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How Wide Is Hume's Circle? (A question raised by the exchange between Erin I. Kelly and Louis E. Loeb, *Hume Studies*, November 2004)

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Hume's version, in *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, section 9,² of the viewpoint from which moral assessments are made, and from which traits are recognized as virtues or vices, is that it is one which activates a "universal principle of the human frame," the "principle of humanity." It displays "the force of many sympathies," and depends upon our possession of "some propensity to the good of mankind" (EPM 5.39; SBN 226). Does this represent a revision, on Hume's part, of his *Treatise* claim that sympathy with a person's "narrow circle" is what enables us to judge that person's moral goodness? A humanity-wide circle is scarcely "narrow," even if it is not wide enough for those who see our treatment of animals as relevant to our moral merit or demerit.

The claim about sympathy with the narrow circle is made in the *Treatise* section "Of goodness and benevolence."³ It has recently been assuming the status of a definition of the Humean moral point of view, in some commentators' writings.⁴ If it had been so intended, then there would indeed be a revision in EPM, where there is no mention of narrow circles, merely two footnotes, 22 and 25, to the section "Why utility pleases," concerning the wisdom of confining our efforts to do good to those close to us, lest our efforts be "dissipated or lost for want of a properly limited object." But in fact Hume never claimed that sympathy with a

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person's narrow circle was enough to enable us to recognize her bravery, her proper pride, her prudence, her good judgement, her wit, her integrity, her "justice" or her allegiance to lawful magistrates. It is needed only to judge her "goodness and benevolence." (I take it that the title, "Of goodness and benevolence," is pleonastic, that the varieties of benevolence exhaust "goodness.") Just as benevolence is not the whole of virtue, for Hume, nor is "goodness." The section in which he uses the phrase, "narrow circle," begins with an explicit limitation of what is there to be discussed: "Having thus explained that praise and approbation for everything we call *great* in human affections, we now proceed to give an account of their *goodness* . . ." (T 3.3.3.1; SBN 602). "Good" is not, for Hume, the most general term of moral approbation. Just as we can judge some to be "too intrepid" (an ingredient in "greatness of mind"), so we can judge some to be "too good" (EPM 7.22; SBN 259). Hume's most general terms of approbation are "meritorious" and "estimable." He uses "good" in a restricted sense, for a person's possession of the group of virtues that come under "benevolence." In the *Treatise* 3.3.3.15 (SBN 581–82), he speaks not of one moral point of view, but of "steady and general *points* of view" (my emphasis), and it is possible, indeed plausible, that sympathy with circles of different widths will be needed to recognize different virtues and groups of virtues. For some, such as justice, "extensive sympathy" (T 3.3.1.23; SBN 586) is needed. For others, such as affability, and other aspects of "goodness," we sympathize with the effects of the person's character on a less extensive circle. A good person is affable, generous, and kind, does well as friend, as parent, as neighbor, as colleague, as employer. She does considerate and helpful things to those she encounters, both those close to her, friends, family, and work-mates, and also to those to whom she is not so close, such as the needy in her own community, to whom she may give employment, or charity.

Hume uses other phrases in *Treatise* 3.3 which are sometimes taken to refer to the same group of people as the "narrow circle," namely "those who have any immediate connexion or intercourse with the person," which does seem to amount to the same, and "those who have any commerce with the person," which is surely broader. It occurs earlier, in T 3.3.1.18 (SBN 583), when the topic was the sympathy needed for moral judgement, whatever the virtue we are considering. Just as "any intercourse" is not, for Hume, the same as "any intimate intercourse," so "any commerce" is not the same as "any *immediate* connexion or intercourse" (my emphasis), and it is sympathy with those with whom the judged person had "any commerce" or "any intercourse" that was said to be required for passing moral judgement. Hume had some "commerce" with James Balfour (a letter written and a reply received) but as far as I know no face to face meeting. Does this amount to "immediate connexion" or "immediate intercourse," or was it mediated by Balfour's publisher, to whom Hume sent his letter? Do we have to sympathize with Balfour to judge Hume's "goodness," or is it for other putative virtues, say his

impartiality and his politeness, that we consider that very polite correspondence? I take it that we sympathize with Balfour and other literary correspondents of Hume to judge some of his "natural virtues," not just his politeness but his wit and his proper pride. But the circle of Hume's correspondents was very wide, and to judge of his generosity and benevolence we would move into a narrower circle, and consider his relations with his family, servant, lovers and friends. To judge some of his virtues, such as those shown in his exemplary death, we would need to consider its impact not only on those with him then, but on Boswell, and all those indignant Christians who heard about it, and some of whom expressed their feelings in print. (Of course many exemplary deaths do not get the publicity Hume's got, so make less impact. It is tendencies of traits that count, not actual but accidental impact or lack of impact. Any virtue may, in unfavorable conditions, be "lost to all the world.") Hume's words and his reported life affect all his readers, so they too are in the circle we must consider to judge his character. The Hume Society is increasingly numerous, and does not include all his living readers, admirers, and critics. Among those who came into this ever-widening circle are those of his near contemporaries in the United States, who took his writings to encourage their rebellion from Britain, and their claims to freedom of speech. All of this comes into any judicious version of his influence, and so, unless we judge the degree of influence to be due to accidental factors, of his merit. (I once took a taxi in Charleston, S.C., whose driver told me that reading Hume's dialogues had changed his life, for the better, he believed.)

Obviously we should distinguish Hume's reciprocal relationships, such as those with Balfour and Boswell, from his influence on those persons like the Charleston taxi driver whom he knew only as an anonymous part of that "posterity" he clearly cared about. We might restrict "commerce" to reciprocal relationships, mediate or immediate. Even the circle of those with whom Hume had "immediate commerce" was in fact not so narrow, when we consider his French as well as his British acquaintances. And the circle of those with whom he had correspondence-mediated commerce was wider. If we are to count his influence on all readers of his writings, then the circle to consider widens indefinitely. Best to restrict "commerce," like "intercourse," to a relation between those who have some mutual knowledge, and to put aside, for purposes of judging many of the natural virtues, any influence on "posterity." But to judge artificial virtues, and natural abilities such as wit and wisdom, the effect on posterity seems as important as effect on those close at hand. Certainly when Hume judges English monarchs, the effects of their legislative changes on future generations is not excluded, and nor should it be. There too, however, there can be not just accidentally inefficacious virtues, but even bad effects of exemplary action. The protection afforded the Jews in England by Henry II led them to feel confident enough to come with gifts for his son, Richard, on his coronation. They met with insult, then a general

persecution, culminating in the terrible York massacre. But Henry is to be praised, not condemned, for his humanity and his wisdom in treating them well, and so raising their confidence. Just as Hume, as historian, does not praise James II for ruling so badly that he provoked “the Glorious Revolution,” so he does not hold Henry II responsible for what happened to the Jews under Richard.

Goodness, or benevolence, is not the whole of Humean virtue, and to assess other virtues, sympathetic understanding of the impact of a person’s character on anyone, however remote, seems needed. Even for assessing generosity, which Hume includes in “goodness,” impact on a fairly wide circle may be needed. If the assessed person gave generously to Oxfam or Amnesty International, then sympathy with the victims of famine and persecution, remote from the giver, will come in. Not all generosity is directed at persons known to the generous giver. So Hume may have been wrong, in the *Treatise*, about the width of the circle of those directly affected by a person’s benevolence and generosity. But, if so, he corrected that error in EPM. Speaking there of the benevolent person, he writes, “[l]ike the sun, . . . he cheers, invigorates, and sustains the surrounding world. If confined to private life, the sphere of his activity is narrower: but his influence is all benign and gentle. If exalted to a higher station, mankind and posterity reap the fruits of his labours” (EPM 2.6–7; SBN 178). It is some of his commentators, not Hume himself, who have given that passing phrase, “narrow circle,” a currency and an import that there is no reason to think he intended. He asked us to turn to his *Enquiries*, rather than to his *Treatise*, for his considered version of his views, and there it is what the *Treatise* termed “extensive sympathy,” rather than sympathies with narrow circles, which is found necessary for judging moral merit. I believe there are some significant revisions in EPM, in particular as regards the role of reason,⁵ but I do not find any substantive change in the specification of the points of view needed for moral assessment. The “narrow circle” of *Treatise* 3.3.3 always had a narrow role, to explain how we judge a restricted set of virtues.

NOTES

1 Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals: A Critical Edition*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), hereafter abbreviated “EPM” and cited by section and paragraph number, followed by page numbers in the “SBN” edition, *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

2 *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), abbreviated as “T” and cited by Book, part, section, and paragraph, followed by the page number in the “SBN” edition, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

3 We might call this the Michigan reading of Hume. Some may have intended it as a correction of my over-emphasis on the distinction between great-making and good-making virtues, in chapter 11 of *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's Treatise* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991). I was wrong to suggest, from the diagram on page 201, that the "good" and the "great" exhaust the virtues. Even for the natural virtues, we need to add the "natural abilities." Some of those, such as "profound genius," may make its possessor "great," but others, like "a clear head," seem to escape the great/good dichotomy.

4 See my "Incomparably the best?" forthcoming in *Blackwell's Companion to Hume*, ed. Elizabeth Radcliffe.