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A Symposium on Louis E. Loeb,
Stability and Justification in Hume's Treatise

Stability and Partiality in Hume's Moral Philosophy: A Response to Louis Loeb

ERIN I. KELLY

Hume's moral philosophy is a sentiment-based view. Moral judgment is a matter of the passions; certain traits of character count as virtues or vices because of the approval or disapproval they evoke in us, feelings that express concern we have about the social effects of these traits. A sentiment-based approach is attractive, since morality seems fundamentally to involve caring for other people. Sentiment-based views, however, face a real challenge. It is clear that our affections are often particular; we favor certain persons over others. This poses a problem when it comes to determining the proper content of morality. The ties of sentiment would seem to be in tension with the aspirations of morality toward impartiality and universality.

To be sure, some sentimentalists reject a conception of morality as impartial and universal. But no serious sentimentalist believes that we should understand moral judgment to track without qualification the partiality of our ties of affection. Morality exhorts us to transcend in some measure our own particular concerns and preoccupations in order to extend appropriate attention to the interests of other people considered apart from ourselves. Hume acknowledges this. He believes that the "variability of our sympathies" provides a difficulty for which the "corrections" of moral thought offer a solution.

The question I would like to pose for sentimentalist moral philosophies, and for Hume's philosophy in particular, is whether a sentiment-based account of moral judgment can adequately correct for distortions in moral thinking that result from self and group-interest. I believe this question is especially urgent for

Louis Loeb's interpretation of Hume, and I am not convinced that Loeb provides a convincing response to it on Hume's behalf.

Loeb concentrates on Hume's account of justification, both epistemic and moral. The epistemic account considers the justification of belief—the conditions under which forming a belief would be rational. As Loeb reads Hume, these conditions are characterized by psychological mechanisms that tend to generate stable beliefs (SJ 88).¹ Stable beliefs are dispositions that exert a steady influence on thought, feeling and action (SJ 80).² They contrast with ideas that are “momentary,” “floating,” and “loose.”³ Forming stable beliefs organizes our thinking, it keeps our mind from wandering and enables us to form interests and plan for the future (SJ 79; see T 1.3.10.2; SBN 118–19). Stability is achieved when belief is “infixd” by the senses, memory, and causal inference and when conflict and tension with other beliefs is avoided.

The claim Loeb is making on Hume's behalf is a normative claim about belief. It concerns the beliefs we are epistemically obligated to accept. The source of this normative claim, Loeb argues, is found in our motivation to avoid the uneasiness that arises from an unsteady will and from conflict and disharmony among our beliefs. We seek a tranquil and coherent resolution to haphazard principles of action and divisions in our epistemic commitments. This commits us to a normative standard: we ought to base our beliefs on information supported by our senses, memory and causal inferences.

According to Loeb, stability is the key to Hume's account of justification also in contexts in which belief is not mainly in question. Our moral judgments are justified if they result from mechanisms that tend to provide stable judgments. Stable moral judgments are the product of “corrections” that aim to ease “cognitive dissonance” caused by variation in our sympathies.⁴ Loeb is drawn to the language of cognitive dissonance to describe instability in our moral experience, for it has the advantage of capturing psychological tensions and discomforts that are not necessarily a matter of logical inconsistency. It seems to be appropriate terminology to apply to tensions between our sentiment-driven judgments.

Cognitive dissonance arises in the case of moral judgment when we notice that the approval we feel for qualities and character traits that are useful or pleasurable to us is stronger than the approval we may feel for qualities and character traits that do not benefit us. This variation in approval is something that occurs even concerning the very same qualities and character traits. We discover excitement and approval for a person's qualities when we come into closer contact with that person, though we may previously have been unmoved by knowledge of his character. This variation is not uncommon, Hume writes, as “our situation, with regard both to persons and things, is in continual fluctuation; and a man, that lies at a distance from us, may, in a little time, become a familiar acquaintance” (T 3.3.1.15; SBN 581). We experience the variation in our sentiments that arises from

continual fluctuation in our situation as a kind of contradiction. It is unsettling to us to think that the sentiments that guide our appraisal of qualities and traits of character could vary so much with changes in our situation, and this may lead us to doubt that our judgments have a sound basis.⁵ We seek a source of stability for them. Hume writes, “When we form our judgments of persons, merely from the tendency of their characters to our own benefit, or to that of our friends, we find . . . such an uncertainty from the incessant changes of our situation, that we seek some other standard of merit and demerit, which may not admit of so great variation” (T 3.3.1.18; SBN 583). Hume observes that we do arrive at a stable standard of moral appraisal, and he aims to explain how this happens.

Hume’s insight is that despite its susceptibility to fluctuation with variation in psychological distance, sympathy remains the source of character evaluation. Once it is suitably corrected by reflection, it serves as a reliable guide to moral appraisal. According to Hume, virtuous character traits cause in us a peculiar sentiment of approval (and the vices, disapproval): it is the approval a “judicious spectator” or impartial observer would feel when considering the tendency of those traits to benefit not ourselves but persons who have a “particular connexion” with the agent (T 3.3.1.14, 3.3.3.2; SBN 581, 602).⁶ Moral reflection involves the exercise of imagination: we imagine the pleasures and pains a judicious spectator would feel when considering the usual effects of the character traits in question. More precisely, a character trait is picked out as virtuous by the approval that we feel when we sympathetically identify with those persons who would benefit from the agent’s disposition to act in the associated ways; and we focus on the usual effects of the agent’s disposition, rather than the actual effects in a given instance. This attention to the “narrow circle” of persons who would tend to benefit from the exercise of virtuous traits serves as a mechanism for correcting the variations of sympathy (T 3.3.3.2; SBN 602). It generates feelings of sympathy we may lack when considering our own self and group interests.

Now let me turn to a striking feature of Loeb’s interpretation of Hume. On Hume’s account of moral judgment, the exercise of judgment typically involves reflection. As we have seen, this reflection consists in following the course of certain calm passions under the exercise of the imagination (T 2.3.8.13; SBN 437–8).⁷ On Loeb’s understanding, however, there is no *requirement* of reflection in Hume’s account of moral justification. There is no moral pressure to reflect if the unreflective stance is not dissonant. What this means for moral assessment is that certain character traits constitute reasons for moral approval only for persons whose failure to make these judgments leads to tension in the actual judgments they make. In other words, morality exerts pressure toward reflection only to assuage bothersome tension and instability in our actual judgments.

Similarly, when the unreflective person is not faced with conflicts or tensions among his beliefs, Hume maintains that there is no epistemic requirement of re-

flection. Thus a belief could be justified for an unreflective person, provided that it is steady in its influence on the will, sentiments and action, yet fail to be justified for a reflective person (SJ 87). This account of justification lends support to our pretheoretical intuitions about what to believe, while allowing that philosophical reflection leads to skeptical conclusions.⁸ The justification of our beliefs and judgments is provided by their stability. If they are stable they are justified even though reflection could unsettle them.

Contrast this reading of Hume with that advanced by Christine Korsgaard. Korsgaard defends the view that the source of normativity in morality is our reflective endorsement of its claims. In fact, for Korsgaard, the question of normativity is itself generated by our capacity for reflection; it arises from the activity of reflection on our motives for action. She writes, “[W]hen we reflect on the things which we find ourselves inclined to do, we can then accept or reject the authority those inclinations claim over our conduct, and act accordingly.”⁹ Prior to the exercise of reflection, there is no question of normativity; rather, she writes, “it is . . . because we are normative animals who can question our experience, that normative concepts exist.”¹⁰

Korsgaard interprets Hume to share this understanding of normativity as reflective endorsement.¹¹ Her evidence for this interpretation lies in Hume’s claim that our moral sense “must certainly acquire new force, when reflecting on itself, it approves of those principles, from whence it is deriv’d, and finds nothing but what is great and good in its rise and origin” (T 3.3.6.3; SBN 619). This claim, it should be noted, concerns a “global” sort of reflection that our moral faculty conducts upon itself, something that involves acquiring the kind of understanding of our moral psychology that we would gain from reading Hume’s *Treatise*. This understanding will not, thinks Hume, unsettle our moral commitments. Yet it would not clearly follow from this that morality requires us to explore the implications of our particular moral appraisals for as yet unconsidered situations.¹² This could indicate an inconsistency in Hume’s account of normativity for, in Korsgaard’s view, “[t]o raise the normative question is to ask whether our more unreflective moral beliefs and motives can withstand the test of reflection.”¹³ Korsgaard suggests that Hume’s insight into the nature of normativity stops short of realizing its full implications.¹⁴

For Loeb’s Hume, by contrast, a normative claim is a claim about why we ought to accept certain beliefs and judgments: we ought to accept them because in so doing we will relieve ourselves of discomforts and tensions in our experience.¹⁵ This represents a more thoroughly naturalistic reading of justification. Loeb writes, “For Hume, epistemic obligation is naturalized as deriving from the motivational force of the felt uneasiness in unstable doxastic conditions” (SJ 22). The justificatory status of a belief is shown thus to depend only upon nonepistemic facts about how it was produced, facts that can be characterized without relying upon normative claims

about “knowledge,” “evidence” or the relevance of reflection (SJ 22). Moral obligation is similarly naturalized. Hume writes that moral obligation requires “some actuating passion or motive” (T 3.2.5.6; SBN 518). As Loeb interprets this idea, a central motive is the desire to avoid the discomfort of instability in our judgments.¹⁶ Easing this mental discomfort, however, does not always involve reflection. It might instead be accomplished by shielding oneself from the sources of instability through keeping to one’s present situation, in the way of “many honest gentlemen, who being always employ’d in their domestic affairs, or amusing themselves in common recreations, have carried their thoughts very little beyond those objects, which are every day expos’d to their senses” (T 1.4.7.14; SBN 272).

The distance between these interpretations should not be exaggerated. Loeb makes the case that for Hume, the unreflective person tends to have unstable beliefs (SJ 95). First of all, the range of social circumstances in which we become familiar with differences of opinion is broad and prompts us to reflection. Secondly, argues Loeb, beliefs that are grounded in dogmatism or deference to authority, for instance, are likely to come into conflict with the results of habitual causal inference (SJ 95). Thirdly, Loeb stresses that on his interpretation, justification is provided by the *tendency* of belief and judgment-forming mechanisms to produce stability in belief and judgment, and that judgments about a tendency of this sort are generalizations about persons who are reflective to a similar degree (SJ 95). He writes, “The fact that an individual’s beliefs are stable does not in itself imply that they are justified, for they might result from mechanisms that do not tend to produce stable beliefs” (SJ 95). Finally, as Loeb interprets Hume, judgments of stability are relative. A belief-forming mechanism can be said to produce a stable belief only if there are no alternative belief-forming mechanisms readily available to a subject that would produce greater stability in belief (SJ 96).¹⁷

These considerations, Loeb maintains, support the hypothesis that the beliefs and judgments of unreflective persons are unlikely to be justified. At the same time, he points to Hume’s endorsement of the skeptical view that reflection itself can generate instability in belief, thus undermining our knowledge claims (see T 1.4.7.1–3; SBN 263–5). This underscores the point that reflection may be relevant to justification, but when it is, this is because of its contribution to stability. Reflection is not itself the source of normativity.

There is much to appreciate in Loeb’s catalog of the resources available to Hume for addressing the worry that in making justification contingent upon the stability of persons’ beliefs and attitudes Hume makes justification come too easily. Yet I think this objection remains troublesome, particularly in the moral case. In evaluating Loeb’s Hume, we should worry about the possibility of arrangements that could block our sympathetic consideration of the interests of persons who are unfamiliar to us by emphasizing a sense of their unfamiliarity and distance from us. As “insiders” of a particular group or society, we might in effect ascribe to

outsiders a different moral status, if the mechanisms—e.g., ignorance, prejudice, nationalism, et cetera—supporting a sense of their difference are stable enough to block our sympathetic identification with their situation and traits. We may appreciate their strengths less and lack concern for what harms them because we fail to identify similarities between their traits and circumstances and those of persons who are familiar to us. A sense of contradiction in our judgments may thus be avoided.

Consider, for example, the case of enemies in war. Propaganda that aims to dehumanize members of societies or groups with which we are at war and to stress the differences between “us” and “them” may be quite effective in blocking perceptions of similarities between the traits, interests and situation of such persons and the traits, interests and situation of persons in our own society. This may lead us to lack a sense of obligation toward them and to dismiss claims made on their behalf that we not treat them in certain ways. Prisoners held by the United States in Guantanamo Bay after the 2003 Iraqi War, for instance, were granted no legal rights. Public exposure to these persons of the sort that might tend to evoke sympathy and understanding of their history, actions, and intentions has been minimal to null. They remain nameless, faceless and largely without moral status.

Closer to home is the example of felons. Persons convicted of felonies are typically removed from society. They are known to us by little more than the crimes they have committed. This along with exploitation by politicians of racial stereotypes and people’s fear of crime creates a situation in which there is little if any public sympathy for the plight of prisoners. Our moral condemnation of them and their subsequent exclusion from our sphere of moral concern is effected with little reflection upon their human qualities, needs and potential. Circumstances in our prison system have degenerated in ways that ought to be morally disturbing, and felons face serious difficulties reentering society once they have served their sentences.

Finally, consider the community-directed concern that may lead members of affluent communities to adopt zoning policies that disallow high-density housing developments. This largely excludes people with low incomes from residency in these communities. An exclusive policy might be adopted from a desire to protect a certain quality of life for one’s family and neighbors, with no consideration of the broader effect this has of exacerbating inequalities in the quality of education. Since nonresidents have no representation in the decision-making body, their circumstances and interests can effectively be ignored.

These are cases that involve concrete and, it would seem, fairly stable limits on the range of social circumstances in which we encounter difference and disagreement. The tendencies involved are potentially broadly shared and do not involve obvious mistakes in factual judgments. Moreover, these tendencies may well provide an attractive and comfortable alternative to the disorientation engendered by cultural differences and conflicts of interest.

We are led to a peculiar result: because we do not respond sentimentally to persons beyond our sphere of awareness, we do not judge them to be virtuous or vicious. But since for Hume virtue or vice is nothing but “the object of feeling” (T 3.1.1.26; SBN 469), it follows that character traits exemplified by people who lie outside of our realm of awareness and concern do not constitute virtues or vices, even though they may be essentially the same traits as those we do recognize as virtues and vices.¹⁸ For Loeb’s Hume, the traits and circumstances of persons unfamiliar to us give us no reasons for moral approval or disapproval when we lack concern for the persons affected by them. Persons outside of our sphere of concern in effect lack moral status; we are under no moral pressure to take them into account and to consider our possible obligations toward them, if the mechanisms that tend to block our consideration of them are stable enough. Thus the interests of outsiders may not receive full sympathetic attention, even when they are affected by our actions. And the disposition of insiders to ignore or discount the interests of outsiders could escape moral scrutiny.

These problems may be avoided, although not obviously, by Korsgaard’s reading of normativity as reflective endorsement. The question is whether Hume thinks our moral sense prompts us to reflect on matters about which we experience no cognitive dissonance. If it does, we could have reasons to expand our sphere of moral concern. We may discover that the situations and character traits of persons who do not concern us are relevantly similar to those of persons we now care about. Awareness of these similarities would lead to a sense that the partiality of our concern is inconsistent with our understanding of the objects of moral judgment. A shift in our esteem effected by sympathy with the compatriots of outsiders—their narrow circle—would resolve this tension.

I offer no decisive verdict here concerning which interpretation is more accurate, although I have not found compelling evidence that Hume thinks the moral sense prompts us to further reflection in the way I have just described. I do think there is substantial support for Loeb’s reading. Hume introduces his discussion of morals in several places by reference to our desire to avoid the “contradictions” of variations in our sympathies (T 3.3.1.15, 3.3.1.18, 3.3.3.2; SBN 581–2, 583, 602). It seems fruitful to read this in connection with Hume’s claim that moral obligation requires a motivating sentiment. Hume thinks that this sentiment cannot be a sense of duty, since “a sense of duty supposes an antecedent obligation” (T 3.2.5.6; SBN 518). It must be a natural inclination, apart from our sense of duty. In the case of the “artificial” virtues associated with the conventions of property and promising, Hume argues, the original motive to adopt these conventions is self-interest (T 3.2.2.24; SBN 499–500). Regarding the natural virtues and vices, the relevant natural inclination may appear to be our feelings of sympathy. But what is the natural source of obligation for our moral duties to outsiders? It is not our natural inclination to sympathize with their plight, as Hume finds that these sentiments may be lacking

or inconsistent (see, for example, T 3.2.1.11, 3.2.2.6, 3.2.2.8, 3.3.1.15, 3.3.3.2; SBN 481–2, 487, 488–9, 581–2, 603). Rather, as we have seen, it is a desire to avoid the cognitive dissonance that may arise from natural variations in our sympathies.¹⁹

As I have indicated, the passage which Korsgaard cites to support her interpretation is one in which Hume is discussing how the sense of morals acquires new force when it reflects upon itself. Hume seems to be arguing there that when not only virtue but also our sense of virtue and the principles from which it is derived secure our approval, then our moral judgments are as strong and stable as they could be. After all, “nothing is presented on any side, but what is laudable and good” (T 3.3.6.3; SBN 619). The sentiments of morality and justice have a secure source in fundamental principles of human nature, principles that are able to bear their own scrutiny. Hume contrasts this with “most of the inventions of men” that are subject to change. Regarding the part of morality that is conventional, writes Hume, the natural causes of our moral sentiments “render the rules of justice steadfast and immutable; at least as immutable as human nature. And if they were founded on original instincts, cou’d they have any greater stability?” (T 3.3.6.5; SBN 620). These passages support the point that reflection is valuable because it serves the cause of greater stability.

Loeb’s interpretation also makes sense of why it is that Hume is much less skeptical about unreflective beliefs concerning matters of everyday life than he is about metaphysical beliefs. Korsgaard understands Hume’s position in the following way: “We can only remain skeptical about beliefs in common life so long as we keep the skeptical arguments before our minds, which we cannot do while we are thinking about common life.”²⁰ This reading is compatible with the idea that we ought to be skeptical about many ordinary beliefs or at least to acknowledge in our more reflective moments that our common beliefs are unjustified. Loeb stresses, however, that Hume does not criticize ordinary folk who do not pursue and attempt to sustain the kind of philosophical inquiry that leads to skepticism about belief nor does he criticize their beliefs as unjustified. Instead, he writes that these folk “do well to keep themselves in their present situation; and instead of refining them into philosophers, I wish we cou’d communicate to our founders of systems, a share of this gross earthy mixture, as an ingredient, which they commonly stand much in need of, and which wou’d serve to temper those fiery particles, of which they are compos’d” (T 1.4.7.14; SBN 272). It seems that Hume finds value in our capacity to remain steady in our ordinary cognitive lives, despite the potential of philosophical reflection to unsettle our beliefs.

If Loeb is right, however, this should leave us with doubts about the plausibility of a Humean moral philosophy. It seems mistaken in overemphasizing what would seem to be a kind of aesthetic paradigm for moral judgment. This paradigm prizes the value of a person’s internal psychological stability, consistency, balance, and tranquility. The unity and harmony of a life may seem attractive when juxtaposed

to a painful and perhaps futile awareness of what are sometimes intractable moral conflicts. But this life threatens to come at the price of neglecting a fundamentally interpersonal paradigm for morality characterized by a substantive requirement of impartiality and due consideration for all persons.

NOTES

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1 Louis E. Loeb, *Stability and Justification in Hume's Treatise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 88. Page references to Loeb's book ("SJ") appear in the text. References to the Hume's *Treatise* ("T"), also provided in the text, are to David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). I cite passages from the *Treatise* by book, part, section, and paragraph, and I also include page references to David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed., revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), hereafter "SBN."

2 Other terms Hume uses to characterize justified beliefs include: *firm*, *fast*, *solid*, and *settled*. See T 1.3.7.7, 1.3.7.8, 1.3.8.15, 1.3.9.4, 1.3.9.16, 1.3.10.6, 1.3.10.10, App. 3, App. 4, App. 5, and App. 8; SBN 629, 97, 106, 108, 116, 121, 631, 624, 625, 626, and 627. Hume also uses a different cluster of terms to refer to the characteristics of belief: *vivacity*, *vividness*, *intensity*, and *liveliness*. Loeb understands this cluster of terms to characterize the theory of ideas that Hume inherited from his predecessors and sought to integrate with his associationism. On this theory, ideas are identified with occurrent mental states. Loeb writes, "The psychological hold of the inherited theory of ideas explains the centrality of vivacity in Hume's discussions even as he advances a view that breaks out of this mold" (SJ 67). For Loeb's discussion of the idea that Hume understands belief as a disposition, see SJ 68–73, 82–4, 170–1.

3 T 1.3.7.7, 1.3.8.16, 1.3.9.6, 1.3.9.16, 1.3.10.9, and 3.3.2.6, App. 3, App. 4; SBN 97, 106, 110, 116, 123, 595, 624, and 625.

4 Loeb focuses his discussion on the case of intrapersonal variation in moral sentiments. Christine Korsgaard emphasizes as well the significance of interpersonal disagreement in judgment: Hume holds that disagreement with other persons is uncomfortable for us because we naturally sympathize with the perspective and experience of other people and, when we encounter disagreement, this causes the opposing view also to be "in us." See Christine M. Korsgaard, "The General Point of View: Love and Moral Approval in Hume's Ethics," *Hume Studies* 25 (1999): 23–5.

5 See SJ 120. See also Loeb's discussion of Hume's psychological principle that sudden change gives rise to uneasiness, SJ 124–31.

6 John Rawls highlights the role of the judicious spectator in his interpretation of Hume. See John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, ed. Barbara Herman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 64–102.

7 The apparently rational requirement of impartial conduct is, writes Hume, “nothing but a calm determination of the passions, founded on some distant view or reflection.” (T 3.3.1.18; SBN 583). See Loeb’s interesting discussion of Hume’s reconstruction of reason as a faculty of association. (53–9).

8 Loeb argues that this accounts for the relationship between the constructive results of *Treatise* Book 3, part 3 and the destructive conclusions of Book 3, part 4.

9 Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 89.

10 Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 47.

11 Annette Baier makes similar claims: “Successful reflexivity is normativity,” in *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume’s Treatise* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 99–100. Korsgaard cautions, however, that Hume’s understanding of normativity as reflective endorsement should not be understood to reach to each and every expression of a disposition, but rather to dispositions as general tendencies. See Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 88–9.

12 For help in formulating this objection I am indebted to Faviola Rivera Castro.

13 Korsgaard, *Source of Normativity*, 47.

14 See Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 88–9.

15 Loeb writes, “In Hume’s view, both epistemic and moral obligation derive from motivation in the form of particular kinds of felt uneasiness and satisfaction” (SJ 23).

16 See also Korsgaard’s interesting discussion, in “The General Point of View,” of how love for particular persons prompts us to take up the moral point of view. It is not obvious, however, that this claim about love ultimately challenges the connection Loeb draws between stability and justification, since for Hume it is a concern to achieve a stable conception of the object of love—a person—that drives us to take up the “general point of view,” according to Korsgaard. In any case, I cannot see how this position (i.e., that interpreting love for particular persons as the key to understanding what draws us to the moral point of view) that would help Hume to escape the main challenge to his view that which I advance in this paper.

17 I have written “readily available,” since Loeb recognizes that “‘availability’ would have to be characterized narrowly, in keeping with the spirit of the requirement of stability under the de facto degree of reflection.” (SJ 96).

18 On the reality of the traits that constitute virtues and vices, see Baier, 194–5.

19 Hume makes this connection explicitly in the interpersonal case, using the language of obligation, “We are quickly oblig’d to forget our own interest . . . by reason of the perpetual contradictions, we meet with in society and conversation, from persons that are not plac’d in the same situation, and have not the same interest with ourselves” (T 3.3.3.2: SBN 602–3).

20 Korsgaard, 63n.