

HUME: BETWEEN SUBJECTIVISM AND MORAL REALISM

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IN *ENQUIRY CONCERNING THE PRINCIPLES OF MORALS*, David Hume gives us his account of the foundation and role of morality in our lives. His explanation of our moral principles has recently captured the attention of modern moral philosophers (e.g. Bernard Williams and Alasdair MacIntyre) who have followed a trend towards giving naturalistic accounts of our moral practice. However, with this increasing attention, the debate over what Hume's true metaphysical view of our moral foundations is has intensified. Understanding Hume's opinion on this matter is essential because it plays a significant role in the interpretation of other parts of his moral theory. Before we look at some of Hume's major contributions to the field of moral philosophy, we must be clear on the metaphysical framework he bases his arguments on. The debate centers on Hume's belief in 'moral truths.' Some argue that Hume is a subjectivist, while others maintain that he is a moral realist. Hume gives both sides ample fuel for debate in the *Enquiry*, but are these interpretations valid?

In this paper, the arguments for both the subjectivist and moral realist interpretations of Hume in the *Enquiry* will be examined and then rejected. I will first outline Hume's theory of morals as presented in the *Enquiry* and consider the view that Hume is best interpreted as a subjectivist. Using W. Davie's *Hume's Apology*, I will attempt to show why such an interpretation is flawed. I will then turn to the opposing view and examine D. Fate Norton's interpretation that Hume is a moral realist. I hope to show some problems with his account. Lastly, I will argue that Hume's actual view has elements of both positions and cannot be adequately captured by the use of either of these terms.

1. Defining the terms

Before I begin, I would like to precisely define how the terms 'subjectivist' and 'moral realist' will be used throughout this paper. I will use fairly standard definitions of 'subjectivist' and 'moral realist.'¹ When using the term 'subjectivist,' I refer to one who supports the idea that moral judgments are simply individual expressions of feeling. A subjectivist, in this sense, supports the claim that ethical judgments cannot be said to be correct or incorrect, appropriate or inappropriate. For her, as individual expressions of feelings, moral judgments have no 'truth

values,’ and if moral conflict exists, it cannot be resolved, because no objective standard exists to which one can appeal. I will use the term ‘moral realist,’ on the other hand, to denote someone who does believe that moral judgments have ‘truth values’—i.e., that moral judgements can accurately be described as either true or false. A moral realist believes that moral properties exist in the world which are not, as Norton phrases it, merely “based on private psychological factors and nothing more” (HCSM 157). Moral properties, according to the moral realist, are “independent realities” which exist outside of our consciousness. A moral realist supports the claim that morals are discovered by our consciousness and, contrary to the subjectivist, denies that moral distinctions are derived from our emotional reactions.

2. Hume’s theory of moral distinctions

Hume’s theory on the foundation of moral distinctions in the *Enquiry* is a descriptive account of how and why we label certain characters and actions good or bad. His theory is most famous for its emphasis on the role of sentiment. Dismissing reason in its traditional role as the source of our moral judgments, Hume claims moral distinctions depend upon our faculty of sentiment. In fact, Hume’s definition of virtue is “*whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation*” (EPM 289). This definition, however, seems to entail anything that gives the agent pleasure. Eating ice cream, for example, certainly wins our sentiments of approval—we usually ask for a second scoop. It is clear that we need to make some additional distinctions.

Giving Hume’s definition proper context involves distinguishing between the phenomenon that one observes and the feeling one gets while observing that phenomenon. A phenomenon that can be morally evaluated will have the following three important attributes. First, the phenomenon one observes must be *external* to the observer; it will be the mental action or quality of an external agent (i.e. someone else). Second, by saying mental action or *quality*, Hume points out that this phenomenon does not have to be something an agent does, it may merely be a quality of her/his character. Lastly, this action or quality is a *mental* one which implies that moral judgments can only be passed on *thinking, intentionally acting* agents. This narrows down the definition considerably: virtue is that agent’s intentional action or quality of character which leads to feelings of approval. Not only does this exclude eating ice cream, but it also excludes judgments being passed on all accidents, situations in which people cannot control themselves, and inanimate objects.

Consider what might seem like a possible objection: because I get happy whenever my friend is happy, I get a pleasing sentiment of appro-

bation every time he eats ice cream. Does virtue then consist in my friend eating ice cream? Surprisingly, this is closer to the Humean picture, but we have not yet considered the moral objects of our sentiments, nor have we explicated the role reason plays in Hume's theory.

As we just noted, eating ice cream is not a Humean virtue. This is because only certain actions or qualities are the objects of moral distinctions. Hume takes the major object of our moral sentiments to be actions or qualities of character that are *publicly useful*. For Hume, almost all moral judgments involve considerations of the *public utility* of mental actions or qualities (*EPM* 180).

It appears to be matter of fact, that the circumstance of *utility*, in all subjects, is a source of praise and approbation: That it is constantly appealed to in all moral decisions concerning the merit and demerit of actions ... in a word, that it is a foundation of the chief part of morals, which has a reference to mankind and our fellow-creatures. (*EPM* 231)

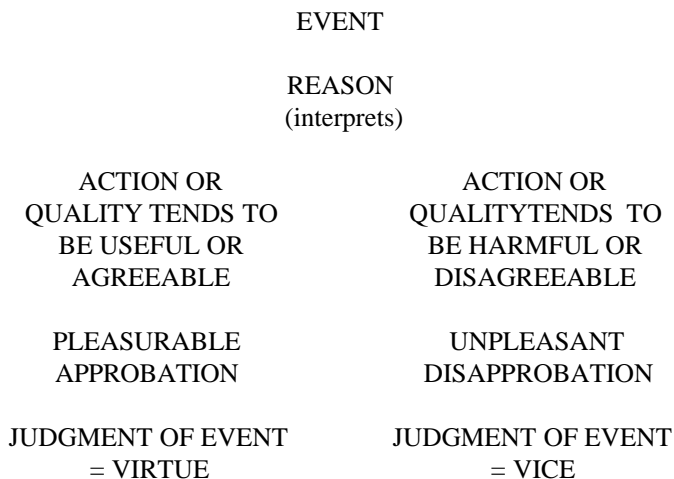
Hume thinks that whenever we see actions or people that tend to increase or decrease public utility, we have the corresponding sentiments of either "the happiness of mankind, [or] a resentment of their misery" (*EPM* 286). According to Hume, then, those actions, such as justice and benevolence, which tend to increase public utility and which lead to feelings of happiness and approval, are deemed virtuous. Actions which tend to decrease in public utility, such as injustice and infidelity, on the other hand, lead to feelings of discomfort and disapproval and are thus deemed vicious.

Although public utility is the principle basis from which we judge virtue, there are additional objects of our moral sentiments. Private utility is one. For example, when we see someone who has certain skills, such as a gift for business or athleticism, we feel happy for them and approve. The ideas of "happiness, joy, triumph, prosperity, are connected with every circumstance of his character, and diffuse over our minds a pleasing sentiment of sympathy and humanity" (*EPM* 234). There are also what Hume calls 'agreeable qualities.' These 'agreeable qualities' are either traits we admire in a person such as cheerfulness, courageousness, and intelligence—qualities immediately agreeable to the person herself—or social graces such as good manners—qualities immediately agreeable to others (*EPM* 269). At this point, it is important to remind ourselves that Hume is not saying this is the ideal picture—he is not telling us how we *ought* to make our judgments. He is saying this *is* the entire picture and this is *how we make* our judgments. He is describing, not prescribing, our moral judgments.

Now we can see how reason fits in. Although sentiment is the sole judge of virtue and vice, contrary to what is commonly thought about

Hume, reason plays an important part in our moral distinctions. Reason presents objects to our moral sentiments in a way in which our sentiments can properly judge them. In Hume's picture, reason can accomplish two things: it can either determine matters of fact or establish the relations of ideas (*EPM* 287). With these two abilities, reason instructs us "in the tendency of qualities and actions, and point[s] out their beneficial consequences to society and to their possessor" (*EPM* 285). In other words, although reason plays no role in *judging* the virtue and vice of actions and characters themselves, it interprets the effect of any action and character on, for example, general public utility. Having done so, we have the corresponding sentiments of approval or disapproval. "*Reason* instructs us in the several tendencies of actions, and *humanity* makes a distinction in favour of those which are useful and beneficial" (*EPM* 286).

Now we have the entire Humean model of how we make moral distinctions. First, we have an impression of some action or quality of character. Next, reason tells us if this action or quality is useful or agreeable to society or the person herself. Lastly, we have either pleasurable feelings of approval or unpleasant feelings of disapproval. If we react with a pleasurable feeling of approval, we deem the action or quality a virtue. If we react with an unpleasant feeling of disapproval, we deem the action or quality a vice. This picture is diagrammed below:



3. Hume – A subjectivist?

In this picture, we see that the final judge of any action or character is how we *feel* about the agent and/or her character. It is therefore easy to see why Hume can be interpreted as a subjectivist. As Davie

puts it, if our evaluation of things hinges upon our feelings, which are variable, then “[Hume] must hold that value judgments are variable too. Moral communication becomes a matter of venting each individual’s supply of feelings and radical relativism threatens to engulf us” (*Apology* 129).²

Although this interpretation is common, Hume should not be interpreted in this manner. There is an objective element in Hume’s theory which denies the possibility that he holds such a view: under certain conditions, regardless of the individual, Hume maintains that we all draw the same moral distinctions. This claim rests on his firm belief that all human beings are fundamentally the same. “Would you know the sentiments, inclinations, and course of life of the Greeks and Romans? Study well the temper and actions of the French and English” (EHU 83). Hume believes that there is a universal standard of feelings common to everyone, a standard which “nature has made universal in the whole species” (*EPM* 173). Hume similarly thinks that in the area of moral judgments, everyone reacts with the same moral feelings—a set of feelings that he simply groups under the title Humanity.

One man’s ambition is not another’s ambition, nor will the same event or object satisfy both; but the humanity of one man is the humanity of every one, and the same object touches this passion in all human creatures. (*EPM* 273)

In this passage, note not only his emphasis on a common humanity, but also that Hume believes the objects of our feelings, the four qualities listed above, to be the same in everyone. Not only does everyone react the same way, everyone reacts in the same way to the same things.

Hume also has a theory of error—a way to explain the existence of moral conflict in society. Although Hume claims that everyone reacts in the same way to the same things, at the same time, he recognizes the existence of moral dispute which is incompatible with such a claim. For Hume, however, conflict is explainable by considering the events that lead up to our reactions, not the reactions themselves. My account of Hume’s theory of error is drawn from W. Davie’s *Hume’s Apology*. According to Davie, Hume believes that moral disputes arise in two ways. One possibility is that we have imperfect knowledge about the case at hand—facts can be wrong, facts can be hidden, etc. (*Apology* 130). The second way moral disagreements arise is due to the possibility of distorting the facts if we do not take what Davie describes as Hume’s ‘moral point of view’ (*Apology* 130). Hume’s moral point of view is one of objectivity in the sense of unbiased observation. In order to make a proper moral judgment, we must make sure that we are not perverting *how we see* the facts by letting our own interests interfere.

Hume notes that we only share the common sentiment of humanity when “interest or revenge or envy perverts not our disposition” (*EPM* 227). Hume believes, therefore, that if we (1) know all of the facts and (2) look at these facts objectively, our shared sentiments will lead us to a similar standard of moral judgment.

This strain of ethical universalism is why Hume should not be considered a subjectivist. A subjectivist maintains that because moral judgments have no ‘truth values,’ moral conflict cannot be resolved. Hume, on the other hand, has a standard of universal feelings which he believes will lead us to the same moral conclusions every time.

4. Hume – a moral realist?

If we accept that the subjectivist interpretation of Hume has flaws, must we then support the moral realist interpretation? Because moral realism is taken to be the opposite of subjectivism, it might be natural to do so. This position is advanced by Norton in his paper, “Hume’s Common Sense Morality.” Norton argues that Hume really believes in objective moral truths that exist independently of our feelings. His argument begins with a distinction we made earlier: the recognition that Hume distinguishes between an action or character being virtuous and the feelings that these virtuous actions invoke. In Norton’s opinion, since virtue and vice are “sufficiently different from such psychological states,” they “can be said to be the *source* of these states” (HCSM 158).

It is only on condition of a certain objective state of affairs (his being virtuous) that the passion of esteem arises. But if the passions are in this way signs of moral qualities; and if the passions are *dependent* upon and *reflect* objective states of affairs, as Hume claims they do; then it follows that the *virtues signified by the passions also depend upon and reflect these same objective states of affairs.* (HCSM 159)

His reasoning is as follows:

- (1) A certain objective state of affairs (his being virtuous) stirs our passions.
- (2) Because the passions reflect his being virtuous, and they also reflect an objective state of affairs that correspond to his being virtuous, it follows that the virtues reflect an objective state of affairs.

The problem with Norton’s account is that he has already labeled the state of affairs in terms of the agent’s being virtuous in premise (1). Next, in premise (2), he concludes that the agent’s being virtuous *reflects* this state of affairs. He leaves out, however, how Hume has come to conclude premise (1) in the first place. From our discussion of

Hume's moral theory, we know that a state of affairs is only virtuous *on account of having been deemed so by our emotional reaction to the situation*. In order to call Hume a moral realist, Norton must show not only that virtue and vice exist as separate entities, but also that the moral value assigned to these entities is not derived from subjective elements of our consciousness. In other words, he must show that Hume believes virtue and vice exist as separate entities in the absence of our feelings about them. Virtue and vice in this sense would be 'discovered' by our consciousness, not 'created' by it.

If we examine the *Enquiry*, however, Hume seems to believe the opposite—virtue and vice came into existence *after* we have had pleasurable and unpleasant sentiments about certain situations. In the Humean picture, if we did not have any feelings about the world, *nothing would ever be virtuous or vicious*. In the *Enquiry*, Hume clearly states that our system of morality is a direct result of the particular way humans have been created—our 'human fabric'. In his discussion of whether morals are derived from reason or sentiment, he says that morals, "like the perception of beauty and deformity, [are] founded entirely on the particular fabric and constitution of the human species" (*EPM* 170). Hume does not believe virtue and vice are merely discovered by our particular 'human fabric'. He believes that virtue and vice *derive their very existence* from the way our sentiments are constructed.

Thus the distinct boundaries and offices of *reason* and of *taste* are easily ascertained. The former conveys the knowledge of truth and falsehood: the latter gives the sentiment of beauty and deformity, vice and virtue. The one discovers objects as they really stand in nature, without addition or diminution: the other has a *productive faculty*, and *gilding or staining all natural objects with the colours, borrowed from internal sentiment, raises in a manner a new creation*. (*EPM*, 294; last italics mine)

A moral realist must maintain that virtue and vice exist in the world independent of our feelings; we come to discover (not create) these moral truths, be it through intuition, rationalization, or feelings. Hume's view appears to be the opposite: if you take away human sentiment, there would be no relations or matters of fact in the world that could be called good or evil.

There is a further argument against the moral realist interpretation. Let us imagine Norton's world: a world devoid of our feelings, in which virtue and vice exist as "independent realities" (*HCSM* 157). What would such a world be like? We can imagine that virtue and vice would consist in the same events as they do now, and that they could be described either by certain relations or by facts about the world. For

example, even if we had no reaction to a person taking candy from a baby, we could still describe the event:

Someone just took candy away from a baby.

This description is a description of an event that has particular relations and matters of fact. If we change the relations or matters of fact, we get very different descriptions:

Someone just took candy away from a candy thief.

or,

Someone just took hydrochloric acid away from a baby.

Even though the proposed world is one devoid of emotions, a moral realist would maintain that virtue and vice must exist in the relations or matters of fact described—“objective states of affairs,” as Norton calls them. It becomes clear, however, that something is wrong with thinking that Hume imagines the world to be this way, for it is a consistent theme in Hume’s philosophy that virtue does not consist in either relations or matters of fact. In one of the more famous passages in the *Enquiry*, he writes:

Examine the crime of *ingratitude*, for instance ... anatomize all these circumstances and examine, by your reason alone, in what consists the demerit or blame. You never will come to any issue or conclusion ... the crime of ingratitude is not any particular individual *fact*; but arises from a complication from circumstances, which, being presented to the spectator, excites the *sentiment* of blame, by the particular structure and fabric of the mind. (*EPM* 287-288)

In fact, the idea of non-emotive moral relations or facts seems contradictory to the whole spirit of the roles Hume assigns to sentiment and reason. For reason judges either *matter of fact* or *relations* (*EPM* 287). We can assume that reason would therefore be able to distinguish virtue and vice in a non-emotive world merely through its ability to judge relations and matters of fact. However, Hume makes it clear throughout his entire *Enquiry* that reason merely plays an interpretive role and “*is not alone sufficient to produce any moral blame or approbation*” (*EPM* 286; italics my own).

5. A closer look at Hume’s theory

So far, we have looked at the arguments for interpreting Hume as a subjectivists and as a moral realist and rejected both. Rejecting the subjectivist interpretation, we saw that because Hume believed that everyone would agree on the morality of moral issues if everyone (*a*) had per-

fect knowledge of the issue at hand, and (b) looked at the issues from an objective viewpoint. We rejected the moral realist interpretation because we saw that Hume's belief in the birth of virtue and vice from the 'productive' faculty of sentiment lay in direct opposition to the moral realist claim that moral truths exist in the world independently of our feelings.

It is my belief that Hume's actual contains elements of both interpretations. Although these views seem incompatible, Hume's theory is, in fact, coherent. R. W. Hepburn uses the term 'intersubjectivist' to describe Hume.³ Such a term is commonly used to describe one who believes moral judgments are universal, but are still a matter of human psychological reactions.⁴ Since this description captures the elements of Hume's theory that reflect both subjectivism and moral realism, such a description seems appropriate.

NOTES

1. This definition is largely drawn from the definitions of 'ethical objectivism and subjectivism' and 'ethical relativism' in the *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, 1995.
2. I do not mean to imply by quoting him that Davie endorses this view. He, in fact, does not and is merely explaining the subjectivist interpretation of Hume.
3. This term is used by R. W. Hepburn to describe Hume in 'ethical objectivism and subjectivism' in the *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, 1995.
4. Related by Rachel Cohon in January 1998, Stanford University, CA.

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