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William Davie

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## Hume's General Point of View

WILLIAM DAVIE

People can come away from Hume's ethics with two pretty different pictures of the moral life, or of the role of morality in the larger sphere of life; the difference seems to hinge on divergent interpretations of Hume's requirement of a "general point of view," hereafter abbreviated GPV. Both interpretations can be found in the recent literature.<sup>1</sup> The first view, which seems to be favored by a majority of Hume's professional readers, represents the GPV as a cognitive achievement typically requiring a conscious effort of reason and imagination. One has to 'adopt' or 'take up' the GPV whenever circumstances demand moral judgments. Let us call this "The Conscious Effort View." On this showing, moral judging is a special, relatively esoteric activity, comparable perhaps to the aesthetic judgments of an art critic, though we must think of moral judging as something ordinary people can do at least from time to time.

The alternative reading, which we may term "The Unconscious Habit View," depicts the GPV as largely a matter of habit (or custom). We employ the GPV automatically and ordinarily without noticing or making any particular cognitive effort. We are "insensible" of its operation. We use the GPV whenever we manage to perceive things (hence, speak or think) with a measure of objectivity, which is to say, almost all the time. Here morality appears to be ubiquitous and moral judgment utterly commonplace—comparable to the habitual operations of causal inference without which ordinary life would be sheer unthinkable chaos.

Below we will develop a fuller account of the two views in question, together with some indication of the textual support for each. After each view is presented, we will look for reasons to prefer one over the other. In this reader's opinion, The Unconscious Habit View best represents the main fabric of Hume's moral theory. In the end, though, we have to appreciate that The Conscious Effort View captures a piece of moral life, too, so we must consider where it fits. We may usefully begin with a sketch of some background information about Hume's ethics which is shared by both of the distinct interpretations.

## I. The Common Background

According to Hume we make moral judgments on the basis of certain feelings, on "certain sentiments of pleasure or disgust, which arise upon the contemplation and view of particular qualities or characters."<sup>2</sup> That we do respond to the experiences of other people is guaranteed by the inborn mechanism of sympathy; we do not merely perceive, e.g., that some person in our vicinity is writhing in agony, we immediately react with feelings of our own (in this instance, we would probably feel intense distress and a desire to alleviate the other person's pain). But sympathy obviously vacillates more severely, more rapidly, than moral judgments do. Sympathetic reactions fluctuate with our distance, so to speak, from the character we assess, in space, time, and kind of relationship. By contrast, our moral judgments are steady and unchanging. "We give the same approbation to the same moral qualities in *China* as in *England*" (T 581). So a further condition is necessary in morals. Our sympathy has to be filtered, one might say, through the screens of another mental device, the GPV. How, exactly, does the GPV do its work? The output is clear—our judgments are stabilized and rendered more uniform. Below we will have to examine the mechanism whereby this result is achieved. First we should emphasize one other essential feature of Hume's moral view, namely, that Hume's is an ethics of *character*, as contrasted with the more common ethics of action and rules, commandments, or laws which are designed to govern action. When the philosopher's work is done, the Humean morality displays a list or "catalog" of character traits together with reasons why we applaud or deplore those traits. The catalog of virtue and vice does not readily translate into any informative set of requirements and prohibitions, though actions are not regarded as irrelevant to morality. Actions are taken to be *signs* of a person's character; in practice, in trying to ascertain some person's character, we will take serious account of actions as the information available to our inspection. It remains true that the real focus of moral scrutiny, according to Hume, is the constellation of character from which the actions flow.

Now, in the normal course of life each individual develops personal preferences regarding traits of character in oneself and others. Commonly, though not necessarily, a person will recognize and admire in others the very traits he perceives in himself. "Men naturally, without reflexion, approve of that character, which is most like their own" (T 604). Imaginably, each person could devise a personal catalog of virtue and vice along the lines Hume describes in the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*;<sup>3</sup> without much reflection or thought, we could express or display our personal moral preferences. Clearly we would expect and accommodate certain natural differences from one of these catalogs to the next. You like assertive, outgoing people who will say whatever is on their minds; I favor quieter, more inhibited and private souls. We could enjoy and marvel at the display of our differences and similarities. Here we do not need agreement in our judgments, because nothing is at stake.

For some purposes and in some contexts we do need to achieve agreement in our judgments. This will be the case, roughly, whenever we want to say *not* "I like it," but rather "It is good," and we want to say this to a broad audience (or to an unknown audience, such as the readers of a periodical or the people who will hear a speech we make in the public square or on the radio). In such circumstances the demand for greater objectivity is palpable. There exist many arenas for objective content—in the sciences, in law, in evaluating products for purchase and consumption, in keeping the checkbook balanced, in maintaining a machine or an animal, and so forth—and these matters are not entirely "up for grabs" by the engines of personal preference. The same goes for morality. We make moral judgments which have, or rather *should* have, a life and a truth of their own, as easily discernable by another person as by oneself.<sup>4</sup> Here we enter the realm of Hume's GPV. Apparently Hume thinks that by stepping out of our own shoes, so to speak, we "correct" our sentiments to some extent and we "correct" our language, what we say, even more effectively.

When we examine the idea of points of view in Hume's ethical writings, we find two criteria at work. In one kind of context, Hume assigns a distinct point of view to each individual. "Every particular man has a peculiar position with regard to others; and 'tis impossible we cou'd ever converse together on any reasonable terms, were each of us to consider characters and persons, only as they appear from his peculiar point of view" (T 581). Moreover, it seems to be assumed here that no two people are alike, so there will certainly be the most radical disagreement and failure to communicate.<sup>5</sup>

In many contexts Hume uses a "disagreement" criterion in identifying points of view: to disagree is to have a different point of view. "Heroism, or military glory, is much admir'd by the generality of mankind..... Men of cool reflexion are not so sanguine in their praises of it" (T 600). Again, "To a Cromwell...discretion may appear an alderman-like virtue...but in the

conduct of ordinary life, no virtue is more requisite..." (EPM 236). Here having a different point of view clearly has an impact on one's ranking of the virtues; it also marks a difference in character.

What criterion do we use in identifying Hume's GPV? Hume seems to indicate that both are relevant. We might say that the GPV is the viewpoint of humankind; it is made possible by every individual's common membership in the party of mankind, by the individual's humanity. It is also true that we would expect persons who successfully adopt the GPV to find themselves in agreement. Yet it must be acknowledged that disagreement, in any particular case, is not necessarily the mark of a failure to achieve the GPV. We can imagine two other possibilities. One or both parties might have the facts of the case wrong; clearly we have well-recognized ways of settling factual differences. Or somebody might fail to respond in the way humans normally do, due to some failure of the mechanism of sympathy. But in the ordinary run of human life we probably do expect disagreement about moral matters, e.g., whether some quality of character is a virtue or not, to trace mainly to a failure of objectivity. And we often do understand and accommodate distinct points of view even in moral discussions. We know that a miser may value thrift more than we do. "A mere soldier little values the character of eloquence: A gownman of courage: A bishop of humour: Or a merchant of learning" (T 322). If the facts are clear to all—no small problem—the only *other* way of failing to gain agreement is for somebody to be a humanoid monster, i.e., to lack the mechanism of sympathy.<sup>6</sup>

We have gone far enough with the shared account; now we must examine the divergent views.

## II. The Conscious Effort View

It would be absurd to suppose that human beings in a natural, non-socialized setting might just *slip into* the rather esoteric GPV. A person in that setting might imaginably slip into the viewpoint of his or her own child or aging parent; the operations of sympathy make sense of that much.

Our fancy easily changes its situation; and either surveying ourselves as we appear to others, or considering others as they feel themselves, makes us enter, by that means, into sentiments, which no way belong to us, and in which nothing but sympathy is able to interest us. (T 589)

But Hume's GPV surely requires something more than sympathy. We have to admit that "some artifice, in the sense of thoughtful design and contrivance, seems involved in [Hume's GPV]."<sup>7</sup> In this regard our perception of *all* the virtues, including the ones Hume wants to call

"natural," presuppose an element of the artificial, the conventional.<sup>8</sup> Take the virtue of kindness, for example. It may be allowed that we have some instinctive tendency to develop kindness in ourselves and to act kindly when we can; we also react in a positive manner to at least some instances of kindness and kind action in others (namely, those that are close to us, close enough to be directly experienced). At an early stage of development, for the individual or for humanity generally, the awareness of kindness might be largely a personal matter, both in scope and in style. But morality involves a special way of approving of kindness; our moral approval is impersonal and impartial, at least in that the person who approves has to disregard his own connections, if any, to the person who is the object of attention. The fully developed form of recognition of kindness as a virtue will owe a great deal to conventions. For example, in our culture it is kind to stop on the freeway to help somebody change a flat tire; in a more self-reliant culture the same sort of offer might be insulting.<sup>9</sup> An explanation of a sociological kind (as well as a psychological one) is needed for the natural virtues as well as for the stern rules of justice. Perhaps Hume tacitly acknowledges as much when he places his account of the natural virtues *after* his discussion of the artificial ones.<sup>10</sup>

When we say that the GPV involves conventions, or thoughtful design and contrivance, it should not be supposed that the conventions in question have to be matters of explicit agreement, contract, or direct promise. Some conventions *are* explicit, such as conventions of warfare, but the ones involved in morality are not, indeed cannot be. The convention we appeal to cannot be a promise because it is the kind of thing presupposed by the concept of a promise. A similar point is that language cannot be based on promises, because promises are only possible for language speakers. Language itself requires a background of agreement in the form of shared patterns of behavior, shared reactions, a shared tacit understanding of what is appropriate in particular circumstances. These shared reactions have to be mutually recognized if they are to be effective.

Our present concern is with the conventions involved in the GPV. There is something like an agreement that in certain contexts we shall step away from our own peculiar standpoint for the sake of adopting a shared general standpoint. Let us consider when, how, and why we do this.

When do we take up the GPV? Certainly there are linguistic cues as to its appropriateness. Hume says we recognize certain epithets as marking the language of personal expression, e.g., "When a man denominates another his *enemy*, his *rival*, his *antagonist*, his *adversary*, he is understood to speak the language of self-love, and to express sentiments, peculiar to himself...." But there is another kind of case which we all recognize: "When he bestows on any man the epithets of *vicious* or *odious* or *depraved*, he then speaks another language, and expresses sentiments, in which he expects all his audience are to concur with him" (EPM 272). Of course it is doubtful that we could really

identify these two 'languages' in terms of a vocabulary list, as Hume's remarks might suggest; his point is sound nonetheless, for we all have an ear for the kind of difference he indicates. We know when a speaker is trying to speak objectively and not just express his own peculiar stance. We know, that is to say, when somebody is trying to speak from the GPV.

How do we "get into" or "take up" the GPV? Hume uses a variety of expressions to indicate the nature of the process. He says we "forget our interest" and "neglect [the] differences" between persons remote from us and those we count as friends, neighbors, family, or countrymen (T 602–603). We "overlook our present situation" and our own interest in the judgments we make; we "consider not" whether the persons we view are acquaintances or strangers, countrymen or foreigners. We "regard not" the variations which occur in our basic sympathetic reactions (T 582). All of these expressions suggest that we are exercising our capacity as rational beings here. A thoughtful calculation seems to be required. We would have to ask ourselves questions such as: "What would this man look like to his close friend, or to his neighbors?" "How would I feel about him if he were my friend?" "What do I get if I subtract my own interest, or lack of interest, from my picture of this man?" To answer such questions is no small effort of intelligence. One has to construct in one's mind something that one has never experienced, and something that may run sharply contrary to one's current experience (as when we judge an enemy we fear). It is a remarkable human power, testimony to a highly developed mind. It is truly wonderful that human beings are able to think out these problems, and to appreciate and understand even the moral truths which are first brought to light by other people. This is clearly a high-level intellectual activity.

Why do we enter the GPV? This question may be addressed in terms of individuals or in terms of society at large. Either way, though, the answer is that the GPV device has manifest utility. Clearly it serves an important social function. It assists us in the process of living together fairly peacefully and in providing mutual aid and support.<sup>11</sup> And human individuals are perceptive enough, intelligent enough, that the utility is evident even to the least sharp persons among us. The power of our morally objective perceptions and judgments does not go entirely unappreciated or unfelt even by cold fish or inveterately selfish souls, by the great and the proud, by the famous and the cultured, as well as by the ordinary man in the street. Undoubtedly the ubiquitous influence of moral judgments is due to the operations of sympathy, even in the person we regard as cold and unsympathetic.

In general, it is certain, that, wherever we go, whatever we reflect on or converse about, everything still presents us with the view of human happiness or misery, and excites in our breast a sympathetic movement of pleasure or uneasiness. (EPM 221)

It should be stressed that the GPV is a distinct mental function, not to be confused with sympathy. Morality, using the GPV, lets us *correct* the output from sympathy. Clearly this involves a higher-level cognitive function, of the sort we associate with conscious consideration. We might usefully compare it with playing chess or working out a problem in physics. Nobody plays chess without some conscious effort, and nobody achieves the level of shared, responsible moral judgments without making the relevant kind of conscious effort.

### III. The Unconscious Habit View

When, in what circumstances, do we adopt the GPV or at least move in the direction of adopting it?<sup>12</sup> A moot question—but generally speaking, we would obviously expect pressure moving us toward the GPV whenever there is a need for greater objectivity, perhaps because we want to gain agreement or at least communicate our moral views. Just the desire to get things *right*—to know the truth—would account for some pressure. Certainly we do want to “see well” just in the ordinary run of life. We want to know the truth about the people we encounter at work, our child’s friends and their parents, the candidates for mayor, the salesman at the automobile dealership, at so forth. We want to see ourselves well, too. We have a need to “bear our own survey,” and bearing it means little if the survey is not reasonably accurate and objective. In the case of other people, knowing the truth gives us a chance of making good choices in a wide range of practical matters. The main product of our personal survey is our own intimate experience of pride or humility (shame). Nothing could be more important, in a sense, as our every experience throughout our days will be partly conditioned by our self estimate, by our way of holding our Self in the social world.

We are not in fact aware of any effort, any thoughtful calculation, any artifice regarding our use of the GPV. That is our experience. We simply try to “get it right” in our perceptions and judgments. Our immediate experience is not entirely conclusive, of course, since we might have said the same about our experience of justice and judgments regarding property. Our experience is a promising place to start, however, and we should not dismiss it too hastily.

Consider the sort of case in which, according to Hume, we “form some general unalterable standard...” (T 603, 583). Hume says that it is through *experience* that we arrive at our “calm” judgments concerning the characters of men. What experience? And how does experience operate here?

It proves helpful to bear in mind Hume’s explicit analogy with *seeing* and saying what we see. In the case of sight, Hume observes that

All objects seem to diminish by their distance: But tho’ the appearance of objects to our senses be the original standard, by

which we judge of them, yet we do not say, that they actually diminish by the distance; but correcting the appearance by reflexion, arrive at a more constant and establish'd judgment concerning them. (T 603)

The "reflexion" which enables us to see and say that things do not become smaller as we move away from them is clearly an operation of which we are insensible (or unconscious).<sup>13</sup> Nobody has to *think* that the Thanksgiving turkey is still big enough to be worth eating when it is seen from the far end of the room. But what sort of experience has taught us how to perceive in such cases, what is the "reflexion" of which we have become insensible? Of course these are things we cannot remember; they are lost in the darkness of our youth, where our memory cannot serve. We can reconstruct the kind of experience which would be relevant here, however. As a wee child we may have been surprised a few times by how *big* somebody is up close, when they seemed of ordinary size seen from afar. Or we may have pointed to "the cute little house on the hill" only to be informed with a laugh that the little house is ten times larger than our own. Instances of this ilk, and still simpler ones, abound in the life of any young human. The learning here is not primarily, and not merely, a conscious process. It is comparable rather to the case in which "a horse, that has become accustomed to the field, becomes acquainted with the proper height which he can leap, and will never attempt what exceeds his force and ability" (T 105). Obviously the horse learns how to see the true size of things; it can by reflexion correct its initial sensory input, although in this case not for the sake of agreement with other horses. A horse doesn't want to stumble and fall.

Hume is making a similar point, we may say, regarding our moral notions and the perceptions associated with them. Here he emphasizes that "*the intercourse of sentiments in society and conversation makes us form*" and use the GPV (T 603, my emphasis). Humans do not like to stumble and fall in conversation. With the GPV we employ an objective standard in approving and disapproving of characters and manners. This is a useful way of staying on our feet when we talk.

It is presupposed by Hume's account that humans are sufficiently similar in their basic make-up to make an objective standard possible (and useful). This essential similarity is endlessly complex, but let us settle for a small strand as illustration. Consider. When there is a sudden loud noise, such as a door slamming or the report of a gun, humans "agree" to have a startle reaction: we jump slightly, we widen our eyes, raise the eyebrows, let the jaw go slack, and so forth. This has nothing to do with morality, but it is an interesting phenomenon. A strikingly similar reaction is deemed appropriate when we hear shocking or surprising news, e.g., we are told that our cat Twisty has given birth to six kittens, and we thought Twisty was a male. Or

take another case. When a young mother hears her infant cry out, the appropriate reaction for her is an immediate concern and interest. Now consider the reaction of an observer, perhaps the young woman's mother, who sees that the young woman is little moved by the infant's cries. The grandmother reacts with shock, horror, dismay, and indignation. To be indifferent to one's own child is an unacceptable departure from the standard of humanity; if recognized, such indifference will surely be censured. Here the reaction is morally loaded, so we would think. Or suppose a man has the choice of treading on the pavement or on another person's gouty toe; as Hume says of this case, "There is here surely a difference in the case" (EPM 226). Nobody is indifferent to the misery of other people. Or, if somebody were indifferent, to all appearances, or actually preferred to see others in pain, we would view such a person as scarcely human, that is, we might react more as we do to a frightening animal (EPM 225). As folklore and real life remind us, a monster can have a human form.

So the experience we have in society and conversation when we behave inappropriately—including times when what we say is jarring or distressing for others as well as times when we show our unnatural feelings or lack of feeling—is inevitably an unpleasant and disagreeable experience. It is a disruption of the natural rapport we have with others of our kind. The automatic thing is for a person to vibrate the same as others, for truly "the minds of men are mirrors to one another..." (T365). To find oneself out of harmony is grating and anxiety provoking. This will cause a person to move towards the others, to reinstate the harmonic balance. And in some cases, perhaps most, it may happen that the only conscious concomitant of the process is a flash of shame—feeling *wrong*—or a pang of distressful distance from a loved one.

#### IV. Which View is Better?

Let us consider which view of the GPV is closer to the Humean truth of the matter. One avenue is to see which view is better aligned with the rest of what we understand of Hume's philosophy. There is some hope that we may find a clue to our puzzle in a remote field, for instance in Hume's theory of human understanding. We will consider two arguments here. The first compares the GPV with other familiar mental functions such as forming beliefs, knowing the meanings of words, and having sympathetic feelings; these operate in us without conscious effort, so is it not reasonable to expect the GPV to work in a similar manner? The second argument holds that we use the GPV when we correct ordinary perceptual judgments; nobody would deny that we do this habitually and unconsciously, so it seems natural to think we should find the same to be true of moral judgments. There is one

other possible avenue for investigation, namely, a comparison with common moral experience. In the end this may be the best indicator of Hume's view, if we trust that he is an astute observer of our actual moral lives.

**A. The First Argument.** It is clear in Book I of the *Treatise* that the basic operations of the mind take place outside the ring of light cast by the lamp of consciousness; we are not normally aware of what goes on during the formation of common beliefs, for example. This is certainly the case with the massive edifice of belief which we loosely attribute to "the senses." When we try to *think* about belief-formation we find "'tis impossible upon any system to defend either our understanding or senses" and we are forced to acknowledge that "carelessness and in-attention alone can afford us any remedy" (T 218). Happily for us "nature herself suffices" when it comes to the ordinary life and she does her work without our conscious control.

Hume's account of another mental function essential to many conscious processes, namely, the ability to know the meaning of common words, supports a similar picture of nature working beyond our ken. For Hume our knowing some ordinary word—'white', 'black', 'government', 'negotiation', 'conquest'—is due to the operation of myriad customs, one for each word, it appears. For example, if we were to try to think, or if somebody were to say, "all triangles have equal sides," we would "excite" the particular habit or custom which is associated with the word 'triangle'. Immediately ideas of scalene or isocetes triangles would "crowd in upon us, and make us perceive the falshood of this proposition..." (T 21). We cannot explain the custom itself. "To explain the ultimate causes of our mental actions is impossible." We cannot even directly inspect or observe one of these customs. We can only evoke or excite them and watch what happens. There is indeed a "magical faculty" in the soul, a strange power of producing relevant ideas or images without any direction by conscious thought. Humans succeed in conversation without having definitions for any of their words, but if someone tries out a definition we can swiftly judge its adequacy and provide criticism as needed.

When we turn from the understanding to the whole arena of our passions and actions, with Book II of the *Treatise*, it is pretty obvious that the account of sympathy is drawn in parallel to the account of belief. Sympathy is presented as an involuntary process, a *mechanism* that is universally operative in humans (T 575).

The minds of all men are similar in their feelings and operations, nor can any one be actuated by any affection, of which all others are not, in some degree, susceptible. As in strings equally wound up, the motion of one communicated itself to the rest; so all the affections readily pass from one person to another, and beget correspondent movements in every human creature. (T 575–576)

Here the communication is an instinctive response, an emotional contagiousness that spreads easily among our kind.<sup>14</sup> Certainly the operations of sympathy are not ordinarily within our conscious control.<sup>15</sup> It is an aspect of our animal nature, and we clearly share it with other animals:

Observe the force of sympathy thro' the whole animal creation, and the easy communication of sentiments from one thinking being to another. (T 363)

Every one has observ'd how much more dogs are animated when they hunt in a pack than when they pursue their game apart; and 'tis evident that this can proceed from nothing but sympathy. (T 398)

It is settled, then, that sympathy is an automatic animal response, quite beyond choice and involuntary, our awareness coming in only after its work is done. We are often conscious of the result, almost never of the process itself. In the normal run of human experience, we see the ubiquitous *influence* of sympathy. It produces myriad feelings and thoughts, impulses and passions. In this broad field we witness the operation of another mechanism, one which to some extent controls and corrects the "raw" response provoked by sympathy.

Clearly the operation of the GPV is typically distinct and distinguishable from that of sympathy. Let us consider a case in which we can contrast their respective products. A woman, Mary, lives with her father in a mobile home which she finally owns free and clear. Her dad has a serious problem with alcohol. It is Monday morning after a "binge" weekend. Her father is passed out in the bathroom, smelly, unshaven, his shirt stained with vomit; he is due at work in an hour. His alarm clock is shrieking from his bedroom. What is Mary to do? On countless Mondays she has cleaned him up, ironed his shirt, made a lunch, driven him to work. She feels so sorry for him! But for months she has felt uncomfortable about her role. She knows it has to stop, her behavior is just making it possible for him to continue as a drunk. He needs to face the consequences of his actions. So this time Mary takes control of herself and leaves for work without rescuing her dad. She thinks to herself, "How hard it is to do what you know is right for someone you love!"

As I am picturing this case, Mary's sympathetic response to her father's plight is strong and involuntary. Evidently some mechanism operates to control and inhibit her basic response. It seems reasonable to suppose that it is the GPV that produces her growing discomfort. She sees her father, and her own behavior, in a more objective way than sympathy alone would prompt. It first comes to her consciousness in the form of what we might call moral discomfort or uneasiness. And this suggests that the GPV operates

in a manner similar to sympathy, that is, as an involuntary response of which we are rendered largely insensible by custom. What we find in *this* example would certainly incline us toward The Unconscious Habit View.

It remains possible that we *can* in some cases consciously adopt, or try to adopt, the GPV; of course the proponents of The Unconscious Habit View would never want to deny that possibility. It would acknowledge, in a similar way, that we *can* upon occasion consciously produce or resist the formation of a belief, trace the meaning of a word, or try to boost our sympathetic responses. But they claim that for the most part we are quite unaware of our belief formation, our word meanings, and the inner operations of sympathy. And we are generally unaware of the GPV.

This argument may prove persuasive, but it is not conclusive. Since the GPV is a distinct and separable function of the mind, not the same thing as sympathy, it could imaginably work in a different way. Does the lamp of consciousness switch on whenever we employ the GPV? It remains a moot question.

**B. The Second Argument.** We have already seen a version of this argument above. Let us rehearse it and expand it a little.

We may begin by recalling Hume's analogy between the process of correction required for ordinary sense perception, specifically *seeing* and saying what we see. Here is the second *Enquiry* version of the point about vision.

The same object, at a double distance, really throws on the eye a picture of but half the bulk; yet we imagine that it appears of the same size in both situations; because we know that on our approach to it, its image would expand on the eye, and that the difference consists not in the object itself, but in our position with regard to it. And, indeed, without such a correction of appearances, both in internal and external sentiment, men could never think or talk steadily on any subject; while their fluctuating situations produce a continual variation on objects, and throw them into such different and contrary lights and positions. (EPM 227–228)

The operation of judgment here is normally an unconscious one. As asserted before, nobody has to *think* that the Thanksgiving turkey is still big enough to be worth eating when it is seen from the far end of the room. We can see that it is the same twenty-five pound bird we placed on the table a few minutes before. Obviously we had to learn from experience *how* to perceive well and accurately in such circumstances, but all normally endowed humans do learn and automatically engage in a "correction of appearances."

It is worth noting that *this* kind of "reflexion" and correction is a process we share with many other animals. Hume observed that a horse will learn

the height he can jump "and will never attempt what exceeds his force and ability." Gardeners know that deer will devastate a garden protected by a five-foot fence, but a seven-foot fence will usually save the tomatoes and beans. The deer will not even try the seven-foot fence. A horse or deer is wonderfully adept at judging the true size of things. Every animal, including the human, must learn to correct its initial sensory input. "From a certain sensation affecting his smell, [the dog] judges his game not to be far distant from him" (T 178). These ways of learning and knowing are normal for most animals.

In the moral arena of life, where we judge of characters and manners, it appears that we employ *the same mechanisms of correction*, the essential difference being that moral judgments involve "internal" sentiments. Hume says, with regard to moral contexts, "the 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, my emphasis). This suggests that the GPV is like a *tool* which we can (possibly must) employ in moral contexts, but which can also be used elsewhere for other purposes. It is essential for morality, but it is just as essential for our communication about the dry goods of the world.<sup>16</sup>

For our present purpose, the question is whether the GPV as used in moral contexts is necessarily the product of thoughtful calculation and conscious awareness, or whether it is the product of our automatic customs, of which we are generally insensible. Now, given Hume's explicit comparison with our perception of objects in the world around us, it seems that The Conscious Effort View is thrown on the defensive here; it is incumbent on that voice to explain why the GPV has to be a conscious process in moral perception. The obvious line for that voice, or the most plausible, may be to say that *there are many cases* in which the process requires our clear awareness, or that *there are many persons* for whom the process is a conscious one. But this leaves open the possibility that there are many cases and many persons for whom the process is largely or entirely unconscious.

**C. The Appeal to Common Moral Experience.** Let us consider afresh the nature of our firsthand experience, the concrete evidence drawn from everyday life. Relevant for our consideration would be any instances in which moral distinctions are put to work in what we say or think. Such instances are surely abundant in the lives of ordinary people. Just as surely, we do not find an immediate and obvious awareness of a "general point of view." Significantly, that expression is not a familiar one, it does not crop up everywhere in conversations on moral topics. That fact should be surprising or disturbing for advocates of The Conscious Effort View of the GPV, for on their showing we could scarcely *think* on moral matters without an immediate awareness of taking up a special standpoint. And if we are so

aware of our point of view, it is natural that we should speak of it. We do not speak of it, not much at any rate, so common experience presents a *prima facie* difficulty for The Conscious Effort View.

However, it may be misguided to focus so tightly on that expression "general point of view." We might be aware of the phenomenon named by that expression under other headings, using other words and phrases. We can tell a plausible story here. The most obvious kind of case to cite, no doubt, is that in which we recognize that a person is speaking from a *selfish* or *self-centered* viewpoint, as when a lumber baron opposes restrictions on timber sales in public forests. We figure that the public interest dictates some level of preservation of forest lands, and that may require restrictions on timber sales. Such cases are not uncommon, but in principle it is easy to oppose or "correct" a selfish stance. In the present case we would simply point out that other people have interests that are not compatible with unrestricted logging of the forests.

There are more interesting cases not involving selfishness. In some instances, we recognize a disturbing or damaging *bias* in a person's moral judgments, and we might understand the bias in terms of the person's narrow viewpoint. When a miser pronounces his brother a fool because the sibling gives twenty percent of his income to an orphanage, we understand that the miser probably places too much value on keeping money (though in the present case, we may imagine, the miser's own money is not affected). We know that other people, such as those who run the orphanage, would apply very different epithets to the brother: generous, kind, a benefactor. Of course the miser will retort: "generous fool, kind fool, fool of a benefactor." Now, to discuss the matter further with the miser might be a study in futility; a miser, after all, is one kind of fanatic. But if we presume, for the sake of discussion, that the facts of the case are such that most people would purely admire the miser's brother and would never consider him a fool, there might be a chance. The opinions of other people will give us leverage in our argument; we should be able to pry the miser away from his harsh judgment. Inevitably he will care what other people think, especially those persons who, like himself, care about money.

Such cases, where judgments are skewed by selfishness or some other failure of perspective, while not altogether rare, certainly do not form the main fabric of moral life. Rather they stand out against the background of countless cases in which we simply *see* and say what we see. In normal cases we naturally speak with some measure of objectivity, the relevant measure being somewhat context-dependent. This point is easy to appreciate when it comes to "external" judgments. If I assert that my fence is three feet high, and a tape measure reads thirty-five and a half inches, in most contexts people would say I spoke the truth. If I claim to have a six-foot fence, I might be called a liar. It works the same way with "internal" sentiments and

judgments. Perhaps I exclaim, in the company of one who knows the life of Hume, "David Hume was an inveterate pennypincher!" The very sense, not to mention the truth, of what I say will depend on the whole context. Am I admiring the man's necessary frugality? Am I deploring his tightness with money? (The person who knows me would expect that I admire the way Hume managed his affairs).

The things we say, the judgments we make, undoubtedly fall short of absolute objectivity, whatever that would be (for it is not a humanly applicable standard); yet for the most part we do manage to be objective *enough*. Otherwise we face the immediate "uneasiness" caused by resistance from our interlocutors. The miser who publicly calls his brother a fool risks having scorn and contempt heaped upon him by those who do not share his harsh, unsympathetic judgment. Even here, the more common response would probably be some version of "look who's talking!" We know that a moral judgment is an expression of the character of the person who makes it. This personal "coloring" of our judgments is not a lamentable feature of our lives, indeed it contributes sparkle to conversations. Nobody would wish that we were all alike. We have enough in common, our shared humanity, so that genuine communication on moral matters is always possible.

If indeed the mechanism of the GPV is frequently active but only occasionally in the light of consciousness, how are we to understand the main thrust of Hume's effort in his moral theory? What is the relationship between his philosophical findings and the current of everyday life? Well, Hume seeks to *explain* familiar moral phenomena in terms of what he has learned of human nature, specifically the nature of the mind and of the passions. He looks within the human organism to make sense of the curious features of moral life—the things we love and abhor, the way we feel bound by a promise, our passion for property rights, our love of fame, and so forth—whereas various other philosophers have looked outside for an explanation, to God or to social conventions. The explanation Hume offers is what we might call "a Black Box" explanation, where the human mind is the black box. We know the input conditions (roughly, what we can pick up from the senses); we know the output as well (our moral distinctions, the judgments and practices they infuse). Hume's task is to discover and describe the operations that must take place inside the black box. For Hume, in addition to mechanisms of perception, belief formation, and passion production, the black box contains the operations of sympathy and the GPV. Of course his theory does not *open* the box for a direct view of its contents; it is not as though people become conscious now of their inner operations whereas they were not before.

Against the background of our automatic habit-driven responses, we can place those cases in which we are sharply conscious of our moral process, such as cases in which we try hard to be more objective or more

sympathetic. The whole field of "artificial" virtues, of justice and rights and duties, is replete with suitable examples. We might even find moral problems that are analogous to playing chess or doing a calculation in physics; a question regarding the fair distribution of available resources after a war or natural disaster is a candidate. Nobody plays chess without some conscious effort, and a fair distribution of food and clothing would require intelligent calculation, so such cases leave room for The Conscious Effort View to take hold. We certainly want to acknowledge that conscious effort has a proper place in moral life!

Adopting Hume's moral theory as a guide to life might have some useful effects. Hume offers an interesting analogy regarding its possible influence in the Conclusion of Book III. He invites us to consider the relation of the painter (of the human figure) to the anatomist. "An anatomist...is admirably fitted to give advice to a painter; and 'tis even impracticable to excel in the latter art, without the assistance of the former" (T 621). The painter needs to be aware of what he does not see in order to more effectively render what he does see. Knowing the configuration of human bones, knowing how the muscles lie and where they attach, even knowing how the systems of respiration and blood circulation work, the painter educated in anatomy brings the figure alive on the canvas. So it is, Hume suggests, with the possible service of "the most abstract speculations concerning human nature" to the exercise of "*practical morality*." Specifically, the philosophical work "may render this latter science more correct in its precepts, and more persuasive in its exhortations" (T 621). At the very least, I suppose, we would avoid "the delusive glosses of superstition and false religion" (EPM 270). And our exhortations could appeal to our love of fame, our constant habit of surveying ourselves, in short to what is already natural to us.

## V. Consequences and Further Questions

If this interpretation of Hume's GPV is on the right track, so that the GPV is largely a matter of custom and habit, operating outside the ring of light cast by our conscious attention, there are interesting consequences.

One consequence is that we cannot treat the GPV as a criterion for identifying human beings; we are not "the animal that uses the GPV." There seems to be no difference in kind between the way sentiments are corrected in humans and in other animals. "It seems evident, that animals as well as men learn many things from experience" (EHU 105). A related point is that we cannot identify a judgment as "moral" merely by showing that it is produced with the aid of the GPV; countless judgments we would never deem moral do as much. At most the GPV is a necessary condition for moral perception. (Even that seems questionable. Isn't it possible that in some instances sympathy alone could prompt one to see, and say, something of

moral significance?) Finally, we cannot explain why animals are *not* moral agents by saying that we can, but they cannot, take up the GPV.<sup>17</sup>

Thus we are left with curious questions. Why *is* it that animals other than humans do not fit under the umbrella of morality?<sup>18</sup> What *does* make one judgment moral and another one not?

Regarding the latter question, we might borrow Hume's words on a closely related topic: "Is there any reason for being so extremely scrupulous about a *word*?" There is little reason to suppose that our lives (or our language) will be very precise in marking the boundaries between the moral and the non-moral (or between virtues and talents). Still, we can acknowledge, in Hume's terms, that we have distinct "species of sentiment" and that we associate morality with "the sentiments which arise from humanity" and not those which arise merely from one's own spleen. A philosopher might *forge* a tight boundary, but we do not have to respect it. It is not a boundary we find in the ordinary run of life.

The former question takes us pretty deep into Hume's whole picture of humanity and its place in nature. For Hume, it is abundantly clear that animals are similar to humans in many respects. They form beliefs in the same way and "beasts are endow'd with thought and reason as well as men" (T 176). We share a basic emotional structure with animals, and this is not merely a matter of their feeling pain and pleasure as we do, for it extends even to the relatively complex emotions of pride and shame (T 324–328). As Charlotte Brown has observed, it follows from the fact that animals experience pride that they are *persons*, beings that have a sense of self.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, animals enjoy the mechanism of sympathy. We "observe the force of sympathy thro' the whole animal creation..." (T 363). Finally, animals are objects of love and hatred for us, and many animals experience these emotions just as we do. We know that a "dog naturally loves a man above his own species, and very commonly meets with a return of affection" (T 397). So animals seem to have intact the very engine which drives morality in human beings.

But—animals don't talk. They think, they form beliefs, they love and hate, but they do not use words. For humans the whole process of abstract thought *requires* words. "A particular idea becomes general by being annex'd to a *general term*" (T 22, my emphasis). The general term is linked by association to a particular custom. Animals, lacking words, cannot do this. It is not that they lack the mental capacity, i.e., that they are not smart enough or do not think well enough. They *simply* do not talk. As Wittgenstein observes, "commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing."<sup>20</sup> Here is a salient difference between humans and other animals. Non-human animals do not engage in forms of life which are constituted by words, such as writing a history of England or taking out a mortgage. It seems that much of

what we think of as morality requires words, although animals do experience (wordless) love and are the objects of human love. Wordless love might be thought morally significant, in some circumstances. Certainly humans do have forms of love which require language (marriage), but we also have forms of love which are silent. This prompts one final reflection. Though we share the general function of a GPV with other animals, it is likely that we know applications of the GPV which require language. Some things we can experience without words, some we cannot.<sup>21</sup>

## NOTES

My thanks to an anonymous reader for *Hume Studies*, whose comments on an earlier draft were extremely helpful.

1 What I call "The Conscious Effort View" is nicely represented by Annette C. Baier and J. L. Mackie; passages from their works will be quoted in the relevant section below. "The Unconscious Habit View" is indicated by Elizabeth Radcliffe, John P. Wright, and Marcia Baron. References to their works are supplied below.

2 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd edition revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), 581. Further references to the *Treatise* will be cited parenthetically as "T" followed by the relevant page number(s).

3 David Hume, *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd edition revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 174–175. Further references to the first *Enquiry* will be cited parenthetically as "EHU," while references to the second *Enquiry* will be cited as "EPM," followed by page number(s) in both cases.

4 Moral judgments are reasonably objective for Hume, but this should not encourage us to attribute moral realism to him. He can account for our objectivity without appealing to any "real" moral properties existing outside of us, as we shall see below.

5 It is the assumptions of Book I that underwrite the confident assertion in Book III that each person has unique perceptions, a unique point of view. What is true, undoubtedly, is that each person has separate perceptual machinery; I have my eyes, you have yours. Of course that is not really a basis for saying that our perceptions are different. Images reflecting on an eyeball's retina are not perceptions. Whether different people perceive things the same way or not is properly an empirical question; we would have to ask them, e.g., to describe what they see, then tabulate the results. Then we may find interesting, non-trivial variations in perception, perhaps reflecting differences in the moral character of the persons perceiving

6 In all of this I am imagining a disagreement where we do see some issue of undoubted moral significance and where the people who fail to agree are, on the face of it, sane, serious, and deserving of respect. But I suspect that it is

not always easy to know when we are faced with a "monster" such as Hume's "sensible knave," a man who does not deserve our respect. Quite possibly we should say, in the end, that the knave was not truly making moral judgments, though it seemed like it at the time.

7 Annette C. Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 177.

8 J. L. Mackie, *Hume's Moral Theory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 120–123. Annette Baier agrees with Mackie on this point.

9 It remains possible, of course, that kindness may be recognized as a virtue across all cultures. But to understand what counts as kindness in another culture might require a careful factual enquiry.

10 Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments*, 77.

11 Mackie, *Hume's Moral Theory*, 123.

12 See Elizabeth S. Radcliffe, "Hume on Motivating Sentiments, the General Point of View, and the Inculcation of 'Morality,'" *Hume Studies* 20.1 (1994), 37–58. She suggests that we should think of the GPV as something we can approach to a greater or lesser degree. This makes sense, since we can clearly be more or less objective and we can succeed in being more objective without being entirely objective.

13 See John P. Wright, "Butler and Hume on Habit and Moral Character," in *Hume and Hume's Connexions*, edited by M. A. Stewart and John P. Wright, (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 105–118, who reaches a similar conclusion. In a similar vein, Marcia Baron suggests: "The following is probably the case: When I take the general view, I need not be aware that I am doing so; I need have no notion that there is such a standard. I may not even be aware that I am correcting my sentiments." See her "Morality as a Back-up System," *Hume Studies* 14.1 (1988), 25–52; reprinted in *David Hume: Critical Assessments*, edited by Stanley Tweyman, 6 volumes (New York: Routledge, 1995), IV, 139–155.

14 For a good detailed discussion of sympathy, see Phillip Mercer, "Hume's Concept of Sympathy," in *Sympathy and Ethics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972); reprinted in *David Hume: Critical Assessments*, edited by Stanley Tweyman, 6 volumes (New York: Routledge, 1995), IV, 437–460.

15 We can sometimes use indirect methods to control or suppress reactions that sympathy produces. For example, a person may avoid triggering certain sympathetic reactions by staying away from a funeral and the mourners.

16 Many of Hume's readers nowadays equate his GPV with the *moral point of view* (e.g., see Radcliffe, 53). But it is just as if we were to use a yardstick to measure the sides of a triangle, then name the yardstick "triangle measurer." Nobody calls the GPV "the solid object point of view" or "the true height point of view," but the correction process afforded by the GPV is just as essential for our commerce with objects of the world, such as turkeys or fences, as it is for our moral feelings and talk.

17 This does seem to be the standard explanation. See, for example, Antony E. Pitson, "The Nature of Humean Animals," *Hume Studies* 19.2 (1993), 303: "[O]ur ability to take the common or general view appears to reflect just

those respects in which we differ crucially from animals."

18 Maybe animals *do* fit under the moral umbrella in some manner. Charlotte Brown suggested as much in "Humean Animals," a paper presented to the 18th International Hume Conference, University of Oregon, Eugene, August 1991. See also Annette Baier's "Knowing Our Place in the Animal World," in *Postures of the Mind* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 139-156.

19 Charlotte Brown, "Humean Animals."

20 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, (New York: Macmillan, 1953), Remark 25.