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Rosalind Hursthouse

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# Virtue Ethics and Human Nature

ROSALIND HURSTHOUSE

In this paper, I begin by outlining some basic features of the version of virtue ethics I espouse, and then turn to exploring what light may be shed on our understanding and interpretation of Hume when he is viewed from that perspective.

## I. Virtue Ethics

A characteristic claim of modern virtue ethicists, as I take it is well known, is the following:

An action is right if and only if it is what a virtuous agent would, characteristically, do in the circumstances.

However, as is also, I think, well known, the claim is hardly distinctive of virtue ethics, for, as it stands, it comes too close to being a truism that just registers a link between the concept of right action and the concept of a virtuous agent; deontologists or indeed utilitarians may well espouse it too. The difference between those who do and virtue ethicists such as myself lies in the way in which the claim is read.

They read it as an answer to the question, "What is a virtuous agent?" Having already got themselves (as they suppose) a specification of right action from somewhere else, they then use the truism to specify their concept of a vir-

tuous agent. An act is right, it may be said, if and only if it maximizes utility, and so a virtuous agent is one who is disposed to maximize utility. Or, an act is right if and only if it is in accordance with correct moral laws or rules, so a virtuous agent is one who is disposed to act in accordance with such laws or rules. Consider Rawls's definition of the virtues as "strong and normally effective desires to act on the basic principles of right," or, indeed, Locke: "If virtue be taken for actions conformable to God's will, or to the rule prescribed by God, which is the true and only measure of virtue."<sup>1</sup>

But we virtue ethicists read it the other way, as an answer to the question, "What is a right action?" Answer: It is not, necessarily, an action that maximizes utility; not, necessarily, an action that is in accordance with any moral rule, principle, or law (as those terms are normally understood); but, simply, what a virtuous agent would, characteristically, do (or have done) in the circumstances.

Thereby, of course, we invite the question, "So what is a virtuous agent?" since, without an answer to this question, our specification of right action is obviously woefully incomplete. Notwithstanding a surprisingly widely held belief to the contrary, this problem has not escaped our notice, and contrary to one which is, perhaps, equally common, we do not regard it as necessary to resort to deontology in order to answer it. Rather than producing anything remotely resembling Rawls's claim, we move to another truism, namely, that a virtuous agent is one who has, and exercises, those character traits that are the virtues, and then turn to the question, "Which character traits are the virtues?"

At this point, we may start to diverge, according to what kind of virtue ethics we are espousing. But if, like me (and unlike, say, Michael Slote or Christine Swanton) you are a neo-Aristotelian, you begin your work on this question by brooding about Aristotle's answer, namely: A virtue is a character trait that a human being, given her (human) nature, biological and psychological, needs for *eudaimonia*, or true happiness, to flourish or live well.<sup>2</sup>

So let us think of virtue ethicists of my ilk as basically making just these two claims:

- (1) An action is right if and only if it is what a virtuous agent would, characteristically, do in the circumstances (reading that as an answer to the question "What is a right action?") and
- (2) A virtue is a character trait a human being, given her (human) nature, needs for *eudaimonia*.

Given that we modern virtue ethicists have made a point of defining our position in contrast to those of utilitarians and deontologists, it would, I think, be anachronistic to describe Hume as one of us. But, given just these two basic claims, it is quite plausible to think of him as one of our precursors. It is not

merely that, like us, he constantly uses the virtue and vice vocabulary and the terms “virtuous” and “vicious” instead of “right” and “wrong”—that was common enough in his time, unlike the present. But, like us, he is fundamentally interested in the question, “Which character traits are the virtues” (or rather, in his case, “How do we form the judgment that a particular character trait is a virtue?”), and nothing could be more remote from his thought than the idea that of course you answer this question off the back of some prior specification of right action.

So, bearing in mind the modern, neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists’ claim that a virtue is a character trait a human being, given her nature, needs for *eudaimonia* or true happiness, let us turn to considering Hume’s claim—that a virtue is useful or agreeable to its possessor or to others.

## II. Hume’s Disjunctive Claim

Viewed in relation to the Aristotelian claim, what should strike us about Hume’s disjunctive claim, I think, is the enormous confidence with which he asserts it.<sup>3</sup> We should be struck by the confidence for three related reasons. The first is that, as Hume and his classically educated readers must have known, the Aristotelian claim was around, and it is a rival to his. It is not only Aristotelian, but was preserved (albeit with differing interpretations and elaborations) by the Stoics and the Epicureans—and he never gives it so much as a mention. It is as though he is so sure of his claim that he sees no necessity to argue against the eudaimonism of Aristotle, the Epicureans, and the Stoics—that the virtues are necessary for *eudaimonia* or true happiness. We know he did not like the Stoics, and it is true he shows little sign of remembering any Aristotle, but we know he does like the Epicureans and derived a great deal from them.

James Moore, in his scholarly paper “Hume and Hutcheson,” indeed says that it is from the Epicurean tradition that Hume derives “the argument that virtues are approved because of their usefulness and agreeableness.”<sup>4</sup> But, unfortunately, he does not discuss how, in that tradition, these two are yoked together into a conjunction; nor does he comment on the fact that Hume’s claim is not that the virtues are all approved because of being useful *and* agreeable, but the much looser disjunctive claim that they are approved for any one of four causes—useful or agreeable to their possessor or to others. And going for the fourfold disjunction, rather than the conjunction, makes a really big difference.

When the ancients sought to defend eudaimonism, they relied on two premises about human nature: one, that human beings are social animals and two, that they are also rational. In virtue of our rationality, we can (and indeed, unlike any other animal, can only) perfect our nature by developing, through education and reflection, that second nature, in which we possess the virtues

that our basic animal (and thereby social) nature is suited to.<sup>5</sup> (Consider, for example, Aristotle's remark that "we have the virtues neither by nor contrary to [our] nature; we are fitted by [our] nature to receive them.")<sup>6</sup> Now, the point about rationality, in relation to Hume, should be downplayed, and it does not have to be expressed using that concept. More neutrally, we can say that the idea is that we human beings can develop, through education and reflection, a second nature such that we take a particular pleasure and pride in certain things, and come to regard certain things as worth pursuing and having, which relate to our fellow human beings as much as to our individual selves—a point that Hume shows every sign of endorsing. *Eudaimonia*, true happiness, is living well, as a human being, that is, as a social animal that enjoys its individual life and the (largely social) activities that make it up. Thus the ancients sought, we may say, casting their view in Humean terms, to defend the view that the virtues are (by and large) useful *and* agreeable, to their possessor *and* to others.

Of course, this claim has never been easy to make out; it requires quite a lot of fancy footwork and, so its critics say, a lot of special pleading, if not concealed circularity. But, as a claim concerning what is distinctive about those character traits that are the virtues, we don't want it to be easy to make out. We can agree that it is not easy for a character trait to satisfy this very demanding conjunctive condition, and hence there is little danger that a whole lot of character traits that are standardly condemned as vices will manage to slip in alongside the virtues.

But, as we all know, it is all too easy for something to meet a disjunctive condition, let alone one with four disjuncts—and this brings me to the second reason why we should be struck by Hume's confidence in his claim that a virtue is useful or agreeable to its possessor or to others. Not only does it come without any consideration of the rival view, it also comes so clearly in advance of the "experimental method." In the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* we have something, albeit something rather cursory in some cases, in the way of the application of that method to determine whether or not it is true that the standard list of the virtues does indeed display this pattern. But in the *Treatise* we just have the confidence. And that is interesting. Why is Hume so sure? Of course, it fits in very nicely with his conviction that whatever is called virtuous produces pleasure; we will certainly, as he says, "reap a pleasure from the view of a character . . . which is agreeable to others or to the person himself" (T 591).<sup>7</sup> But why was he so sure, in advance of looking at the details, that generosity rather than avarice, courage rather than cowardice, honesty rather than dishonesty, and so on—the character traits on the standard list—were going to emerge as just the ones, unlike the vices, that did, indeed, cause such a pleasure? Do you not have to look quite carefully at the details in order to discern this? Taking just a quick glance, does it not seem that meanness, rather than generosity, is useful to its possessor, and that honesty, though it may be

agreeable to its possessor, is by no means always agreeable to the others on its receiving end?

This brings me to the third, perhaps barely distinguishable, reason why we should be struck by Hume's confidence, namely, that when one does look at the details, it is disastrously obvious that the four causes of pleasure are bound to yield many inconsistent or inconclusive results.

What might we say about courage? Well, it is useful to its possessor insofar as it enables her to achieve, in the teeth of danger, things she very much wants, and it is useful to others insofar as she wants their good and defends them from danger. On the other hand, cowardice is useful to its possessor insofar as it preserves her from risking life and limb, and useful to others insofar as, when she wants to harm them, she is often too timid to do so. Suppose we followed Hume in insisting that justice, as a virtue, namely a personal character trait, is only useful to others. All right, so that is why it receives approbation. But, by the same token, so should self-abnegation. Suppose we follow him in insisting that the so-called selfish virtues are only useful to their possessor. All right, so that is why they receive approbation. But, by the same token, so should injustice. If the quality of being immediately agreeable to its possessor moves us, by the mechanism of sympathy, to the approbation of proper pride, why not to the approbation of self-indulgence and licentiousness as well, since they are jolly agreeable to their possessors (albeit only that)?

I should stress that this disastrous feature of the disjunctive claim is not something that can be avoided by adverting to the "common point of view." The issue is not why, or how, we manage to agree on aspects of personal merit, given our own particular interests, instead of praising this person's justice (because it was useful to us) and condemning that man's (because we were disadvantageously on the receiving end). Nor is the issue, "Why do some people praise justice and others injustice, some praise proper pride and others vanity, some chastity and others the unconstrained enjoyment and pursuit of sexual gratification?" The issue is rather, "Why, on Hume's account, don't we all praise all of them?" Whatever view we take of the common point of view, from the ideal observer, or the nearly ideal moral judge or critic, to Rachel Cohon's deflationary account, the constant thread is that it is the pleasure received from any one of the four causes that explains moral approbation, and it is simply this introduction of the *disjunction* that brings disaster in its train.<sup>8</sup> Far from having an explanation of our drawing a distinction between virtue and vice, or between moral approbation and disapprobation, the very fact that we do so has become a total mystery, since just about any vice or defect (I suppose it is a bit odd to call self-abnegation a vice) can, as I put it earlier, manage to slip in.

Hume is far from holding consistently to his disjunctive claim. Indeed, he frequently seems to forget that it is the disjunctive, not the conjunctive, thesis about usefulness and agreeableness that he holds, at some times saying things or making points that clearly belong with the ancient tradition, while

at others he stresses his own disjunctive claim in the teeth of it. Here are a few brief illustrations from the *Enquiry*.

When it comes to courage, he is prepared to go to almost Stoical lengths to establish that courage is not only useful both to its possessor and to others, but actually falls under the heading of a quality immediately agreeable to its possessor (EPM VII). Even Aristotle is prepared to concede, with respect to courage, that its exercise may not be enjoyable.<sup>9</sup> But, by contrast, he goes all disjunctive when he insists that discretion, industry, reasonable frugality, temperance, patience, constancy, perseverance, forethought, and so on are “selfish” virtues that “tend *only* to the utility of their possessor” (EPM 243).<sup>10</sup> Here he argues in the teeth of the conjunctive account—and immediately becomes implausible even by his own lights. Given that we are social animals, and engage in a large number of shared endeavors (as he emphasizes in relation to justice), your discretion and industry, your temperance, patience, constancy, perseverance, forethought, and so on are as useful to the rest of us as they are to you. If you are imprudent or lazy, drunken or shortsighted, prodigal, impatient, or lacking in perseverance, you are of very little use to the rest of us at all, no matter how benevolent or just your motives. Virtue in rags, or in the dungeon, may still be virtue sometimes, but hardly when the person is in rags or the dungeon through his own imprudence, laziness, or prodigality; and I shall be unimpressed by your sincere promise to help me cut my corn tomorrow if I know that you lack those very qualities necessary for the reliable execution of such an enterprise.

As a final, instructive example, look at the inconsistencies in his discussion of justice. Most of the discussion stresses the point that justice is only, or solely, praised on account of its being useful to others. This is in keeping with the disjunctive claim, but thereby at odds with what he says about honesty, fidelity, and truth, which is more in keeping with the conjunctive one. (They, you may remember, are amongst those qualities that “derive their merit from complicated sources”; they are useful to others, but also “advantageous to the person himself,” since they lead others to repose trust and confidence in him [EPM 238]. Should it not be obvious that the same is true of justice, as ancient tradition stressed?)

However, right at the end of the second *Enquiry*, speaking of the possessor of this “only-useful-to-others” character trait, he says that such a man “taking things in a certain light, may often seem to be a loser by his integrity” (EPM 282). And, in doing so, he speaks with Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and the Epicureans. “Of course,” they all say, “no one really loses out through acting justly, though it may seem so to those who have not learnt to take pleasure in virtuous conduct, and mistakenly regard the acquisition of worthless toys and gewgaws as requisite for happiness, instead of consciousness of integrity and the satisfactory review of our own conduct. Justice is useful *and* agreeable to its possessor *and* to others.”

It seems to me that it must be an unconscious reliance on the conjunctive claim of the ancient tradition that preserves Hume from worrying about the disastrous feature of his own disjunctive account, namely, that it looks as though it will yield both justice and injustice, honesty and dishonesty, courage and cowardice, generosity and avarice as character traits that, through the mechanism of sympathy, would prompt us to approbation. I suspect, further, that the same unconscious reliance on the ancient claim must, at least often, be what blinds many commentators to it. I think I discern, in friendly discussions of Hume, the rather hazy idea that the qualities useful or agreeable to others will at least not be a source of misery and disaster to their possessor, that those useful to their possessor will at least not be inimical to others, that, by and large, the four causes pretty much coincide, and that everything is going to work out just fine.

But those of us who consciously rely on the ancient claim are in a position to see that Hume (and his commentators) cannot have things both ways. If Hume holds the disjunctive claim then he is, I have maintained, just sunk: far, far too many character traits should get approved. Shall we then charitably suppose that he holds, not strictly the conjunctive claim, but a tightened version of the disjunctive one: there are four causes of moral approbation, but they do pretty much coincide by and large. Perhaps; but it really is not going to sit happily with much of the text, namely, with all those places in which Hume is actually at pains to insist, with respect to some character trait, that its sole source of merit is just one of the four, in defiance, or neglect, of some fairly obvious arguments to the contrary.

"Well," it may be said, "let us admit that Hume made some mistakes there, put them to one side, and concentrate on what is so good about him: namely, the insights contained in the tightened disjunctive claim. This, after all, is superior to the blatant conjunctive one of the virtue ethics tradition, since it allows for just a few odd cases where, for some inexplicable—or perhaps even explicable—reason, just one of the causes suffices to prompt the approbation, or three of them together do despite the presence of a cause that would usually produce extreme uneasiness and disapprobation."

This, I agree, is a plausible position for Humeans to take, but, as I shall argue, it calls for some further work which has not yet, as far as I know, been done by his commentators.

### III. The Truly Useful and Agreeable

Those of us who go straight for the conjunctive claim are only too aware of what, traditionally, would have to go into a defense of the claim that the four causes often coincide, something that of course we would have to argue *en route* to defending the view that they *always* do. Part of what I described above as the fancy footwork that goes into that traditional defense, are morally load-

ed concepts of the useful (or beneficial) and the agreeable (or pleasurable). There is, it is held, a distinction between what is truly useful in truly benefiting its possessor or others, and what only appears to be so when things are "taken in a certain light," and a corresponding distinction between what is truly or rightly agreeable (or pleasant or enjoyable) and what only appears to be so. It is only when one is able to discern these distinctions that one sees that injustice, cowardice, and avarice are never truly useful to their possessor, nor vanity or licentiousness truly agreeable to him, nor honesty truly disagreeable to others. Though the honest criticism may hurt, to anyone right-minded it is welcome and thereby agreeable, since it enables her to correct a failing. (In the good old days, Blackwell's bookshop in Oxford, instead of sending their student customers fierce threats of legal action when their bills were overdue, used to remind them that when they had opened their account they agreed to pay at the end of each term, and would request that they implement their promise. And they added a quote attributed to Plato, in what I think must have been, even twenty-five years ago, a rather Victorian translation: "How then, Socrates, shall we recognize the truly just and generous man? It is he who, being reminded of an obligation, is able gracefully to thank his creditor for prompting him to do his duty.")

Without a discernment of these morally laden distinctions, one's view of what is useful or agreeable to its possessor or to others will, indeed, be all over the place—this is useful to others but markedly disadvantageous to its possessor, this is agreeable to its possessor but disadvantageous to others, this is agreeable to, but disadvantageous to, its possessor, and so on. It is only armed with the discernment that we can find, so it is claimed, a wonderful coinciding of what we may think of as Hume's four causes.

Now there is at least one passage in Hume that suggests, to me at least, that he takes himself to be employing these concepts of the useful and agreeable about which there is no room for reasonable disagreement, rather than value-laden concepts with whose application someone with a rather different ethical outlook might reasonably disagree. All you need, he seems to think, is a mind reasonably cleared of prejudice, and a bit of robust common sense. The passage is the one in the second *Enquiry* in which he trashes the "monkish virtues":

And as every quality which is useful or agreeable to ourselves or others is, in common life, allowed to be part of personal merit; so no one will ever be received, where men judge things by their natural, unprejudiced reason, without the delusive glosses of superstition and false religion. Celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, solitude, and the whole train of monkish virtues; for what reason are they everywhere rejected by men of sense, but because they serve no manner of purpose; neither advance a man's fortune in the

world, nor render him a more valuable member of society; neither qualify him for the entertainment of company, nor increase his power of self-enjoyment? We observe, on the contrary, that they cross all these desirable ends; stupify the understanding and harden the heart, obscure the fancy and sour the temper. (EPM 270)

Well, I think here he has certainly made a poor job of clearing his mind of his anticlerical prejudice, and I think too that it has blinded him to the extent to which, in this passage, his concepts of the useful and agreeable *are* value laden, and, moreover, with values that, in less prejudiced moments, he would certainly not espouse. I shall demonstrate this with respect to just one case, namely, celibacy.

The first point to which I want to draw attention is that, with the exception of humility, not one of the trashed so-called virtues is even a candidate virtue, that is, a proper character trait: celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, silence, and solitude are all practices, or action types, like active homosexuality or infanticide or tyrannicide. As such, by his own lights, Hume is supposed, before pronouncing on their virtuousness or viciousness, to inquire into their *motive* in each particular case. (Given that he does not make this mistake in *A Dialogue*, the anticlerical prejudice seems to be a fair explanation of its occurrence here.) So let us consider the motive for celibacy.

The motive for particular acts of abstaining from sexual intercourse, on the part of properly motivated monks, is fidelity to one's word; on entering the order, one takes a vow, promising to thus abstain. And fidelity to one's word, Hume agrees, is a virtue. Nevertheless, one might obviously say on his behalf, it cannot be the case that keeping to a vow, or promise, or contract, is always right, that is, always something that merits the application of the relevant virtue term (which unfortunately we do not have; I hereby coin "fidelitious"), because people make promises they should never have made. It was wrong to make the promise in the first place insofar as it was, say, unjust (as one might promise to revenge the death of one's father by killing an innocent relation of the one who had brought about his death) or pure folly (as one might, in a drunken moment, promise to paint the President's dog red). So let us suppose, plausibly enough, that Hume regards the monk's vow as pure folly. How come? "You are going in for something useless and disagreeable" he says, "something that (1) neither advances your fortune in the world, nor (2) renders you a more valuable member of society, something that (3) does not qualify you for the entertainment of company, nor (4) increase your power of self-enjoyment." And of course, a decent, devout—and spirited—monk can reply:

- (1) I am a great deal more concerned with my fortune in the everlasting world to come than in this one.

- (2) I am serving a very useful role in society by exemplifying the idea that sexual gratification is something that human beings can willingly and happily put to one side in pursuit of finer ends.
- (3) I disdain the idea that I should be merely entertaining to my company; and regard the retelling of malicious gossip as a vicious practice, no matter how motivated by the amiable desire to entertain. I recognize, of course, a social obligation not to cast gloom all about one and must point out that my celibacy in no way hinders my capacity to be entertaining company at a dinner party and crack good jokes. But what I actually think is more important, is that I expect reasonable women to find it agreeable to be occasionally in the company of a man whom they know is not trying to get into their knickers, nor responding to them in accordance with how sexually attractive they are. And, finally,
- (4) Only a very narrow and crass perspective could make you so sure that my celibacy does not increase my power of self-enjoyment. I assure you that my renouncing of the pleasures of the flesh has brought me a serenity and joy that was entirely lacking in my life when I was enmeshed in the hurly-burly of the chaise-longue.

Note that it is only the first of these that Hume can possibly dismiss as an example of the sort of thought that arises from people leading artificial lives informed by religion and false superstition. What could he find to say in response to the other three? I would claim that there is not much for him to say. We have caught him out, I think, espousing particularly crass conceptions of the useful and agreeable that, in other contexts, he would not dream of espousing. (How, one might wonder, would going in for philosophy fare if judged by the same crass standards he applies to celibacy? Those who are only concerned with advancing their fortune in the world must think we philosophers are great dupes; those who think that celibates are bound to be boring company and celibacy bound to be disagreeable and irksome tend to be just those pleasure-seekers who think that intellectuals like us are all boring and that the study and painstaking pursuit of truth must be too, having, as Aristotle says, no grasp of what is truly pleasant.)

In contrast to this passage, we have the (I would say) cautious and sensible acknowledgment of the stage at which argument runs out in the last two paragraphs of the *Enquiry*. What is at issue is whether injustice or infidelity to one's word is more useful to its possessor than the opposed virtues (an issue that famously dates back to Plato and the challenge from Thrasy-machus); and Hume, in his answer, appeals to the views of the honest man, the one who shares his, Hume's, views about the truly useful and agreeable. I have already quoted the bit in which we may take him to be saying that it is only when viewed "in a certain" (and by implication, false) light that justice may *seem* to

be disadvantageous to its possessor. We also have the sensible knaves who "are, in the end, the greatest dupes, and have sacrificed the invaluable enjoyment of a character, with themselves at least, for the acquisition" of what is worthless. With "a view to [true] pleasure, what comparison between the unbought satisfaction of conversation, society, study, health . . . but above all the peaceful reflection on one's own conduct—what comparison, I say, between these and the feverish empty amusements of luxury and expense?" (EPM 283).

Everyone, Hume included, knows that "toys and gewgaws," "luxury and expense" are enthusiastically sought and enjoyed by many, many human beings; indeed, they might more plausibly be described as "natural pleasures" than those he mentions, which, by and large, are found pleasurable only by those who have acquired that second nature which arises in us only through moral education. What we have operating here are the traditional morally laden concepts of the truly useful and the truly agreeable.

#### IV. *Phronesis*

In the traditional account, what enables one to discern the distinctions between the truly useful and agreeable and the merely apparently so is the intellectual virtue of *phronesis* or moral wisdom—something which, despite being intellectual, cannot be possessed independently of the full possession of the virtues of character. What enables one to discern these distinctions according to Hume?

I think I am right in saying that this is not a question that has forcibly struck many of Hume's commentators. But clearly, the only possible candidates are the "good judge in morals" from the essay "Of the Standard of Taste," and/or the taking up of the common point of view. And those commentators who have sought to find in either or both of these notions an objective standard that warrants moral judgments about which character traits are the virtues have not, I think, entertained the idea that either might have to be something at least very akin to our *phronesis*.

So let us entertain it now. What does it suggest about this, or these, notions—the good critic or judge in morals, the taking up of the common or general point of view? Well, it seems to me that the first thing it suggests is that the two notions are distinct, insofar as the (very little) Hume says about the good critic can, not implausibly, be read as at least tending toward being about *phronesis*, but that the rather more he says about the common point of view cannot.

Let me illustrate. All we really have about the good judge in morals is that he is, by implication, pretty much like the good critic in the finer arts, *mutatis mutandis*. What we have regarding the good critic in the finer arts is, firstly, that he must have "strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice."<sup>11</sup> Secondly, we

have the point that you explain why people go wrong in aesthetic judgments by saying they lack these qualities. Thirdly, we have the point that those who have all these qualities—the good critics—are (unsurprisingly) rather rare. Now, the intellectual virtue of *phronesis* could, without stretching the points too much, be described in the same way. It is that aspect of the virtues (which Aristotelians always stress and people who get their idea of the virtues out of Frankena or Rawls always get wrong) that ensures that they are much more than mere bumbling nice desires or motives. The virtue of charity or benevolence (to take a non-Aristotelian example), for instance, is a far cry from a mere disposition or effective desire to do what (you happen to think) would be good for others. You have to have the *correct* conception of what is *truly* good for others in order to possess the virtue, and that does indeed require strong sense—a knowledge, as Foot put it, “of what’s what”—and a mind cleared of prejudice.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, you have to have the ability to see just how this correct conception is to be brought to bear, in practice, on this particular setup, involving this or these particular people—and rather a good general way to describe that is as involving the delicate sentiment, improved by practice and perfected by comparison. Benevolent or charitable motives may, for example, prompt me to say something comforting or helpful to a person who is grieving; but being inexperienced (i.e., unpracticed) in such situations, and having had little occasion to compare situations similar to the one I am now in and learn what differently nuanced responses can be called for—inevitably thereby lacking in the delicacy of sentiment that would enable me to understand what she, this individual who is very unlike anyone I have ever come across before, will find of comfort—I put my foot in it. The explanation of why I went wrong in my moral judgment (thinking that this was what I ought to do when it wasn’t) is that I lack *phronesis*. And, unsurprisingly, a lot of people do go wrong in their moral judgments quite often; *phronesis*, being tantamount to full virtue in all respects, is very rare indeed.

So the good judge in morals might well, from the little we have, be the *phronimos*—the possessor of moral wisdom, and, thereby, virtue. This would indeed, be a very traditional idea: that it is the virtuous “man” (I am afraid one has to say “man” in this context) who sets the standards and is the arbiter. Hence, one might say, the appeal to the judgment of the honest (i.e., basically virtuous) man in the *Enquiry* passage (EPM 283).

What about taking up the common point of view? By contrast, it seems that a central feature of this does not have anything to do with moral wisdom or virtue at all. True, one feature of it, namely, the clearing of one’s mind of a certain sort of prejudice toward narrow self-interest, falls under the more general freedom from prejudice possessed by the good critic; but what about the rest? The feature that really sticks out like a sore thumb, when one is thinking about whether taking up the common point of view is akin to *phronesis*, is that it involves taking up a point of view whose deliverances are uninfluenced by

distances in time: it can respond to the virtues of the ancient Greeks as competently as it can respond to those of its possessor's contemporaries. But no one could suppose that any recognizable deficiency in moral judgment or virtue arose from being unduly influenced by distances in time. Lack of strong sense, yes; lack of experience and practice, yes; insufficiently delicate sentiments yes; prejudice, yes; undue self-interest, most certainly—undue responsiveness to people in one's own time, no.

If I am right about that, it is a point that lends independent support to Rachel Cohon's deflationary account of the common point of view. But suppose I am wrong here, and that taking up the common point of view does, indeed, as many commentators have supposed, make one into the good judge of morals. Now let me turn to the second thing I think is suggested when we entertain the idea that the taking up of the common point of view, like being a good judge in morals, must be something at least very akin to *phronesis*. The second thing is that, since *phronesis*, let me repeat, is inseparable from virtue itself, the taking up of the common point of view, or being the good judge in morals, would turn out to be (pretty much, allowing for a bit of play with the "akin to") coextensive with the possession of the virtues of character.

As I said initially, I think that this is not an idea that has generally been entertained by Hume's commentators. Perhaps Annette Baier comes closest to a consciousness of the question of what enables one to discern the distinctions between the truly and only apparently useful and agreeable, and to a conscious identification of the good judge (or the one who achieves the common point of view) with the virtuous person. We might read her, that is, as saying that the good judge of morals just is the *phronimos*, the fully virtuous person; that to actually achieve the general point of view, such that one's felt sentiment is indeed a moral sentiment, just is to achieve *phronesis* and thus full virtue. It is certainly very hard to read her description of the good judge in morals in "Moral Sentiments and the Difference They Make" as a description of anything other than, at the very least, someone rather rare and morally admirable.<sup>13</sup>

But, as far as I know, Baier does not herself say this anywhere explicitly; and if it really is conscious, one has to wonder why she does not say it. Moreover, in "Moral Sentiments and the Difference They Make," she distinguishes her position from Geoffrey Sayre-McCord's,<sup>14</sup> saying that he makes the general (or as, she says, "moral") point of view accessible to every would-be moral judge, whereas she makes it more "ideal." But her justification of her more idealized position is not the one that anyone who consciously identifies taking up the general point of view with *phronesis* would make. If you were really conscious of that, you would make the very obvious point that of course it is fairly ideal, because we do not achieve moral wisdom just by aspiring to it. It is inseparable from full virtue, and full virtue, though having nothing to do with the fantasy of the impartial observer, is, at the very least, very difficult to acquire. Baier's justification is something quite different.

Moreover, if you are conscious of committing yourself to the view that your good judge in morals is, necessarily, a good, that is, a virtuous, human being, surely one of the things you stress is the necessity for a good moral education in childhood. For the virtues of character—those essential underpinnings of the intellectual virtue of *phronesis* (once again, in the traditional account)—are dispositions of the emotional, passionate part of our natures as human beings, dispositions that arise in human beings only through moral education, and, moreover, education that begins at a very early age. Aristotle, attributing the view in question to Plato, says that we must be raised from infancy to take delight in and be pained by the right things; to take delight in, for example, we might say, the pleasures of the mind, of civilized conversation, of health, of study, of honor, and of virtuous activity itself, and not in luxury and expense, the unrestrained pursuit of physical pleasure, and unmerited recognition and success in the world.<sup>15</sup>

If someone has had the wrong education of the passions, on Aristotle's picture, their chances of acquiring virtue, and thereby *phronesis*, in later life, by the mere effort, however zealous, of taking up a particular point of view, are more or less zilch. If someone has been brought up in a corrupt society, it is highly likely that he will just become incapable of recognizing certain facts even if they are right under his nose and/or even if he makes every effort any human being could make to correct for self-interest and prejudice and open himself to the free unhindered workings of sympathy (whatever they may be). And no amount of "reasonable conversation" with the virtuous is ever going to effect any radical change in someone thus corrupted. As Aristotle says of the man who "lives in accordance with his feelings," interested only in the pursuit of pleasure, "such a man would not listen to an argument to dissuade him nor understand it if he did."<sup>16</sup>

My aim in this paper has been to explore what new light could be shed on our understanding and interpretation of Hume when he is viewed from the perspective of Aristotelian virtue ethics, and I think I have come up with some interesting points. My first was that his disjunctive account of the grounds of moral approbation really is wildly—and disastrously—different from the conjunctive account given in the Aristotelian and Epicurean tradition. My second was that the conjunctive account—and thereby the reliance on the distinctions between the truly useful and agreeable and the merely apparently so—is, in fact, operative in his thought. That led to the question of what, in Hume, can be seen as enabling one to make such distinctions, and thence to my third, more speculative and radical point. On the assumption, from the virtue ethics perspective, that the discernment of such distinctions requires *phronesis*, we would have to look at the good judge in morals and/or the taking up of the common point of view as being co-extensive with the possession of *phronesis* and thereby the possession of the virtues. This led to two more points. First, I said that, from the tiny amount we get in "Of the Standard of Taste," that is

not entirely implausible, but I raised a doubt about whether the same could be said about taking up the common point of view; if that is right, we might view the two notions as distinct and Cohon's deflationary account would be supported. But, I said, making my final point, whether we distinguish the two notions or regard them as co-extensive, what is needed in discussions of the good judge, from the perspective of virtue ethics, is conscious recognition of the point that she must be virtuous, and thereby have had her passions well trained from childhood. For on the virtue ethics picture of human nature, our passions, which we are born with an inescapable and unchangeable tendency to feel, are themselves malleable: We can be trained, and can then go on to train ourselves further, through reflection, to feel our passions in certain ways and not others. But the idea that, in maturity, we can undo the effects of bad moral education in our youth is a rationalistic fantasy.

## NOTES

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1. J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971) 436; John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), I.18.

2. In my recent reflections on Aristotle's answer, I have come to realize that this claim is much more complicated than I supposed when I first blithely asserted it; but, for the purposes of this paper, I shall leave it in this rather vague, but at least familiar, form. For the complications, see my *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

3. I take it that this confidence dates back at least to the 1739 letter to Hutcheson. In the letter, he asks Hutcheson (a question clearly expecting the answer "No") whether "there be any quality, that is virtuous, without having a tendency to the public good or to the good of the person who possess it?" I am open to scholarly correction over dating the confidence back that far, but that turn of phrase in the letter certainly seems to encapsulate the explicit claim in the *Treatise* about the four causes (useful to others or to its possessor, agreeable to others or to its possessor, with maybe just a little additional spin on "immediately agreeable to its possessor," which is not quite what one might expect from the meaning of "tendency to the good of its possessor"). See *The Letters of David Hume*, 2 vols., ed. J. Y. T. Grieg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932), letter 13, in vol. 1: 32-34.

4. James Moore, "Hume and Hutcheson" in M. A. Stewart and John P. Wright, eds. *Hume and Hume's Connexions*, (Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, 1995).

5. For a deep and illuminating account of the ancient developments of eudaimonism, see Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
6. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, tr. J. A. K. Thomson, rev. H. Tredennick (London: Penguin, 1976) 1103a23–25.
7. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), hereafter abbreviated as “T” with page numbers inserted parenthetically in the text; and David Hume, *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), with the second *Enquiry* abbreviated as “EPM” with page numbers inserted parenthetically in the text.
8. Rachel Cohon, “The Common Point of View in Hume’s Ethics,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 57 (1997): 827–50.
9. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1117b16–18.
10. My italics. Compare the *Treatise* claim that such qualities “are esteem’d valuable upon no other account than their advantage in the conduct of life” (T 610–611).
11. “Of the Standard of Taste,” in David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985), 241.
12. Philippa Foot, “Virtues and Vices”, in *Virtues and Vices* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), 6.
13. Annette Baier, “Moral Sentiments and the Difference They Make,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supp. Vol., 69 (1995): 15–30.
14. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, “Why Hume’s ‘General point of View’ Isn’t Ideal and Shouldn’t Be,” *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 2 (1994): 202–28.
15. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1104b11–12.
16. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1179b27, my italics.