



### **A Very Brief Summary of Hume's Morality: Feeling and Fabrication**

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## SYMPOSIUM

Earlier versions of the four articles which follow were presented at a book panel session, on Rachel Cohon's *Hume's Morality: Feeling and Fabrication*, at the Hume Society meetings in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in August 2009.

### A Very Brief Summary of *Hume's Morality: Feeling and Fabrication*

RACHEL COHON

I am deeply grateful to Livia Guimarães and Donald L. M. Baxter for planning this session, and to Elizabeth S. Radcliffe and Don Garrett for serving as my critics. I have been asked to begin by summarizing my book in a few minutes.

*Hume's Morality: Feeling and Fabrication* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), is primarily an analytical, interpretive work about two main issues: the nature of ethical evaluation, according to Hume, and the artificial virtues. The book has two parts: "Feeling Virtue" and "Fabricating Virtue." In the first, I reinterpret Hume's moral psychology, and argue that for Hume our basic grasp of moral good and evil is a direct apprehension by feeling, but one that gives rise to truth-apt moral beliefs. In the second, I reinterpret Hume's distinction between the natural and artificial virtues in a way that explains and resolves the paradoxes and puzzles Hume finds in analyzing them.

In the first chapter I set out, in slightly exaggerated form, what I take to be the common reading of Hume on moral judgment and the nature of moral properties. This reading is what most philosophers and other scholars imbibed in our

graduate education, and it retains some influence over us—myself included—even though many of us now reject some of its parts. It includes three theses that are attributed to Hume:

- 1) belief alone cannot move us to act,
- 2) evaluative propositions cannot be validly inferred from purely factual propositions, and
- 3) moral judgments lack truth value.

Most philosophers who are *not* Hume scholars attribute all three of these claims to Hume. So do some Hume scholars. I know that many of you in the audience do not attribute one or two of them to him. But it's rare for anyone to claim that Hume held none of them.

In my first chapter I grant that there is textual evidence for Hume's acceptance of each these theses. But I argue that if Hume is committed to them, and in the ways he seems to be in the texts, then his moral philosophy as a whole is riddled with errors, puzzles, and contradictions. I have never seen (nor devised for myself) any interpretation that preserved the common reading yet eliminated those problems; so in the next few chapters I develop an alternative interpretation that finds in Hume a more coherent moral philosophy. In doing this, I find that Hume holds none of the three theses.

Chapter 2 is about what is usually called motivation to action. I consider two possible ways to interpret the roles of pleasure and pain, desire and aversion, in Hume's account of the causation of passions and intentional actions: the Background Impulse Model and the Spontaneous Creation Model. I conclude that even on the most subtle interpretation of the text, for Hume beliefs about available pleasure and pain can cause *new* motivating passions, and are not limited merely to directing existing passions. But if they can, then why is reason alone not a motive to the will, and why are moral distinctions not derived from reason?

I work out answers to these questions in Chapter 3. "Reason" for Hume is the name of a type of process or activity, one of comparing perceptions and finding relations between them. Given the nature of this process, no new impression can be its outcome. When he says no passion or action can be produced by reason alone, he means none can be produced by a *reasoning process* without another *process*. Passions are made by a different process, even when they are caused by beliefs about pleasure or pain without any independent causal assistance from a prior passion. Furthermore, the process of discerning the difference between moral virtue and vice is also a process distinct from reasoning. I argue that this interpretation gives us valid ways to read Hume's famous anti-rationalist arguments.

In Chapter 4 I give the moral sensing interpretation of what transpires, according to Hume, when we make moral evaluations, and what their status is. On

the moral sensing view, we experience an occurrent feeling in response to a set of factual observations, and having this feeling constitutes our basic awareness of good and evil. Our moral sensings differ from sense impressions such as seeing colors and feeling heat in important ways. But the moral sentiments resemble the senses in introducing new impressions into the mind from which new ideas may be formed. The moral sensing view passes between the horns of an interpretive dilemma, namely, does Hume think moral judgments are mere noncognitive ventings of emotion, or descriptions of what an observer feels? I say "neither." Our moral *reactions* are occurrent sentiments, but our moral *judgments* are beliefs: lively ideas copied from the felt sentiments. These beliefs are often true, in the full-blooded sense in which any ideas are true. But this does not make Hume a moral realist. As that present-day term is mostly used, he is not; and this is consistent with his not being a noncognitivist or non-propositionalist.

Chapter 5 considers why, according to Hume's emotion-based theory of moral discrimination, moral evaluations are widely shared in a community. Hume traces the causal origin of our moral sentiments to the mechanism of sympathy, and argues that we adopt a common point of view that compensates for variations in sympathy's workings. Our use of this commonly-accessible vantage point explains why our moral evaluations tend to agree. But the account threatens to become inconsistent, first because Hume seems to treat the making of moral judgments from the common point of view as a reasoning process, and because he seems to retract his claim that passions have no representative character. I offer a two-feeling interpretation that avoids these inconsistencies. In answer to a further question, why we bother to imagine ourselves to occupy the common point of view, I argue that the practical demands of social life put pressure on us to use it so we can make reliable predictions about others.

Part II, "Fabricating Virtue," is about the artificial virtues and their differences from the natural ones. Chapter 6 considers the problem of circularity that Hume claims to find when he analyzes the character trait of honesty with respect to property. I explain its source and its solution in a way that I think sheds light on the whole theory of the artificial virtues. Honesty is artificial in the sense that the attitudes and behavior that embody this trait are socially invented, so that once the trait is widely internalized, it provides a prosthesis that human beings use to overcome certain natural disabilities we all have which incapacitate us for impartial cooperation. It is a virtue in Hume's own sense (a character trait that elicits approval), but not according to our pre-theoretical conception of virtue. The persistence of this natural conception of virtue in our thinking accounts for the vicious circle Hume finds in the definitions of honest action and honest motive.

Chapter 7 is about the artificial virtue of fidelity to promises and contracts (being a person of one's word). In our thinking about this virtue Hume discerns a second paradox, besides the circularity problem it shares with honesty. If we think

of fidelity as a natural virtue, we have to pretend that the obligation of a promise is the result of some mysterious and impossible mental act. Why does he think so? An analysis parallel to the one I give for honesty explains the need for a “peculiar act of the mind,” and shows how Hume’s own view avoids such a commitment.

Chapter 8 is about the virtue Hume calls “allegiance to government.” One question I raise is whether this trait of law-abidingness is a virtue at all, as Hume understands virtues. Hume himself raises another question: how masses of people can be induced to obey a government, given that the enforcers of the law are so few. These questions come together. Hume identifies a different fundamental human disability: our preference for near-term goods over distant but greater goods. We out-manuever this weakness by collectively fabricating a character trait—an enduring set of motivating sentiments—and then manufacturing approval of it (using our natural responses as raw materials). The strategy is the same as before, though the problem is somewhat different. Once we have these motivating sentiments, we find it admirable to obey the government, which makes it easy for our rulers to manage us.

In the concluding chapter I ask whether Hume is merely a psychologist who describes the human mind’s proclivities for moral judgment, or also an advocate for a particular list of the virtues and vices (and a critic of lists different from his own). I argue that Hume regards the traits he lists as real virtues and vices—not only traits that we do happen to approve and disapprove, but ones we *should*. He provides some grounds on which to criticize societies or the people of particular historical eras for approving and disapproving the wrong traits, though not adequate grounds to enable us to make all the criticisms we might wish.