

PHIL 5983: Hume and Practical Reasoning

Prof. Funkhouser

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Hume, *Treatise*, 3.1.1-2; *EPM*, §1 and Appendix 1

T 3.1.1

- Q: Do we make moral distinctions on the basis of ideas or impressions?
 - The idea/reason answer, as Hume describes it, views moral truths as eternal and equally applicable to each rational being.

- Morality is practical — it is supposed to influence our passions and actions. This observation leads to the *Motivation Argument*:

Since morals, therefore, have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows, that they cannot be deriv'd from reason; and that because reason alone, as we have already prov'd, can never have any such influence. Morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions. Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular. The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason.

- Hume will not rehearse all of his arguments for the motivational inefficacy of reason, but he does return to the Representation Argument.

Reason is the discovery of truth or falshood. Truth or falshood consists in an agreement or disagreement either to the *real* relations of ideas, or to *real* existence and matter of fact. Whatever, therefore, is not susceptible of this agreement or disagreement, is incapable of being true or false, and can never be an object of our reason. Now 'tis evident our passions, volitions, and actions, are not susceptible of any such agreement or disagreement; being original facts and realities, compleat in themselves, and implying no reference to other passions, volitions, and actions. 'Tis impossible, therefore, they can be pronounced either true or false, and be either contrary or conformable to reason.

- Hume does hold that actions can be evaluated — they just cannot be rationally evaluated.

Actions may be laudable or blameable; but they cannot be reasonable or unreasonable: Laudable or blameable, therefore, are not the same with reasonable or unreasonable.

- Hume allows 2 roles for reason.
 1. Reason can excite a passion by making us aware of the existence of one of its objects.
 2. Reason can discover causal relations necessary for means-end reasoning.

Q: Has Hume overlooked any others?

Note that errors of reasoning here are mistakes of fact, not morality.

- I am not sure what to make of this passage:

And here it may be proper to observe, that if moral distinctions be deriv'd from the truth or falshood of those judgments, they must take place wherever we form the judgments; nor will there be any difference, whether the question be concerning an apple or a kingdom, or whether the error be avoidable or unavoidable. For as the very essence of morality is suppos'd to consist in an agreement or disagreement to reason, the other circumstances are entirely arbitrary, and can never either bestow on any action the character of virtuous or vicious, or deprive it of that character.

- Hume presents the challenge of deriving moral conclusions from relations of ideas. He claims that no such demonstration has ever been established.
 - Such a demonstration would have 4 relations to appeal to: resemblance, contrariety, degrees in quality, and proportions in quantity and number (compare with T 1.1.5). Any such relations could equally hold for inanimate objects. But they cannot be morally evaluated. *Reductio*.
 - Hume: If you insist that there are other relations, then provide and explain them to me.
 - Pure reason also fails at establishing an *a priori* connection between recognition of relations (even assuming that this is what morality consists in) and the will.

'Tis one thing to know virtue, and another to conform the will to it. In order, therefore, to prove, that the measures of right and wrong are eternal laws, *obligatory* on every rational mind, 'tis not sufficient to shew the relations upon which they are founded: We

must also point out the connexion betwixt the relation and the will; and must prove that this connexion is so necessary, that in every well-disposed mind, it must take place and have its influence; tho' the difference betwixt these minds be in other respects immense and infinite. Now besides what I have already prov'd, that even in human nature no relation can ever alone produce any action; besides this, I say, it has been shewn, in treating of the understanding, that there is no connexion of cause and effect, such as this is suppos'd to be, which is discoverable otherwise than by experience, and of which we can pretend to have any security by the simple consideration of objects.

- The ingratitude example is supposed to show that, for many instances of ingratitude, parallel relations can hold among objects that are not moral agents (e.g., trees). So, morality cannot be grounded in such relations.
- Nor are moral judgments matters of fact.

Take any action allow'd to be vicious: Willful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call *vice*. In which-ever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case.

- Hume groups moral judgments with other secondary qualities.
- Hume also notes how many authors, when reasoning on this subject, shift from 'is' claims to 'ought' claims.

T 3.1.2

- Since moral judgments cannot be reached by reasoning, which works on ideas, it must be due to some impression.

Our decisions concerning moral rectitude and depravity are evidently perceptions; and as all perceptions are either impressions or ideas, the exclusion of the one is a convincing arguments for the other. Morality, therefore, is more properly felt than judg'd of; tho' this feeling or sentiment is commonly so soft and gentle, that we are apt to confound it with an idea, according to our common custom of taking all things for the same, which have any near resemblance to each other.

- Feeling pleasure and pain (uneasiness), of a certain kind, *constitutes* moral judgment.

To have the sense of virtue, is nothing but to *feel* a satisfaction of a particular kind from the contemplation of a character. The very *feeling* constitutes our praise or admiration.

◦ Objection: But lots of things cause pleasure, though we are not morally judging them.

Response: The pleasures are varied, and only a particular kind of pleasure constitutes moral judgment.

'Tis only when a character is considered in general, without reference to our particular interest, that it causes such a feeling or sentiment, as denominates it morally good or evil.

◦ Hume denies that we have instincts of pleasure/pain corresponding to each moral judgment. The moral judgments are too diverse for this to be plausible. Rather, we utilize a few general principles.

• Some sense of morality is universal. Though, Hume remains agnostic, at this point, concerning whether morality is a product of nature or artifice.

EPM §1

• Hume takes the reality of moral distinctions to be an obvious truth of common sense. But he considers the question whether such distinctions are derived from reason (deduction/induction) or sentiment (a feeling or inner sense).

◦ On behalf of reason, it has been claimed that moral distinctions are disputable. But, matters of sentiment are not open to such argument.

◦ On behalf of sentiment, we can point to the failure of reason to provide convincing arguments for moral distinctions.

• Hume presents, once again, a version of his Motivation Argument in arguing in favor of sentiment. The end of moral inquiry is practical — the acquisition of certain habits or behaviors — but reason alone cannot so motivate. Sentiment has this power, not reason. So, moral distinctions are derived from sentiment.

The end of all moral speculations is to teach us our duty; and, by proper representations of the deformity of vice and beauty of virtue, beget correspondent habits, and engage us to avoid the one, and embrace the other. But is this ever to be expected from

inferences and conclusions of the understanding, which of themselves have no hold of the affections nor set in motion the active powers of men? They discover truths: but where the truths which they discover are indifferent, and beget no desire or aversion, they can have no influence on conduct and behaviour.

- Note the experimental methodology that Hume recommends for studying morality (along with other matters, of course).

The only object of reasoning is to discover the circumstances on both sides, which are common to these qualities; to observe that particular in which the estimable qualities agree on the one hand, and the blameable on the other; and thence to reach the foundation of ethics, and find those universal principles, from which all censure or approbation is ultimately derived. As this is a question of fact, not of abstract science, we can only expect success, by following the experimental method, and deducing general maxims from a comparison of particular instances. The other scientific method, where a general abstract principle is first established, and is afterwards branched out into a variety of inferences and conclusions, may be more perfect in itself, but suits less the imperfection of human nature, and is a common source of illusion and mistake in this as well as in other subjects. Men are now cured of their passion for hypotheses and systems in natural philosophy, and will hearken to no arguments but those which are derived from experience. It is full time they should attempt a like reformation in all moral disquisitions; and reject every system of ethics, however subtle or ingenious, which is not founded on fact and observation.

Appreciate the significance of this recommendation.

EPM, Appendix 1

- Obviously, reason must play some role in assigning moral praise. Reason at least determines the utility of particular actions.
 - Hume argues that though reason can inform us of the consequences of particular actions, it cannot make us care, one way or the other, about those consequences. This is where sentiment comes in.

Utility is only a tendency to a certain end; and were the end totally indifferent to us, we should feel the same indifference towards the means. It is requisite a *sentiment* should here display itself, in order to give preference to the useful above the pernicious tendencies. This sentiment can be no other than a feeling

for the happiness of mankind, and a resentment of their misery; since these are the different ends which virtue and vice have a tendency to promote. Here therefore *reason* instructs us in the several tendencies of actions, and *humanity* makes a distinction in favour of those which are useful and beneficial.

- Hume then provides 5 reasons why reason alone cannot be the source of morality.

1. Hume challenges the reader to come up with an argument, from reason alone, as to why some particular trait — ingratitude — is morally blameworthy. He denies that this is possible.

He also makes a positive argument for this claim, recalling the 2 varieties of reasoning. He then presents what I have called the Eliminating the Possibilities Argument. The version of the argument here is a bit better than in T 2.3.3, because it considers, in some detail, attempts to account for a particular moral judgment solely on the basis of reason. (Though, the argument still has the feeling of a challenge, worded with many rhetorical questions.)

Also note his definition of ‘virtue’:

It defines virtue to be *whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation*; and vice the contrary.

2. Hume claims that there is an important difference between, say, the speculative reasonings of a geometer and moral deliberation. In doing geometry we can infer unknown facts from known facts. But Hume claims that no such inference is permissible in moral deliberation. We cannot reach a moral judgment until all the facts are made available to us.

In the disquisitions of the understanding, from known circumstances and relations, we infer some new and unknown. In moral decisions, all the circumstances and relations must be previously known; and the mind, from the contemplation of the whole, feels some new impression of affection or disgust, esteem or contempt, approbation or blame.

3. Hume makes an analogy to natural beauty. Natural beauty depends on the arrangement of physical properties, but we cannot infer the natural beauty of an object from knowledge of these properties. So too for morality. Hume goes on to claim (infer?) that morality, like beauty, is not a property of objects. Rather, it is a response — which depends on the particular fabric and structure of the perceiving mind — to objects.

4. Morality cannot consist simply in the instantiation of certain relations. For, inanimate objects can stand in these relations, though there is no immorality. (This argument is awfully weak, I think.)

5. There is no reason why we value something as an ultimate end.

It appears evident that the ultimate ends of human actions can never, in any case, be accounted for by *reason*, but recommend themselves entirely to the sentiments and affections of mankind, without any dependance on the intellectual faculties. Ask a man *why he uses exercise*; he will answer, *because he desires to keep his health*. If you then enquire, *why he desires health*, he will readily reply, *because sickness is painful*. If you push your enquiries farther, and desire a reason *why he hates pain*, it is impossible he can ever give any. This is an ultimate end, and is never referred to any other object.

And virtue is an ultimate end.

- In the last paragraph of this Appendix Hume offers a nice summary of his views on the roles of reason and taste (sentiment) with respect to action and virtue.