish *in himself* betwixt the vice and virtue, or be certain, that his esteem of his own merit is well-founded" (T 597-98), results in our general tendency to over-value rather than to under-value ourselves. But, excessive displays of pride on the part of others, in most circumstances, offends against our own pride, producing a passion of humility by comparison. Thus the disposition to overtly display one's pride is a vice.

Hume claims that this second vice of ostentatious pride also raises the strong suspicion of the first vice of ill-grounded pride. "[A]n importunate and open demand of praise and admiration," besides being offensive in itself, is "a sure symptom of the want of true dignity and elevation of mind ... For why that impatient desire of applause; as if you were not justly entitled to it" (E 266)? Those who are secure in their sense of self-worth do not need constant reassurance of it from others. "A man of sense and merit is pleas'd with himself, independent of all foreign considerations" (T 596).

While the disposition to ostentatious pride is offensive, and thus a vice, the overt display of pride in certain circumstances is not only approved, but greatly admired. Pride "may openly display itself in its full extent, when one lies under calumny or oppression of any kind" (E 265). It is, according to Hume, pride displayed under such circumstances that fully reveals the nobility, dignity, and greatness of the human spirit.

> Who is not struck with any signal instance of greatness of mind or dignity of character; with elevation of sentiment, disdain of slavery, and with that noble pride and spirit, which arises from conscious virtue? (E 252)

It is clear why Hume considered pride so crucial an aspect of human excellence. When Hume speaks of pride, he is speaking of what we would call self-respect, or dignity of character. And he correctly points out, no one has respect for someone who has no self-respect. "Where a man has no sense of value in himself, we are not likely to have any higher esteem of him" (E 254n). This is also why Hume refuses to admit humility into his catalogue of virtues. The *passion* of humility, a feeling of pain or uneasiness towards oneself, is important to moral

life because of its role in self-evaluation. A feeling of uneasiness towards our vices, along with the uneasiness felt from sympathy with others' disapproval towards us, are motivations for remedying such defects. They are, in other words, motivations for improvement of character. But the *disposition* of humility is a steady and well-established uneasiness towards oneself, a permanent sense or feeling of pain aroused by the belief that one lacks any value or worth. To be a truly humble person is simply to lack any self-esteem or self-respect.

Hume hints, without explicitly stating, that the modern (Christian) view of humility as a virtue is based on a misunderstanding of the true nature of humility:

> many religious disclaimers ... represent to us the excellency of the *Christian* religion, which places humility in the rank of virtues, and corrects the judgment of the world, and even of philosophers, who so generally admire all the efforts of pride and ambition. Whether this virtue of humility has been rightly understood, I shall not pretend to determine. (T 600)

Hume does not explain this remark, but it is likely that he believed there was a misunderstanding that involved confusing humility with modesty. Modesty Hume describes as "a just sense of our weakness" (T 592). But, unlike humility, modesty "excludes not a noble pride and spirit" (E 265). The recognition of one's weaknesses need not produce humility; it will depend on the nature and extent of the weakness. To recognize that one is seriously deficient in some admirable quality, for example, that one is so lacking in good sense as to be a fool, will certainly produce a feeling of humility. On the other hand, to recognize that, for all one's good sense, one is still capable of mistaken judgements, is to acknowledge no more "weakness" than any human being, and thus will not produce any such feeling. Modesty, expressed in a "diffidence of our own judgement, and a due attention and regard for others" (E 263), is a *social* virtue. Humility is disagreeable both to the "humbled" person and to impartial observers. Modesty, on the other hand, is an indication of *benevolence*—a due regard for others—and is thus agreeable both to the modest person and to others.

Thus,

> a genuine and hearty pride, or self-esteem, if well-conceal'd and well-founded, is essential to the character of a man of honour, and ... there is no quality of the mind, which is more indispensibly requisite to procure the esteem and approbation of mankind. (T 598)

The virtues comprising greatness of mind, which are all founded on such pride, constitute the "heroic virtues." When greatness of mind is had in any great degree it is "so dazling," it "so elevates the mind" (T 601), that it is properly considered sublime. It is "a great excellency" (E 265) and it constitutes "every thing we call *great* in human affections" (T 602).

With respect to the role of greatness of mind in human excellence Hume clearly aligned himself with the classical moralists. Not only were they correct in their recognition of it as a major ingredient in human excellence, but their recognition produced some of the greatest examples of such excellence of character. Practically all of Hume's examples of greatness of mind in the *Treatise* and in the *Enquiry* are from ancient sources, and, he claims, "[a]mong the ancients, the heroes in philosophy, as well as those in war and patriotism, have a grandeur and force of sentiment, which astonishes our narrow souls" (E 256).

But nowhere is this aspect of Hume's classicism more evident than in *The History of England*, where he exchanges the role of the moral theorist for the role of the practical moralist, engaging in continual moral evaluation of historical personages. Hume's account of the execution of Montrose and his description of Montrose's character is typical of Hume's classical moralist approach. After describing the vain endeavours of Montrose's enemies to "vilify and degrade him by all their studied indignities,"[5] and the fruitlessness of all attempts to subdue his "heroic spirit" (*History*, 24), Hume describes how Montrose proudly and "patiently endured the last act of the executioner" (*History*, 24). Hume's assessment of Montrose's character reveals the depth of his admiration for the heroic virtues:

> Thus perished, in the thirty-eighth year of his age, the gallant marquess of Montrose; the man whose military genius, both by valour and conduct, had shone forth beyond any, which, during these civil disorders, had appeared in the three kingdoms. The finer arts too, he had, in his youth, successfully cultivated; and whatever was sublime, elegant, or noble touched his great soul. Nor was he insensible to the pleasures either of society or of love. Something, however, of the *vast* and *unbounded* characterized his actions and deportment; and it was merely by an heroic effort of duty, that he brought his mind, impatient of superiority, and even of equality, to pay such unlimited submission to the will of his sovereign. (*History*, 24-25)

Extensive Benevolence

For all its "excellency," Hume did not consider greatness of mind the sole, or even the primary, ingredient in human excellence. It is, so to speak, a necessary but not a sufficient condition. As much as we may admire this aspect of the character of the ancient heroes, when we turn our attention to the "barbarous cruelty" (E 321), to the indifference to the suffering of others, exhibited by many of these same heroes, our admiration is checked. "Courage and ambition," Hume claims, "when not regulated by benevolence, are fit only to make a tyrant or public robber" (T 604). While there are instances of greatness of mind among the ancients, which "astonish our narrow souls," the ancients "would have had equal reason to consider as ... incredible, the degree of humanity, clemency, order, tranquillity, and other social virtues" attained in modern times (E 256-57).

Greatness of mind encompasses those virtues that are founded on a regard, respect or esteem for ourselves. But human beings are not, as Hobbes and other followers of the "selfish school" would have it, merely self-interested beings. They are also *social* beings. Their nature consists of both affections towards self, or the "interested affections" and affection towards others, or the social affections. And, in general, Hume claims, men's social affections outweigh their interested affections:

> So far from thinking, that men have no affection for any thing beyond themselves, I am of opinion, that tho' it be rare to meet with one, who loves any single person better than himself; yet 'tis as rare to meet with one, in whom all the kind affections, taken together, do not over-balance all the selfish. (T 487)

"Benevolence" is Hume's term for the category of virtues founded on esteem, love, or good-will towards others, and includes "*generosity, humanity, compassion, gratitude, friendship, fidelity, zeal, disinterestedness, liberality*, and all those other qualities, which form the character of good and benevolent" (T 603). Nor does Hume view the two categories of virtue as possessing equal weight or equal merit. As the quote above makes clear, in the truly virtuous person, greatness of mind must be *regulated* by benevolence. It is, Hume claims, a tendency to the "tender passions" which "gives a just direction to all ... other qualities" (T 604). Human beings are both essentially and *primarily* social beings.

Hume's inclusion of extensive benevolence in his catalogue of virtues is, one may say, decidedly non-classical. It is true that the Roman Stoics, the ancients whom Hume believed most closely approximated his own account of virtue, had among their tenets the

notion of care for one's fellow man, or *caritas*. But the Stoic notion of *caritas* bears little resemblance to Hume's unmistakably Christian notion of benevolence. Hume's "Christianizing" of the Stoic view is particularly evident in his essay, "The Stoic." The essay is one of a quartet of essays in which, Hume claims, his intention is "not so much to explain accurately the sentiments of the ancients sects ... as to deliver the sentiments of sects, that naturally form themselves in the world" (*Essays*, 138). Having extolled the greatness of mind of the sage, *Hume's* Stoic adds:

> But does the sage always preserve himself in this philosophical indifference, and rest contented with lamenting the miseries of mankind, without ever employing himself for their relief...? No; he knows that in this sullen *Apathy*, neither true wisdom, nor true happiness can be found. He feels too strongly the charms of the social affections ever to counteract so sweet, so natural, so virtuous a propensity. Even when, bathed in tears, he laments the miseries of human race, of his country, of his friends, and unable to give succour, can only relieve them by compassion; he yet rejoices in the generous disposition. (*Essays*, 151)

One must imagine that the ancient moralists in general, and the actual Stoics in particular, would be struck dumb with incredulity at the thought of a man of virtue being bathed in tears of compassion for the miseries of the human race.

The conception of benevolence as a "tender sympathy with others" (E 178), upon the apprehension of which "[t]he tear naturally starts in our eye ... our breast heaves, our heart is agitated, and every humane tender principle of our frame is set in motion" (E 257); the conception of benevolence that expresses itself in one who "relieves the distress'd, comforts the afflicted, and extends his bounty even to the greatest strangers" (T 478), and in one from whom "the hungry receive food, the naked clothing, the ignorant and slothful skill and industry" (E 178), is a conception taken from the catalogue of the *Whole Duty of Man*, not Cicero's *Offices*.

It is not terribly surprising that Hume should fail to give Christianity its due here given his well-known quarrels with it. It is, perhaps, even more understandable in light of Hume's belief, discussed below, that Christianity is responsible for the misguided course of modern moral thought. But, understandable as it may be, one cannot help but suspect an unusual lapse of greatness of mind on Hume's part. For greatness of mind requires recognizing virtue even in one's enemies.

But, however Hume may have ignored the path by which benevolence came to be recognized as a virtue, he does have an account of why the ancients failed to recognize it as such. They failed to recognize it because they did not understand it, and they did not understand it because they did not have an adequate experience of it. Hume allows that the ancients would have been astonished at the "degree of humanity, clemency, ... and other social virtues" achieved in modern times, "*had any one been able to have made a fair representation of them*" (E 256-57, emphasis added). Understanding what Hume means by making a "fair representation" of virtue requires examining Hume's notion of the *intrinsic* value of virtue.

Virtue as an Intrinsic Good

Clearly both greatness of mind and benevolence have utility. Greatness of mind, being founded on pride or self-esteem "gives us a confidence and assurance in all our projects and enterprizes" (T 597), and is thus useful to its possessor. Benevolence likewise "makes a man agreeable and useful in all the parts of life" (T 604) and, in general, the more extensive the benevolence the greater the social utility. But while both greatness of mind and benevolence have instrumental value, their utility is not the only, or even the primary, source of our approval of them. Both, according to Hume, are "immediately agreeable," and valued intrinsically, without reference to (and sometimes in *spite of*) their effects on either the possessor or others.

The self-esteem underlying the virtues comprising greatness of mind is always immediately agreeable to the person actuated by it and, by sympathy, to those who observe it in others. This is true, Hume claims, even when it "goes beyond its just bounds" and "becomes prejudicial" to its possessor (T 600). Hume's remarks on the merit of heroism is instructive:

> Heroism, or military glory, is much admir'd by the generality of mankind. They consider it as the most sublime kind of merit. Men of cool reflexion are not so sanguine in their praises of it. ... When they wou'd oppose the popular notions on this head, they always paint out the evils, which this suppos'd virtue has produc'd in human society; ... But when we fix our view on the person himself, who is the author of all this mischief, there is something so dazling in his character, the mere contemplation of it so elevates the mind, that we cannot refuse it our admiration. (T 600-601)[6]

It is easy to miss Hume's point here. Hume is not claiming that the virtue or merit of heroism lies merely in its consequences, and that

those of "cool reflexion," being more apt to note its pernicious consequences, are less apt to consider it a virtue. The basic category of moral evaluation is, for Hume, character, not action. Actions are only properly subject to moral evaluation insofar as they issue from permanent dispositions of character.

> If any *action* be either virtuous or vicious, 'tis only as a sign of some quality or character. It must depend upon durable principles of the mind, which extend over the whole conduct, and enter into personal character. Actions themselves, not proceeding from any constant principle, have no influence on love or hatred ... and ... are never consider'd in morality. (T 575)

But a "heroic" disposition is something that, in itself, commands our admiration. What those of cool reflection note is that, while military heroism is certainly admirable with respect to greatness of mind, it is all too often found in characters that are seriously deficient in benevolence or humanity.

Likewise, benevolence is immediately agreeable to both its possessor and to others. Love, Hume claims, "is *immediately agreeable* to the person, who is actuated by it ...; nor can we forbear giving a loose to the same tenderness towards the person who exerts it" (T 604). This, according to Hume, "seems ... a proof, that our approbation has ... an origin different from the prospect of utility and advantage, either to ourselves or others" (T 604). Just as greatness of mind is admired independently of its consequences, so too benevolence is admired even when it "rises to a degree that is hurtful":

> As a certain proof that the whole merit of benevolence is not derived from its usefulness, we may observe, that in a kind way of blame, we say, a person is *too good*; when he exceeds his part in society, and carries his attention for others beyond the proper bounds. In like manner, we say a man is *too high-spirited, too intrepid, too indifferent about fortune*: reproaches, which really, at bottom, imply more esteem than many panegyrics. (E 258)

For all Hume's references to the utility or advantage of various moral qualities, references that have misled many commentators into viewing Hume as some sort of proto-utilitarian, Hume's view is fundamentally at odds with any theory that reduces all virtue to mere instrumental value. While Hume does maintain that some qualities of character (for instance, the "artificial virtues") derive their entire value

from their utility or usefulness for achieving some end, he points out that a *means* to an end only has value insofar as the end has value (T 577; E 219). But what, according to Hume, has value as an end, or *intrinsic* value? Two things: the esteem, love, or respect for *self* that is the source of dignity, courage, magnanimity, and all the other virtues comprising greatness of mind, and the esteem, love, or respect for *others* that is the source of gratitude, friendship, generosity, compassion, and all the virtues that constitute benevolence.

Thus, for Hume, the instrumental value of the artificial virtues is based on the intrinsic value of the natural virtues. This is why, after having discussed the prudential motives underlying the *origin* of justice, Hume claims that he must put off giving an account of the *moral* obligation of justice, that is, why it is a *virtue*, until after he has discussed the natural virtues:

> The *natural* obligation to justice, *viz.* interest, has been fully explain'd; but as to the *moral* obligation, or the sentiment of right and wrong, 'twill first be requisite to examine the natural virtues, before we can give a full and satisfactory account of it. (T 498)

The purely instrumental value of justice rests on "*a* sympathy *with public interest*" (T 499-500), or *benevolence*. And, as with all the artificial virtues, justice can only be a virtue within a conventional order because it is only within such an order that the actions and practices we call 'just' can be construed as issuing from motives of either benevolence or greatness of mind. In a (hypothetical) state of nature, what sort of motive could one have for taking away some goods found by a poor, struggling, but good and kind person and returning them to the rich, powerful, greedy and mean person who lost them? Where there is no reason whatsoever to expect anyone to reciprocate such actions, one would be hard pressed to describe any circumstance in which such an action could be the result of either a benevolent or a magnanimous motive.

For Hume, while both benevolence and greatness of mind are necessary to the virtuous character, the perfection of character requires that love or esteem for self be regulated by and subservient to love and esteem for others:

> The epithets *sociable, good-natured, humane, merciful, grateful, friendly, generous, beneficent*, or their equivalents ... universally express the highest merit, which *human nature* is capable of attaining. ... Exalted capacity, undaunted courage, prosperous success; these may only expose a hero or politician

> to the envy and ill-will of the public: but as soon as the praises are added of humane and beneficent; when instances are displayed of lenity, tenderness or friendship; envy itself is silent, or joins the general voice of approbation and applause. (E 176)

Thus Hume's moral system rests on the two fundamental natural virtues of love (esteem) for self and love (esteem) for others. These are the two basic, intrinsic moral goods—the foundation of all virtue.

I claimed above that Hume could explain why the ancients failed to recognize extensive benevolence as a virtue by claiming that they did not have a "fair representation" (E 257) of it. Keeping in mind Hume's view of virtue as both an instrumental and an intrinsic good, we can now give a fuller account of what Hume means by a "fair representation."

In "A Dialogue" at the end of the second *Enquiry*, Hume makes clear that giving such a representation requires examining the behaviour, judgements or character of people and cultures in light of their particular beliefs, situation, and experience. An understanding of the beliefs and situation of a people is clearly necessary in understanding the instrumental value of certain dispositions. For instance, Hume points out "that, among all uncultivated nations, who have not as yet had full experience of the advantages attending beneficence, justice, and the social virtues, courage is the predominant excellence" (E 255). But, as was shown above, Hume considered beneficence (though not the artificial virtue of justice) to be *immediately agreeable* in addition to useful. If so, why wasn't it recognized as such by the ancients?

The answer is clear if one keeps in mind what Hume means by "immediately agreeable." He does not mean 'approved at first sight'; he means valued for its own sake and not merely for the sake of something else, that is, *intrinsically good.* Something that is immediately agreeable in this sense may take time, practice, repeated experience, or fuller knowledge for people to recognize its intrinsic value. To use a non-moral analogy,[7] wine is immediately agreeable in the sense that its taste is valued for its own sake. But no one would claim that this requires that people enjoy or appreciate it the first time they taste it. Some people will; but most will not come to appreciate wine until they have had a "fuller experience" of it. A similar explanation can be given regarding the recognition of extensive benevolence as a virtue. Some will approve it immediately; but many will find it odd, alien, incomprehensible, suspicious, etc., at first. Only repeated and fuller experience will teach people the intrinsic along with the instrumental value of benevolence. Thus, the one and only respect in which Hume

was willing to allow the superiority of modern morals over the ancient, was not the result of any advance in speculative moral systems, but simply the result of an "enlarged experience."

It is interesting to note that on this view it follows that no catalogue of virtues can be permanently fixed. We can be reasonably assured that those qualities that have been recognized as virtues "in all nations and all ages" (*Essays*, 228), will continue to be so considered. Given that human passions and the fundamental principles of moral judgements are always the same, it is reasonable to suppose that human beings have had enough experience of, say, courage, for it to be highly unlikely that any *new* view of it, which might lead to its rejection as a virtue, will be forthcoming. On the other hand, it is always possible, and, indeed, our actual historical experience renders it probable, that we will discover some hitherto unrecognized virtues.

The Error of the Moderns

It is significant that Hume also aligned himself with the ancients in rejecting the modern distinction between natural talents or abilities and moral virtues. In fact, Hume considered the error of the moderns here so considerable that he devoted an entire section in both the *Treatise* and the second *Enquiry* to vigorously opposing it. According to Hume, the moderns, "who represent the distinction betwixt natural abilities and moral virtues as very material" (T 608), claim that natural abilities "are entirely involuntary, and have therefore no merit attending them, as having no dependance on liberty and free-will" (T 608). Hume raises a number of objections. To begin with, many qualities, "which all moralists, especially the antients, comprehend under the title of moral virtues, are equally involuntary" (T 608). Whether one is courageous is, for the most part, no more a matter of the will than whether one is intelligent. The qualification "especially the antients" is important. For Hume goes on to point out that "all the qualities which form the *great* man" (T 608), that is, the qualities that constitute greatness of mind, are involuntary. Thus, the moderns' attempt to confine virtue to the voluntary explains their lack of regard for greatness of mind, and their corresponding 'narrowness of soul'.

Hume also recognizes that the moderns' attempt to limit the moral realm to the sphere of the voluntary is fundamentally at odds with the traditional conception of virtue as excellence. What is excellent in no way depends on what is voluntary. Indeed, in his account of the virtues of the intellect, Hume most clearly illustrates his affinity with the classical conception of virtue. "There is," Hume claims, "a sentiment of esteem and approbation, which may be excited, in some degree, by any faculty of the mind, in its perfect state and condition" (T 610). Further, human beings "are superior to beasts principally by the superiority of

their reason," and it is the "degrees of the same faculty, which set such an infinite difference betwixt one man and another" (T 610). How, then, do we determine "what character, or peculiar understanding, is more excellent than another" (T 610)? Hume's answer is that the excellence of the understanding or intellectual abilities is determined by "considering which ... qualities capacitates a man best for the world, and carries him farthest in any of his undertakings" (T 610; E 241). The virtue or excellence of that capacity that distinguishes man from the beast lies in its enabling him to perform a function well.

Among the consequences of the modern turn in ethics are the shift in the locus of moral evaluation from character to action, and, to use a contemporary phrase, the beginning of 'bad faith' in moral practice. I will discuss each of these consequences in turn.

Voluntary and involuntary are features that are appropriately applied to action, not character. According to Hume, modern "legislators, and divines, and moralists," seeking to regulate men's behaviour, naturally concentrated on men's voluntary actions, which, unlike natural abilities, "may be chang'd by the motives of reward and punishment, praise and blame" (T 609). But, what needs explaining is why this feature that is so essential in the realm of *policy* came to be considered a defining characteristic of the moral realm. Hume's explanation is essentially that the moderns have got their religion mixed up with philosophy—"especially ethics" (E 322). The modern divines, under the "disguise" of philosophers,

> treating all morals as on a like footing with civil laws, guarded by the sanctions of reward and punishment, were necessarily led to render this circumstance of *voluntary* and *involuntary*, the foundation of their whole theory. (E 322)

The ancient polytheistic religions demanded only certain outward observances of behaviour, leaving the rest of a person's behaviour, and, more importantly, the inner constitution of his soul, to himself. Civil law concerned itself only with the outward behaviour thought to affect the peace and well-being of society; the inner constitution of the soul or character was the proper province of philosophy. Modern religion, according to Hume, has usurped the role of both civil law and philosophy. It "bends every branch of knowledge to its own purpose," and has "warped from their natural course" both "reasoning, and even language" (E 322). Unlike the ancient polytheistic religions, modern religion is not content with regulating merely the outward behaviour but seeks to regulate the very minds and souls of men:

> modern religion ... inspects our whole conduct, and prescribes an universal rule to our actions, to our words, to our very thoughts and inclinations; a rule so much the more austere, as it is guarded by infinite, though distant, rewards and punishments; and no infraction of it can ever be concealed or disguised. (E 342)

Substituting the 'kingdom of God' for the 'kingdoms of men', the modern religion models divine law on civil law, thus making a necessary feature of civil law and its sanctions—voluntariness—a necessary feature of morality. Hume saw that with this "new course" being followed by modern moralists the term "virtue" was already beginning to lose its classical connotation of "excellence." Taking its place, for instance in the systems of the moral rationalists, the precursors of Kant, was the notion of moral goodness, interpreted as conformity with a "rule of right" (E 288), determined by "moral law."

> The author of *L'Esprit des Loix* [Montesquieu] ... supposes all right to be founded on certain *rapports* or relations; which is a system, that, in my opinion, never will be reconciled with true philosophy. Father Malebranche, as far as I can learn, was the first that started this abstract theory of morals, which was afterwards adopted by Cudworth, Clarke, and others; and as it excludes all sentiment, and pretends to found everything on reason, it has not wanted followers in this philosophic age. (E 197n)

Hume saw this turn to the rule of right as the natural result of combining the civil, religious, and moral realms. And, he also recognized as an inevitable consequence the origin of what I have called "bad faith." Hume claims that, however theology may have warped moral systems and even moral language to its own purposes, human beings will continue to approve and esteem excellence in all character traits, regardless of their relation to the will:

> Every one may employ *terms* in what sense he pleases: but this, in the mean time, must be allowed, that *sentiments* are every day experienced of blame and praise, which have objects beyond the dominion of the will or choice. (E 322)

Whatever modern moral systems (including contemporary ones) permit one to say, and whatever such systems allow to be called "moral goodness," actual esteem and admiration will continue to be accorded to all excellence of character, including excellence in natural talents

and abilities. "Who," Hume asks, "did ever say, except by way of irony, that such a one was a man of great virtue, but an egregious blockhead" (E 314)? Not only is our *actual* admiration and esteem for others not restricted by any notion of voluntariness, but our own sense of self-esteem or self-worth is equally unrestricted:

> the *sentiment* of conscious worth, the self-satisfaction proceeding from a review of a man's own conduct and character ... arises from the endowments of courage and capacity, industry and ingenuity, as well as from any other mental excellencies. (E 314)

We are, Hume rightly claims, generally as mortified by our lapses of good sense as by our lapses of kindness, and as insulted by accusations that we lack wit as by accusations that we lack honesty. When it comes to *real human passions* there is no distinction in kind between natural abilities and the so-called *moral* virtues. The modern move to make a distinction in *kind* between moral good and natural abilities, and thus strip the latter of any normative weight or authority, merely produces alienation and guilt. For our inner experience is that of according the same *kind*, if not always the same *degree*, of esteem to intelligence as to benevolence, to dignity as to honesty, to beauty as to faithfulness, to mercy as to duty. One may say, as Kant does, that actions motivated purely by benevolence have no moral worth or that we cannot know with certainty whether any action has really ever been morally worthy; one may say, as utilitarians do, that the only intrinsic good is happiness, and that all other goods, including virtue, are merely instrumental; one may say, as Rawls does, that there is no original title to natural endowments, and that, therefore, they are not part of personal merit. One may say any number of the inane and self-deceptive things that modern moral systems lead one to say, but, if we say these things, we must expect that our experience will not be conformable to what we say, and when we continue to find ourselves admiring the noble, the prosperous, the beautiful, the intelligent, and the talented, we must not be surprised that we guiltily (though, Hume would argue, foolishly) condemn ourselves for admiring what is of no "moral" worth. In a time when we are not content to regulate mere behaviour, but seek to regulate people's souls, the attempt to constrict the moral realm is to be expected. After all, how much easier to control a narrow and duly humbled soul, than a vast and unbounded soul.

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1. David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (1975; reprint, Oxford, 1979), 318 (hereafter cited as "E").
2. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (1978; reprint, Oxford, 1981), 606 (hereafter cited as "T").
3. David Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis, 1987), 168 (hereafter cited as *Essays*).
4. David Hume, *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Grieg, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1969), 1:34.
5. David Hume, *The History of England*, vol. 6 (Indianapolis, 1983), 23 (hereafter cited as *History*).
6. Hume makes a similar point in the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (E 258 and 258n).
7. The analogy is suggested by Hume's essay, "Of the Standard of Taste" (*Essays*, 226-49).