**David Hume on the Reality of Moral Distinctions**
Scepticism and Anti-Scepticism in Hume's Moral Philosophy

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# Scepticism and Anti-Scepticism in Hume's Moral Philosophy

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*Abstract*

My thesis is focussed on the moral philosophy of David Hume. Hume's moral philosophy contains an apparent paradox that has not been adequately dealt with, or even straightforwardly addressed, by commentators. However, it threatens to undermine the general coherence of Hume's moral system.

The apparent paradox concerns Hume's stance towards the tradition of moral scepticism. On the one hand, Hume is evidently sceptical about various claims concerning the foundation of morality—in particular, he is sceptical about the objectivity of moral qualities. On the other hand, Hume defends the existence of a real distinction between virtue and vice from sceptical arguments to the contrary. There is evidently a tension between these positions: how can there be a real distinction between virtue and vice if they are not objectively existing qualities?

My thesis explores how the apparent tension within Hume's moral thought can be resolved, by situating Hume's views historically, re-examining his texts and suggesting a more nuanced understanding of how sceptical and anti-sceptical ideas are coherently integrated into his overall theory of morals.

*This thesis is dedicated to the memory of*

ROBERT MARK HARGRAVE

*Philosopher, Sceptic, Corruptor of Youth*

(1949-2012)

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This thesis has taken longer than it might have, and would not have been completed at all without the support of many friends and colleagues.

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*Abbreviations*

References to Hume's works and correspondence will use the following abbreviations throughout this thesis:

| | |
|---|---|
| T | *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40) |
| A | *Abstract of a Book lately Published* (1740) |
| L | *A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh* (1745) |
| E | *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1748, 1777) |
| M | *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* (1752, 1777) |
| N | *The Natural History of Religion* (1757, 1777) |
| P | *A Dissertation on the Passions* (1757, 1777) |
| RP | *Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences* (1758, 1777) |
| ST | *Of the Standard of Taste* (1758, 1777) |
| Sc | *The Sceptic* (1758, 1777) |
| OC | *Of the Original Contract* (1758, 1777) |
| MOL | *My Own Life* (1758, 1777) |
| SH | *Of the Study of History* (1758, 1777) |
| HL | *The Letters of David Hume* (1938) |
| NHL | *New Letters of David Hume* (1954) |

These will be followed by Arabic numerals indicating the book, part, section, and paragraph numbers, as applicable. Quotations of Hume's works are taken from *Hume Texts*, an outstanding online collection of Hume's works, edited by Peter Millican and Amyas Merivale of Hertford College, University of Oxford: <http://www.davidhume.org/>. My page references correspond to their rendering of the texts, which in turn are paginated in accordance with the standard modern reference editions of Hume's works (e.g., Selby-Bigge for the *Treatise* and two *Enquiries*). I give the full references to these standard editions in the 'Hume's Works and Correspondence' section of my bibliography. I have also given the year of

publication above in parentheses so that the reader may easily locate the volume in which an essay (say, *The Sceptic*) is to be found, by checking the corresponding entry by year in my bibliography.

# Table of Contents

Chapter

# 1

# Introduction

*§1.1. Hume on Morality: Sapping or Supporting?*

One of the most vexed and controversial problems in the interpretation of David Hume's philosophy is its relationship to the sceptical tradition. Recent scholarship addressing this subject has tended to concentrate on this problem in relation to Hume's theory of understanding, especially his treatment of the 'problem of induction' (as it is called nowadays), and the intimately connected analysis of causation.[1] It is understandable why this should be so: inductive inference, based on causal relations, is the cornerstone of Hume's attempt to "introduce the experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects"; the central concern guiding his philosophical project as identified in the subtitle of *A Treatise of Human Nature*. If scepticism infects Hume's treatment of these topics, then that poses a serious problem for his attempt to construct an empirical science of human nature more generally, including in his theories of the passions and of morals. Nevertheless, there is a *unique* problem of Hume's relationship to scepticism in the moral domain, which does not simply flow from the sceptical worries that plague his general epistemology. In this chapter, I introduce that problem, and suggest that, when brought out of the shadow of his epistemology, the problem of Hume's relation to moral scepticism presents itself as just as complicated, troublesome, and difficult to solve.

[1] For example, the most prominent debate to emerge in recent Hume scholarship concerns the so-called 'New Hume' interpretation(s), and is focussed on the nature of Hume's apparent inductive scepticism and, relatedly, his theory of causal connexion. The most significant contributions to this debate are collected in Read and Richman (2007).

Hume's early critics were quick to identify him as a moral sceptic.[2] One prominent example of this can be found in the campaign against Hume's candidacy for a chair in moral philosophy at the University of Edinburgh. Hume's candidacy was strongly opposed by a collection of academic, political, and clerical enemies.[3] As part of the campaign against Hume, a pamphlet, entitled *A Specimen of the Principles concerning Religion and Morality &c.*, was circulated. In this pamphlet, various accusations were levelled at Hume, including "Universal Scepticism" and "downright Atheism" (L 14-15, p. 425). Notably, Hume believed that the charge which would be regarded as the "severest"—given the "prevalent Opinion of Philosophers in this Age"—is that he was responsible for "sapping the foundations of Morality, by denying the natural and essential Difference betwixt Right and Wrong, Good and Evil, Justice and Injustice" (L 19, 36, pp. 425, 429). Indeed, Hume's views on morality—particularly his supposed rejection of our "natural Obligations"—were said to be worse than those of the arch-sceptic and infidel, Thomas Hobbes, or the "Monster of Malmesbury," as he was then known (L 11, p. 424).[4] Hume vigorously denied these charges, arguing in his *A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh* that the accusations contained in the *Specimen* were "invidious", relying on "broken and partial Citations, to pervert [his] Discourse" (L 41, p. 431). Nevertheless, the charges stuck, and Hume was denied the chair at Edinburgh.

It might be thought that, as it was written in order to undermine Hume's application for the chair at Edinburgh, the *Specimen* was motivated by academic politics, and should be treated, therefore, as potentially disingenuous. However, several of Hume's contemporaries with no such motivation also regarded Hume's

[2] I present some evidence of this below. For more extensive evidence, see Russell (2008, pp. 12ff). See also Fieser (2005*a*, pp. xix-xxi); and §3.2 of this thesis.

[3] For the details of this controversy, see Emerson (1995).

[4] See Parkin (2007, p. 1) for some colourful epithets of abuse deployed against Hobbes. I consider Hobbes's moral theory and its legacy in British moral philosophy in Ch. 2.

theory of morals as having sceptical import. Thomas Reid, one of Hume's most esteemed critics, associated Hume's moral philosophy with that of the Epicurean school, which, he thought, had the sceptical consequence that it would "subvert morality", by reducing all merit to pleasure.[5] More polemically, James Beattie described Hume's "sceptical philosophy" as "contradictory to itself, and destructive of genuine philosophy, as well as of religion and virtue".[6] Another critic, James Balfour, argued that Hume "exerted all the force of his genius… to extenuate, and render as imperceptible as possible, the difference betwixt virtue and vice, nay, to confound both in one indistinguishable chaos."[7]

Contrary to his critics, however, Hume characterised his moral philosophy as *opposed* to scepticism. In a letter replying to the charges of the last-mentioned critic, Hume was clear that:

> I have surely endeavoured to refute the Sceptic [about morality] with all the force of which I am master; and my refutation must be allowed sincere, because drawn from the capital principles of my system. (HL, vol. 1, p. 173)

This generates a puzzle for the interpretation of Hume's theory of morals: were Hume's contemporaries right that his principles inevitably undermine or subvert the foundations of morality, and lead to scepticism? Or was Hume's assessment of his own theory as a bulwark against moral scepticism more nearly correct? I contend that the answer depends upon how one answers another question that Hume himself posed: *viz.*, "What is meant by a sceptic?" (E 12.2, p. 149). As Hume recognised, 'scepticism' is a broad-brush term, encompassing many different views in diverse areas of philosophy. One can be a sceptic in one area of philosophy, whilst being resolutely non-sceptical, or even anti-sceptical, in another area: for instance, one

[5] Reid (1788/2010, p. 303). I will comment on the links between scepticism and Epicureanism in the early modern period in Ch. 2, particularly in my discussions of Hobbes, Locke, and Mandeville.

[6] Beattie (2004, p. 48); cf. Beattie (1770, p. 6).

[7] Balfour (1763, pp. 120-1).

might be a sceptic in their theory of knowledge, but an anti-sceptic in their theory of morality. Furthermore, even within a particular domain of philosophy, one can be a sceptic with respect to certain claims or theories, but non-sceptical in other respects. For instance, in the domain of epistemology, Hume argues (at least in his mature work) against "excessive" and "incurable" forms of scepticism, but for a "moderate" and "mitigated" variety (E 12.3-4, 12.24-25, pp. 149-50, 161-2). Likewise in the moral sphere, the question of whether Hume should be regarded as a sceptic does not invite a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer, but rather calls for a nuanced response.

In Chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis, I consider the reasons lying behind Hume's own assessment of his moral theory as a refutation of moral scepticism. The kind of scepticism that Hume attempted to refute was, in fact, exactly that of which he had been accused; namely, undermining the foundations of morality by denying any real distinction between virtue and vice. At the outset of his mature work of moral philosophy, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals,* Hume strongly affirms the "reality of moral distinctions" (M 1.2, pp. 169-70); and throughout that work he defends the notion that there is a real distinction between virtue and vice from various sceptical arguments to the contrary. To some extent, I believe, this focus can be explained as an attempt to address criticisms levelled at the moral philosophy presented in Book 3 of his *Treatise of Human Nature* (on this point, see Chapter 3 below). Given that those criticisms focussed on the supposed dangerously sceptical implications of *Treatise* Book 3, it is hardly surprising that Hume's mature moral work is modified, both structurally and substantially (I will argue), so as to refute the arguments of the moral sceptic. I shall also defend Hume's claim (quoted above) that his refutation must be allowed sincere, because drawn from the capital principles of his system.

In Chapter 5, I will consider in what sense Hume may be said, nevertheless, to endorse certain elements of scepticism concerning morality. As all commentators must surely acknowledge, Hume was sceptical of any conception of a purely rational

apprehension of moral truth or fact. But he carried this scepticism further—as it were, from epistemology to metaphysics—in asserting that:

> …there is nothing, in itself, valuable or despicable, desirable or hateful, beautiful or deformed; but that these attributes arise from the particular constitution and fabric of human sentiment and affection. (Sc 8, p. 162)

To utilise contemporary philosophical terminology, this is an *anti-realist* view. That this kind of anti-realism would, in Hume's day, have been regarded as a sceptical doctrine is indicated by the fact that the above formulation appears in his essay entitled *The Sceptic*.[8]

Taken together, then, Chapters 3, 4, and 5 show that Hume's moral philosophy (in his mature work, at least) combines a concerted defence of the reality of moral distinctions with a denial that moral qualities are properties of objects in themselves (that is, independently of our internal sentiments). Or, put another way, he combines his defence of the foundations of morals from sceptical arguments, with his own scepticism about the objectivity of morals. This generates a serious *philosophical* problem for Hume's moral theory. Chapter 6 will then lay out and attempt to resolve this problem, which is essentially one of trying to reconcile Hume's commitments as detailed in earlier Chapters. A full appreciation of the difficulty of reconciling Hume's commitments must wait until after I have elucidated them in detail, i.e., until the start of Chapter 6. Nevertheless, I will give a brief sketch of the problem here.

[8] One of four essays whose subjects broadly correspond to four ancient sects of philosophy, along with *The Epicurean*, *The Stoic*, and *The Platonist*.

*§1.2. The Reconciliation Problem*

What I will refer to, for the sake of clarity, as the Reconciliation Problem is perhaps best introduced by quoting passages of Hume's where he elaborates the above-mentioned anti-realist thesis concerning moral (and aesthetic) qualities:

> In the operation of reasoning, the mind does nothing but run over its objects, as they are supposed to stand in reality, without adding any thing to them, or diminishing any thing from them. … To this operation of the mind, therefore, there seems to be always a real, though often an unknown standard, in the nature of things; nor is truth or falsehood variable by the various apprehensions of mankind.
>
> But the case is not the same with the qualities of *beautiful and deformed*, *desirable and odious*, as with truth and falsehood. In the former case, the mind is not content with merely surveying its objects, as they stand in themselves: It also feels a sentiment of delight or uneasiness, approbation or blame, consequent to that survey; and this sentiment determines it to affix the epithet *beautiful or deformed*, *desirable or odious*. (Sc 13-14, p. 164)

Hume is clear that moral and aesthetic qualities are not properties of objects as they 'stand in reality'—hence, the process by which we come to recognise these qualities is essentially *additive*. This is the same point, I take it, that Hume makes in a famous passage from his moral *Enquiry*:

> 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. (M App1.21, p. 294)

The problem can now be posed as follows:

*Reconciliation Problem*: How can Hume consistently proclaim the reality of moral distinctions, whilst also denying that moral qualities are a feature of reality?

By 'the reality of moral distinctions,' Hume cannot mean just that we really do make such distinctions, but must instead mean that the distinctions we make are somehow reflective of a *real ethical difference* between the agents whom we are distinguishing.[9] For even the most radical moral sceptic agrees that we do in fact draw moral distinctions, if only to argue that these distinctions are illusory—i.e., that they are based on inadequate or inappropriate foundations. Hume's view that in forming our moral judgements we are not registering our discovery of some aspect of the mind-independent world, but are instead 'raising a new creation'—constructing properties of objects which they do not possess 'as they really stand in nature'—makes it difficult to see how it is supposed to be that our moral distinctions possess the reality that he elsewhere accords them.

Hume's apparent moral anti-realism has caused many contemporary philosophers to categorise him as a metaethical sceptic, often following John Mackie's interpretation of him as an error-theorist.[10] If we attribute moral qualities to persons, actions, etc., which do not in reality possess them, then, Mackie argues, our moral judgements must be systematically erroneous; in short, on this view, anti-realism leads directly to error-theory. But surely Hume's insistence on the reality of moral distinctions is supposed, at a minimum, to rule out this sort of systematic error. Thus, if Mackie were correct that Hume is committed to an error-theory of morals, then Hume's moral philosophy must be deeply—indeed, irreparably—inconsistent. This is strong *prima facie* evidence that Mackie's interpretation is much too sceptical to be an accurate interpretation of Hume's theory of morals.

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[9] Indeed, he says as much: "The difference, which nature has placed between one man and another, is so wide" that no-one can, in practice, "absolutely…deny all distinction between them." (M 1.2, p. 170). It is important, however, that one can still deny the reality of moral distinctions in *speculation*: thus Hume states, "philosophers are apt to bewilder themselves in the subtilty of their speculations; and we have seen some go so far as to deny the reality of all moral distinctions." (SH 7, p. 567).

[10] For example, see Mackie (1980, Ch. 5, esp. pp. 73-4); Finnis (1983, Ch. 3); Fieser (1989); Wright (2009, pp. 251-2); Joyce (2010, pp. 49-53).

In contrast to the dominant sceptical tendency in Hume interpretation, there is another tradition which emphasises instead his naturalistic ambitions and inclinations, and argues that these nullify the sceptical strain, by rendering it idle or inconsequential. This perspective was given perhaps its most compelling, and certainly its most influential, expression in Norman Kemp Smith's classic study, *The Philosophy of David Hume* (1941). Kemp Smith held that Hume's chief philosophical influence had been the moral theory of Francis Hutcheson.[11] Hutcheson had emphasised the primacy of feeling or sentiment over rationality or the intellect in our moral, and other evaluative, judgements (a perspective we may call *sentimentalist naturalism*[12]). In Kemp Smith's view, Hume's major insight was that Hutcheson's sentimentalist naturalism "could be carried over into the theoretical domain".[13] In particular, this supposedly inspired Hume's doctrine that our "natural beliefs"—in external objects, causal connections, and other essential ingredients of our conception of the world—are rooted more in feeling than in reason or evidence. This, according to Kemp Smith's interpretation, puts such beliefs beyond the reach of our sceptical doubts.[14]

I will set aside the question of whether or not Kemp Smith is correct that Hume intentionally applied Hutcheson's approach to morals to the theory of cognition in general.[15] One could dispute this general thesis, whilst nevertheless broadly agreeing with Kemp Smith's assertion of Hutcheson's influence on Hume *if restricted to Hume's moral theory only*. This is, for instance, the position of David Fate Norton, who argues that Hume is a "sceptical metaphysician", but a "common-

[11] Kemp Smith (1941, pp. 12-20).

[12] Term coined by Peter Millican. For a helpful typology and discussion of Humean naturalisms, see Millican (2016, pp. 82-84).

[13] Kemp Smith (1941, p. 13).

[14] Kemp Smith (1941, p. 87).

[15] I agree with Peter Millican that Hume did not: see Millican (2016, esp. p. 84 n. 9).

sense moralist".[16] However, despite Norton's agreement with Kemp Smith that Hume's views on morals were inspired by Hutcheson, Norton conceives of the nature of that influence quite differently. Norton argues that Hutcheson had a cognitivist conception of the moral sense and a realist account of moral ontology, and that he influenced Hume precisely by persuading him of these doctrines. This enables Norton to argue for a *thoroughgoing* anti-sceptical interpretation of Hume's moral theory, according to which our "ideas of virtue and vice… are representative of an external or objective moral reality".[17] However, as I have suggested, and will argue in more detail in Chapter 5, Norton's interpretation is simply not consistent with Hume's scepticism regarding the objectivity of moral qualities.

What is needed is a more nuanced account of Hume's theory of morals, that neither views Hume as a radical sceptic, attempting to undermine the very foundations of morality, nor sees him as a staunch realist, defending the belief that there is a grounding for our moral distinctions that "exists in the nature of things" (M 1.5, p. 171). It should be clear from the above that there is a relation here to the dominant concern in Hume scholarship for a long time: the conflict between the sceptical and the naturalist aspects of Hume's philosophy, and the challenge of interpreting Hume's general philosophy in the light of this conflict without ascribing any crude inconsistency or incoherence to it. However, although the problem I identify in Hume's moral philosophy is related to the tension between Hume's sceptical and naturalist views, it is not merely a localised manifestation of that more general tension. Hume's commitment to an inductive science of human nature (his *scientific naturalism*) is well-established by the time he broaches questions of moral theory.[18] Any sceptical results that Hume establishes in his moral theory, far from

[16] Norton (1982).

[17] Norton (1982, p. 86).

[18] He is quite clear, for example, that he is assuming not only the propriety of the inductive method, but its unique applicability to the study of morality, at the outset of the moral *Enquiry*: "As this [the foundation of ethics] 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

being in tension with this scientific naturalism, are in fact derived from its application. In particular, Hume seeks to use the scientific or experimental method to establish his sentimentalism concerning morality.[19] It is precisely because he holds that it is sentiment which ultimately determines moral judgement that he rejects the notion that moral qualities are properties of objects as they stand in reality (this can be seen from the passages at the start of this section, but should become evident in Chapter 5). Thus, *contra* Norton, Hume's naturalistic placing of sentiment at the foundation of his theory of morals does not lead to a thoroughgoing anti-sceptical moral realism, but, on the contrary, is a major contributor to the raising of his sceptical doubts.

As this description of the Reconciliation Problem shows, I am concerned to defend, at a minimum, the general coherence of Hume's moral philosophy. In this respect, my objectives in this thesis are not *purely* interpretative. My aim is, in part, a philosophical one: that of gaining an understanding of Hume's unique contribution to problems which still persist, given that they concern universal features of human moral thought and action—though, of course, in the present they are approached with a very different set of philosophical tools, assumptions, and so on (indeed, one might even say, with a different 'conceptual framework'). This raises a host of methodological questions concerning how and why to study the history of philosophy. It is to these methodological issues that I now turn.

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instances. …It is full time [philosophers] should attempt a…reformation in all moral disquisitions; and reject every system of ethics, however subtile or ingenious, which is not founded on fact and observation." (M 1.10, pp. 174-5).

[19] Thus he says that once his experimental method has been used "to discover the true origin of morals, it will then easily appear how far either sentiment or reason enters into all [moral] determinations" (M 1.10, p. 173).

*§1.3. Methodological Remarks*

Hume has often been enlisted—or, perhaps at least as frequently, assailed—as a prototypical example of one or another school of contemporary metaethics: emotivism;[20] error-theory;[21] subjectivism;[22] expressivism;[23] projectivism;[24] naturalism;[25] and so on. Some scholars have doubted the usefulness of describing Hume's moral philosophy in terms of these contemporary categories. Kenneth Winkler, for example, sounds a note of scepticism, when he says:

> Commentators have long debated whether Hutcheson's account of the moral sense, or Hume's account of moral judgement, can be classified as "subjectivist," "emotivist," "non-cognitivist," or "anti-realist." I myself have come to think that their accounts cannot usefully be described in these twentieth century terms….[26]

Although I am, to a significant extent, sympathetic to such doubts, I do not agree with him fully, given the complete generality of his claim. Projecting contemporary philosophical notions back onto eighteenth-century philosophy is admittedly usually of limited utility, and is rarely done with enough caution and sensitivity to historical context. In particular, as Edward Craig has commented, the "tendency to treat the great, dead philosophers as if they were our contemporaries" has, in "the case of Hume, who stands in many respects genuinely close to us… proved almost irresistible", though it "can seriously distort" our understanding of his work.[27] However, *pace* Winkler, in some cases a cautious and restricted use of contemporary

[20] Ayer (1980, pp. 84-5).

[21] Mackie (1980, Ch. 5, esp. pp. 73-4).

[22] Flew (1963).

[23] Blackburn (1993).

[24] Kail (2007, Ch. 7).

[25] Sturgeon (2001).

[26] Winkler (1996, p. 3). Cf. Darwall (1999, p. 148).

[27] Craig (1987, p. 11).

notions can be helpful, and this appears to be the case with regard to the concepts of *realism* and *anti-realism*. One indication of this is that highly profitable Hume scholarship has been conducted in such terms. Most notably, there has been a discussion in the literature for more than thirty years on whether Hume was a realist or an anti-realist (or, perhaps, a 'quasi-realist'[28]) concerning causal power, and this has led to some extremely fruitful debates and insightful scholarship, clarifying not just Hume's views on causation, but his epistemology and metaphysics more generally.[29] Similarly, there has been some fine, historically sensitive work on Hume on our belief in the external world likewise framed using these notions.[30]

Another important point to note is that questions of what is, and is not, a constituent of reality, and of the nature of these constituents, were prevalent in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy. To take one key example, debates over the reality and nature of secondary qualities were very prominent in this period.[31] Given that Hume explicitly compared his theory of moral qualities to the secondary quality doctrine, it seems appropriate to ask what Hume thought of the ontological status of those qualities.[32] Moreover, as we will see, Hume has interesting, though seemingly contradictory, things to say about the reality of moral qualities, so it is incumbent upon us to understand exactly what Hume's meaning is in these passages, particularly if we are to rescue his moral philosophy from the charge of incoherence or contradiction. And most importantly in the context of this thesis, understanding Hume's views on the reality and nature of moral qualities is

[28] See Blackburn (1990).

[29] For a collection of many of the best articles to come out of this discussion, see Read and Richman (2007).

[30] See, e.g., Yolton (2000, Chs 6 and 7), and Wright (1983, Ch. 2).

[31] See Nolan (2011), especially the introduction, which suggests the early modern formulation of the primary/secondary quality distinction was the "definitive", "classical formulation" (p. 2).

[32] For insightful discussions of this comparison, though adopting different views of its significance, see Blackburn (1993) and Kail (2007, Ch. 7).

important for defending him against the accusations of his contemporaries that his doctrines lead us to a threatening moral scepticism.[33]

There are two objections that might be raised at this point, which stem, as it were, from opposite directions. The first objection is that I have not conceded enough to Winkler's scepticism. On this head, perhaps my approach will be objected to by scholars who cleave to certain methodological principles of interpretation in the history of philosophy (or, perhaps, the history of ideas more generally), according to which an historical philosophical text can only be understood in its own terms, making any attempt to draw on contemporary philosophical notions when interpreting an eighteenth-century moral philosophy doomed from the outset. The second objection is that I have conceded too much to Winkler's scepticism. If utilising contemporary philosophical notions in understanding Hume is such a fraught business, perhaps there is little that we, now, can learn from Hume to benefit us in our own philosophical inquiries. In replying to the first objection, whilst I do not have an allegiance to any particular historiographical theory, it may nevertheless be appropriate to comment briefly on my outlook concerning these matters. My approach will largely be described, without much justification, as I do not have space to defend what I will say at length. However, I believe it is important to state explicitly what views I do have on historical methodology, so that my work can be read and evaluated in that light. And in response to the second objection, once my approach has been described below, it should be clear that, if something like such an approach is appropriate, and as long as it is applied with care, sensitivity, and historical understanding, there is much we can still learn from the great dead philosophers, including Hume.

[33] Connectedly, the question of Hume's views concerning moral scepticism *cannot* be described as an anachronistic attempt to analyse an eighteenth-century theory in contemporary terms, as the issue of such scepticism was a matter of first importance in Hume's period. Indeed, it was one of the core notions used to define and locate the *kind* of moral theory a philosopher held, including its conceptual proximity to the theories of various other moralists.

The most salutary aspect of studying the history of philosophy, to my mind, lies in the power of its *alienness* to unsettle the assumptions upon which contemporary philosophical inquiry and debate proceeds. In this, I agree with Bernard Williams, who adapted a quote of Nietzsche's to the history of philosophy:

> I cannot imagine what [its] meaning would be in our age, if it is not to be untimely—that is, to act against the age, and by so doing to have an effect on the age, and, let us hope, to the benefit of a future age.[34]

The suggestion, then, is not that the history of philosophy is important because past philosophers were inquiring into matters in a way that is recognisably ours, but rather quite the contrary: it is important because they were inquiring into matters in a way that is in essential respects *not* ours, and hence have the power to induce us to question the assumptions we make, which they did not share. This does not mean that we must, or even can, totally abstract from or abandon contemporary "philosophical materials" when considering historical texts, but that, as Williams points out:

> [W]e must … use the philosophical materials that we now have to hand, together with historical understanding, in order to find in, or make from, the philosophy of the past a philosophical structure that will be strange enough to help us to question our present situation and the received picture of the tradition, including those materials themselves.[35]

Thus, when I make use of contemporary philosophical materials, my aim is not to shoehorn Hume's distinctively eighteenth-century moral philosophy into a modern structure. Rather, it is to illuminate a way in which the framework of thought and discussion in eighteenth-century moral philosophy enables us to question and, hopefully, revise our own framework. As I have already indicated, I will not in the

[34] Cited in Williams (2006, p. 259).

[35] Williams (2006, p. 264).

main be commenting on what we, today, can learn from Hume, as that would distract from my overarching project of explaining and finding a solution to the Reconciliation Problem (see §1.2). However, there certainly are many lessons to be drawn for contemporary moral philosophy, particularly concerning those respects in which Hume's moral philosophy "acts against the age"—that is, our age. I hope that some of these lessons will become clear in the course of this thesis, even if they are not always explicitly stated.

# 2

# Moral Scepticism in Early-Modern Britain

*§2.1. Introduction*

In Chapter 1, I stated that in order to understand the extent to which Hume either accepted or rejected a sceptical view of morality, one must first answer the question: "What is meant by a sceptic?" (E 12.2, p. 149). I further argued that this is not a totally determinate or univocal concept, and therefore requires careful treatment. The significance of calling a view 'sceptical' is that it identifies said view as fitting into a certain tradition, extending back to the ancient sceptics, though obviously changing in content throughout the centuries. Evidently, I do not have the space in this thesis to examine the history of scepticism, or even of specifically moral scepticism, all the way from antiquity up to Hume. But I do wish to consider the much narrower context of debate regarding moral scepticism in British philosophy in the roughly hundred years prior to Hume's interventions.

Unfortunately, as far as I can discover, there is no work that concentrates on the British debate over moral scepticism in the seventeenth and/or eighteenth centuries, and this chapter can hardly supply the place of an in-depth work on the subject. What follows, therefore, is at best a sketch of some aspects of that debate, focussing on what I consider are important features for understanding Hume's conception of sceptical theories of morality, but with no attempt to be comprehensive, and setting aside many interesting questions that arise. Indeed, as indicated, I have limited myself to British figures for the fairly artificial reason that otherwise even this sketch would become too large a project to encompass in a chapter.

I have chosen this span of time as it begins with the crucial intervention of Thomas Hobbes, who undoubtedly did much to rekindle concerns about a sceptical threat to the foundations of morality. Hobbes's writings generated reactions and responses that were to shape the terrain of philosophical debate about morality for the next century and more. After looking at Hobbes, I will then consider the responses of two philosophers commonly identified as moral rationalists, *viz.*, the Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth, and the Newtonian Samuel Clarke. In choosing these two as representatives of the (broadly speaking) rationalist response to Hobbes, I am simply following Hume: "Father MALEBRANCHE, as far as I can learn, was the first that started this abstract theory of morals, which was afterwards adopted by CUDWORTH, CLARKE, and others" (M 3.34, p. 197 n. 12; Malebranche escapes examination by, *inter alia*, not being British[36]). The rationalist response to Hobbes is an important moment in the development of anti-sceptical theories of morals in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—especially given Hume's intellectual concerns—and these two figures seem to me to represent interestingly different examples of rationalist thought about morality (and, more particularly, moral scepticism).

I then go on to consider, in order, the views of John Locke, Lord Shaftesbury, Bernard Mandeville, Francis Hutcheson, and Joseph Butler. These five, as Hume scholars will recognise, are mentioned in the Introduction of the *Treatise* as "some late philosophers in *England*, who have begun to put the science of man on a new footing, and have engaged the attention, and excited the curiosity of the public." Hume further states that these philosophers have instigated "the application of

[36] Recent scholarship has stressed Hume's indebtedness to Malebranche in a number of areas, such as his theories of the passions, causation, and the self. See, e.g., Jones (1982); Wright (1983); James (2005); and Kail (2005), (2007), and (2008). However, no one, as far as I am aware, has challenged the idea that Hume and Malebranche are fundamentally opposed when it comes to moral theory. Indeed, Kail states that, "Malebranche's ethics … is based on a highly abstract religious philosophy", which Hume held to be not only theoretically unsound, but "inimical to human flourishing" (2005, pp. 133, 135). See also Kail (2007, pp. 199-203) on Hume's opposition to Malebranche's moral rationalism.

experimental philosophy to moral subjects" (T Intro.7, pp. xvi-xvii). Whilst Hume here means 'moral' in a broad sense—i.e., covering all phenomena which are characteristic of human beings as opposed to other parts of the natural world—it could easily be construed, in this specific context, in the narrower sense, where it refers to distinctively *ethical* subject-matter. Locke, Shaftesbury, Mandeville, Hutcheson, and Butler overlap in their concerns insofar as they are all interested in the foundations of moral thought and action, and it is hard to believe that Hume did not consider this connection as he devised his list of the late philosophers.[37] Indeed, the five philosophers, as I will show, were all engaged in a debate on morality infused by sceptical ideas and patterns of argument, whether they were amplifying these trends, on the one hand, or seeking to extirpate them, on the other. However, I will start by examining a thinker who was absent from Hume's list of late philosophers in England, namely, the figure of Thomas Hobbes.[38]

### *§2.2. Thomas Hobbes*

In important respects, Hobbes was the *bête noire* of the seventeenth-century in Britain. His works, particularly *De Cive* and *Leviathan*, were vociferously attacked for their moral, political, and theological doctrines. Especially after the publication of the latter, Hobbes came to be viewed as sceptical about the existence of natural justice and morality, and many thinkers crafted their philosophies, in part, as a

[37] I am grateful to Paul Sagar for pointing out the significance of this fact to me.

[38] Paul Russell (2007, pp. 61ff.) argues that Hobbes is made conspicuous by his absence on this list, though as James A. Harris (2009, p. 40) has pointed out, Hobbes may not be appropriately described as following the experimental method highlighted by Hume, given the former's "a priori commitment to materialism and to mechanistic physics, and not … the Baconian inductivism that Newton had so much success with". In general, Russell's (2007, esp. Ch. 6) claim that Hobbes was *the* key influence on, and model for, Hume's philosophical system is subjected to sympathetic criticism by Harris (2009). See also Sagar (2014, pp. 12-15 and *passim*) on how the five authors relate to Hobbes in another way, *viz.*, engagement with the debate on sociability the parameters of which were set by Hobbes.

response to his system.[39] The view of Hobbes as a dangerous sceptic, cemented in the seventeenth-century, then persisted into the eighteenth. Hence, in order to understand the intellectual background to eighteenth-century discussions of moral scepticism in Britain, one must have some grasp of Hobbes's moral theory, and how it was interpreted and criticised by subsequent thinkers.

Problems, however, immediately arise. The interpretation of Hobbes's theory of morals is highly contentious. In particular, his relation to the tradition of natural jurisprudence is far from straightforward. Rather than attempt to settle such major interpretative quandaries, which would take a work apart, I will merely draw attention to some features of Hobbes's moral philosophy which are useful for my present design of establishing the intellectual background to discussions of moral scepticism in the eighteenth-century.

Hobbes conceived of moral philosophy as the "Science of what is *Good*, and *Evill*"; indeed, he claimed that this is "the true and onely Moral Philosophy."[40] The science of morality was, for Hobbes, equivalent to "the true Doctrine of the Lawes of Nature".[41] In order to understand how and why Hobbes identifies his science of morality with the true doctrine of the laws of nature, it is necessary to look at what he pinpoints as a central problem for moral philosophy, *viz.*, the dependence of value terms, such as 'good' and 'evil,' on the passions.[42]

Chapter 6 of *Leviathan* is entitled, 'Of the Interiour Beginnings of Voluntary Motions; commonly called the Passions. And the Speeches by which they are expressed.' In this chapter, Hobbes argues that,

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[39] See Parkin's (2007) thorough study of the reception of Hobbes in seventeenth-century England.

[40] Hobbes (1651/1991, p. 110).

[41] Hobbes (1651/1991, p. 111).

[42] In what follows, I focus on Hobbes's *Leviathan*. It should be noted that, although there are of course substantive differences between his major works, the same problematic examined here is also treated in *The Elements of Law* and *De Cive*. However, *Leviathan* contains Hobbes's most developed treatment of this issue; see Skinner (2002, pp. 87-141, esp. pp. 120ff.).

> because the constitution of a mans Body, is in continuall mutation; it is impossible that all the same things should alwayes cause in him the same Appetites, and Aversions: much lesse can all men consent, in the Desire of almost any one and the same Object.[43]

This problem becomes particularly acute on the traditional interpretation of Hobbes as a psychological egoist: for if all one's appetites and aversions are ultimately for one's own interest or advantage, they are much less likely to converge on the same ends than if we have (at least some) shared desires for a common good. Bernard Gert has challenged this traditional reading of Hobbes's psychology, arguing that in his mature work, the *Leviathan*, Hobbes in fact moved away from his earlier, more egoistic picture of human nature.[44] In my view, however, Gert's reinterpretations of passages in *Leviathan* are implausible. For instance, Gert argues that Hobbes's conceptions of benevolence and pity become less egoistic, citing the definitions that Hobbes gives: benevolence is "*Desire* of good to another"; and pity (or compassion) is "*Griefe,* for the calamity of another, [which] ariseth from the imagination that the like calamity may befall himself".[45] But Hobbes's definitions by themselves are insufficient to establish whether or not he was a psychological egoist concerning these passions. For that, we have to look at the explanation of *why* the good of others is desired, or their calamity grieved. Thus, in a passage on the fourth law of nature, Hobbes argues that reciprocity to those who benefit you is important, for:

> [N]o man giveth, but with intention of Good to himselfe … of all Voluntary Acts, the Object is to every man his own Good; of which if men see they shall be frustrated, *there will be no beginning of benevolence*….[46]

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[43] Hobbes (1651/1991, p. 39).

[44] See Gert (1967) and (1996, pp. 165-168).

[45] Hobbes (1651/1991, pp. 41, 43).

[46] Hobbes (1651/1991, p. 105; my italics).

Similarly, when a person acts compassionately (that is, out of pity), Hobbes says, he does so "to deliver his mind from the pain" involved.[47] Thus, it seems that, for Hobbes, when one desires the good of another, or that they not suffer calamities, one does not desire it for its own sake, but in order to promote the good of oneself.

Nevertheless, the traditional interpretation of Hobbes as a psychological egoist need not be established here; what matters is that he (quite reasonably) came to be viewed as such by subsequent generations of philosophers, and that it was a crucial part of the case for construing Hobbes as a sceptical Epicurean regarding human moral psychology and, consequently, the foundations of morality.[48]

Whatever the basis of our differing and variable passions, Hobbes then goes on to point out that this phenomenon has an important consequence for the applicability of evaluative terminology:

> But whatsoever is the object of any mans Appetite or Desire; that is it, which he for his part calleth *Good*: And the object of his Hate, and Aversion, *Evill*; And of his Contempt, *Vile* and *Inconsiderable*. For these words of Good, Evill, and Contemptible, are ever used with relation to the person that useth them: There being nothing simply and absolutely so; nor any common Rule of Good and Evill, to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves; but from the Person of the man (where there is no Common-wealth;) or, (in a Common-wealth,) from the Person that representeth it; or from an Arbitrator or Judge, whom men disagreeing shall by consent set up, and make his sentence the Rule thereof.[49]

Hobbes argues from the premiss that there is no standard, no "common rule," inherent in "the nature of the objects themselves" by which we may judge things to

[47] Hobbes (1651/1991, p. 94). Cf. John Aubrey's anecdote about Hobbes giving money to an elderly man. According to Aubrey, when asked why he did so, Hobbes answered: "Because … I was in pain to consider the miserable condition of the old man; and now my alms, giving him some relief, doth also ease me." Cited by Gaskin (1998, p. xxix n. 15).

[48] On the fashioning of the Hobbes's identification as a sceptical Epicurean by his opponents, see Parkin (2007, pp. 133-135).

[49] Hobbes (1651/1991, p. 39).

be good or evil, to the conclusion that such evaluative terms are used "with relation to the person than useth them". (Or, when in civil society, in relation to the determinations of a representative, or arbitrator, or other judge who has been set up by consent—but I will set such cases aside for the moment.) Specifically, evaluative terms are used in relation to the passions, that is, the appetites and aversions, of the person who uses them. But if, as Hobbes claims, our passions are inherently variable, this entails that our use of evaluative terms will be subject to a like variability. Hobbes has indeed already foreshadowed this conclusion in Chapter 4, when he says:

> The names of such things as affect us, that is, which please, and displease us, because all men be not alike affected with the same thing, nor the same man at all times, are in the common discourses of men, of *inconstant* signification. …[T]hough the nature of that we conceive, be the same; yet the diversity of our reception of it … gives every thing a tincture of our different passions. …[S]uch as are the names of Vertues and Vices…. And therefore such names can never be true grounds of any ratiocination.[50]

This is, evidently, a serious problem for a philosopher who hopes to construct a science of morality, as Hobbes does. How is such a science even possible when the "tincture of our different passions" causes such variability in our usage of moral terms that they can never constitute "true grounds of any ratiocination"?

This problem, Hobbes appears to claim, can only be dealt with by the doctrine of natural law. Hobbes again brings up the problem of the diversity of usage of moral terms in Chapter 15 of *Leviathan*, where he says:

> *Good*, and *Evill*, are names that signifie our Appetites, and Aversions; which in different tempers, customes, and doctrines of men, are different: And divers men, differ not onely in their Judgement, on the senses of what is pleasant, and unpleasant… but also of what is conformable, or disagreeable to Reason, in the actions of common life. Nay, the same man, in divers time, differs from himselfe; and one time praiseth, that is, calleth Good, what

[50] Hobbes (1651/1991, p. 31).

> another time he dispraiseth, and calleth Evil: From whence arise Disputes, Controversies, and at last War. And therefore so long a man is in the condition of meer Nature … as private Appetite is the measure of Good, and Evill: And consequently all men agree on this, that Peace is Good, and therefore also the way, or means of Peace, which … are *Justice*, *Gratitude*, *Modesty*, *Equity*, *Mercy*, & the rest of the Laws of Nature, are good; that is to say, *Morall Vertues*; and their contrarie *Vices*, Evill.[51]

The point of agreement, then, is supposedly that peace is good, and thus the science of morality is the study of the "means of peace", which Hobbes identifies with the laws of nature. The laws of nature are the central subject-matter of Hobbes's science of morality, as they are seemingly the only means of escaping the inherent variability of evaluative terms, which lead us to "Disputes, Controversies, and at last War". In order to grasp Hobbes's moral philosophy, therefore, it is important to understand his conception of the laws of nature, and how they are supposed to resolve the sceptical worry about fundamental disagreement in the application of moral appellations.

However, the scope and status of Hobbes's laws of nature are far from straightforward, and there is significant dispute concerning this matter in the literature. One issue concerns whether the laws of nature apply only inside organised civil society, or whether they are also meant to apply in the state of nature. This is the question of the *scope* of natural law. Then there is also a question of their *status*; in particular, what is the force of the laws of nature, or in virtue of what are they supposed to bind agents?

There are certainly passages in Hobbes that seem to evince a pronounced scepticism about traditional notions concerning the scope and status of natural law. For instance, in Chapter 13 of *Leviathan*, where he famously argues that the "natural Condition of Mankind" is a condition of war, he states that:

[51] Hobbes (1651/1991, p. 110-111).

> To this warre of every man against every man this also is consequent; that nothing can be Unjust. The notions of Right and Wrong, Justice and Injustice, have there no place. Where there is no common Power, there is no Law; where no Law, no Injustice. Force, and Fraud, are in warre the two cardinal vertues. Justice, and Injustice are none of the Faculties neither of the Body, nor Mind.[52]

Despite such statements, it has been argued that Hobbes's moral philosophy is not compatible "with anything that deserves to be called moral scepticism or relativism."[53] And, indeed, a straightforwardly sceptical interpretation of this passage does miss out some of the subtleties of Hobbes's position. As Kinch Hoekstra points out, although in the state of nature there is no common power, and thus no binding *positive* laws—hence no right or wrong, justice or injustice, in the sense of either conformity to, or disobedience of, such laws—the laws of *nature* do still bind.[54] In fact, Hobbes clearly states that, "The Lawes of Nature are Immutable and Eternall".[55] Hoekstra also, however, notes Hobbes's qualification that the laws of nature are universally binding only in a certain, deflated sense:

> The Lawes of Nature oblige *in foro interno*; that is to say, they bind to a desire they should take place: but *in foro externo*, that is, to the putting them in act, not alwayes.[56]

There has been a good deal of attention to this particular point, which on one level is quite simple: Hobbes is saying that in the state of nature, being a state of war, one cannot be assured that others will abide by general precepts (the maintenance of contracts, keeping of promises, etc.); hence, one is only bound to "desire" or

[52] Hobbes (1651/1991, p. 90).

[53] Sorell (2007, p. 128).

[54] Hoekstra (2003).

[55] Hobbes (1651/1991, p. 110).

[56] Hobbes (1651/1991, p. 110); Hoekstra (2003, p. 112). See also Hoekstra (2007, pp. 120-122).

"endeavour" to act in accordance with the laws of nature.[57] In civil society, by contrast, where sovereign rule allows one reliably to depend on the conformity of others to these precepts, the obligation to act in accordance with the laws of nature extends to the act itself. However, this simple level of interpretation is complicated by the complex set of connections in Hobbes between desire, intention, action, and obligation—a matter that, fortunately, I do not need to address here.[58]

Turning to the status of the laws of nature, Hobbes says that they are "but Conclusions, or Theoremes concerning what conduceth to the conservation and defence" of a person.[59] In this sense, they are only "improperly" called "laws". To be sure, he qualifies this again by saying that "if we consider the same Theoremes, as delivered in the word of God, that by right commandeth all things; then they are properly called Lawes";[60] though it is significant that even this already conditional statement is dropped from the Latin edition of *Leviathan*.[61]

Again, I do not intend to try to settle the scholarly controversy concerning whether, and if so in what respects, Hobbes was influenced by scepticism in general, or even specifically moral scepticism, in this brief review of certain aspects of his ethical system. The most famous defence of the claim that Hobbes was influenced by and reacting to sceptical considerations is contained in the work of Richard Tuck.[62] However, Tuck's conclusions have spawned an appreciable literature, and

[57] Hobbes (1651/1991, p. 110).

[58] In my view, the distinction between *in foro interno* and *in foro externo* obligation is an upshot of Hobbesian "reckoning" (calculative reasoning) about how best to satisfy the natural necessity of self-preservation in the state of nature versus how best to do so in civil society; see Barnouw (2008) for a similar interpretation. See also Deigh (1996); Murphy (2000); and Hoekstra (2003), for an interesting debate on this subject.

[59] Hobbes (1651/1991, p. 111).

[60] Hobbes (1651/1991, p. 111).

[61] As noted by Darwall (1995, p. 54 n. 4).

[62] See, for instance, Tuck (1983), (1988), and (1993, Ch. 7).

several commentators now forcefully reject his interpretation.[63] In my view, these commentators are likely correct in thinking that engagement with the sort of epistemological scepticism that so exercised Descartes, Mersenne, and others, was not the central influence on Hobbes's thought, either in his natural or his moral philosophy, that Tuck takes it to be. The paucity of explicit references to such scepticism in Hobbes's works,[64] and the indication that Hobbes developed the basis of his mechanical-materialist system prior to his interaction with Descartes and his circle,[65] suggest that the Cartesian concern with radical epistemological scepticism was not the central influence that Tuck has suggested in the formation of Hobbes's philosophical thought.

Nevertheless, Quentin Skinner, who agrees with Tuck's critics on the above points,[66] has drawn attention to Hobbes's engagement with the humanist tradition of *ars rhetorica*, which was occupied with the sceptical potential of the diversity of contrasting moral opinions, partly through a discussion of *paradiastole*: that is, the rhetorical re-description of actions so as to yield contrary moral judgements (e.g., such-and-such an action described as brave by one may be re-described as foolhardy by another).[67] Skinner is not convinced that Hobbes has the resources to overcome the problem of *paradiastole*, or disagreement in the application of moral concepts generally, through appeal to the laws of nature as discovered through reason. For there remains the question of whether an action does indeed abide by, or contravene, the laws of nature, and in this, Hobbes is clear that the traditional view that "right reason" can settle the matter is woefully inadequate. As he puts it in *Leviathan*:

[63] See, for example, Zagorin (1993) and (2000); Sommerville (1992, pp. 168-170); and Skinner (1996, pp. 8-9).

[64] See Popkin (1992, pp. 12ff.).

[65] Zagorin (1993).

[66] Skinner (1996, pp. 8-9).

[67] Skinner (2002).

> …when men that think themselves wiser than all others, clamor and demand right Reason for judge; yet seek no more, but that things should be determined, by no other mens reason but their own, it is as intolerable in the society of men, as it is in play after trump is turned, to use for trump on every occasion, that suite whereof they have most in their hand. For they do nothing els, that will have every of their passions, as it comes to bear sway in them, to be taken for right Reason, and that in their own controversies: bewraying their want of right Reason, by the claym they lay to it.[68]

Those who "demand right Reason for judge" would have "every of their passions … to be taken for right Reason": which, of course, would leave the initial controversy exactly where it started—that is, unresolved, and potentially erupting into violence. Hobbes's conclusion is that:

> …when there is a controversy in an account, the parties must by their own accord, set up for right Reason, the Reason of some Arbitrator, or Judge, to whose sentence they will both stand, or their controversie must either come to blowes, or be undecided, for want of a right Reason constituted by Nature….[69]

As Skinner adds, in Hobbes's view, the "Arbitrator must be a unitary moral person whose judgements must be accepted in advance"; which is to say, "the Arbitrator must be the sovereign."[70] Thus, intriguingly, although "Reason suggesteth convenient Articles of Peace",[71] i.e. the laws of nature, we *cannot* rely on right reason to settle whether an action is either in accordance with, or a violation of, those laws. We must accept the reason of the sovereign as deciding the matter, instead of expecting "right Reason constituted by Nature" to settle the dispute.

It is also worth noting that Gianni Paganini has recently extended and deepened Skinner's argument regarding the humanist sources of sceptical ideas in

[68] Hobbes (1651/1991, p. 33).

[69] Hobbes (1651/1991, pp. 32-33).

[70] Skinner (2002, p. 140).

[71] Hobbes (1651/1991, pp. 90).

Hobbes, in particular, by examining the influence of French sceptical thinkers such as Montaigne, Charron, and La Mothe Le Vayer on the anthropological and psychological underpinnings of Hobbes's theories of morals and politics.[72] Suffice it to say that, as Paganini describes, these modern sceptics did not argue for an unreconstructed Pyrrhonian scepticism regarding morality—that is, the complete suspension of judgement (*epoché*) on ethical matters, based on a total lack of uniformity in human customs or practices.[73] Rather, they did identify "some constants in human behaviour", but argued that these constants—centrally, self-preservation and pride—were such that they undermined any dogmatic approach to ethical or political philosophy (e.g., Stoic natural law theory).[74] This encourages the thought that Hobbes's apparent lack of concern with more radical (i.e., classical Pyrrhonian or Cartesian) forms of epistemological scepticism is in no way to be taken as indicative of a wholesale lack of interest in sceptical ideas and arguments in any shape or form.

To summarise, Tuck's interpretation of Hobbes as centrally concerned with the upshot of radical epistemological scepticism for the foundations of various kinds of knowledge has been criticised, and does seem to be implausible. However, Hobbes's denial of the existence of a common rule, or standard, of virtue and vice—"taken from the nature of the objects themselves"—together with his view that our use of moral terms is determined by our variable appetites and aversions, based on an inherently egoistic set of passions, does raise a problem of how serious disputes over the moral categorisation of actions can be resolved. The laws of nature initially seem to offer some hope for resolving such disputes, as they are based on the universally held and recognised desire for peace. But this raises the equally

[72] Paganini (2015).

[73] This is, I should stress, not to say that Montaigne, Charron, and so on, were not strongly influenced by Pyrrhonian considerations. Only that they differed from the ancient Pyrrhonian sceptics in clear and significant ways.

[74] Paganini (2015, p. 57).

problematic question of how to determine whether an action is in accordance with the laws of nature or not. According to Hobbes, appealing to "right reason" is ineffectual, as passionate dispute is just as liable to erupt over what answer the application of right reason would yield, there being nothing "in nature" that settles the matter. Therefore, in place of right reason, disputants must agree to accept the judgement of an arbitrator, who will, in the last analysis, be the sovereign.

Whilst Hobbes may, from his own perspective, have regarded this as the best, or even the only, solution to the problem of disputes over the moral categorisation of actions, it is evident why many of his contemporaries would have regarded his as a deeply sceptical conception. I will turn now to some of Hobbes's critics, with a focus on what they thought fundamentally wrong or dangerous about his general theory of morals, and their alternative strategies for dealing with these foundational issues.

### §2.3. *Ralph Cudworth*

Ralph Cudworth is recognised as the greatest philosopher in the circle known under the sobriquet of the "Cambridge Platonists".[75] In his lifetime, he published one major philosophical work, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678); another, entitled *A Treatise on Eternal and Immutable Morality* (1731), was published posthumously (Cudworth died in 1688). The latter work was, in many ways, a direct response to (what Cudworth perceived as) Hobbes's sceptical challenge to the foundations of morality. He was also one of the most perceptive of Hobbes's contemporary critics.[76] Thus, examining Cudworth's characterisation of his sceptical target ought to shed some light on the perception of moral scepticism in seventeenth-century British philosophy.

[75] Goldie (2014).

[76] See Parkin (2007, p. 334).

Sarah Hutton has highlighted the centrality of refuting Hobbes to Cudworth's *Treatise on Eternal and Immutable Morality* (hereafter just the '*Treatise on Morality*'):[77]

> Cudworth, who had sharpened his arguments on the flintstone of Hobbes in the 1670s, re-emerged into debates that could be traced back to the challenge of Hobbist relativism. He emerged alongside Clarke, Balguy and Price, that is, as a posthumous participant in the debates on the foundations of morality whose terms he had helped to shape.[78]
>
> Cudworth's arguments for the natural basis of morality are directed against the materialism and ethical relativism of Hobbes.[79]

Cudworth's main target in his *Treatise on Morality* is those

> pretended philosophers in all ages who have asserted nothing to be good and evil, just and unjust, naturally and immutably … but that all these things were positive, arbitrary, and factitious only….[80]

After listing several ancient thinkers whom he claims held such a view, Cudworth pins the doctrine on but one contemporary philosopher: Thomas Hobbes.[81] It is not that Cudworth focusses exclusively on Hobbes as his sole modern target—also highlighted for criticism are "divers modern theologers";[82] chiefly, Calvinist

[77] I am concentrating exclusively on Cudworth's *Treatise on Eternal and Immutable Morality*, as scholars have noted that Cudworth's views seem to vary somewhat across his writings, and I judged it best to focus on his most relevant work for my purposes. On this variation, see Gill (2004), building on the observations of Passmore (1951, Ch. 5).

[78] Hutton (1996*a*, p. xv).

[79] Hutton (1996*a*, p. xvi).

[80] Cudworth (1731/1996, p. 9).

[81] Cudworth (1731/1996, p. 13).

[82] Cudworth (1731/1996, p. 14).

theologians holding a voluntarist conception of morality.[83] However, Cudworth is particularly exercised by the brand of (as he sees it) materialism and relativism advocated by Hobbes.

Hutton states that Protagoras (against whom a great deal of Cudworth's fire is nominally directed) is treated in the *Treatise on Morality* as "a kind of stalking horse for Thomas Hobbes."[84] Importantly, the Protagorean philosophy is explicitly branded as a form of scepticism.[85] Furthermore, amongst the ancient philosophers (other than Protagoras) to whom Cudworth ascribes the view of morality that he is attacking are Pyrrho, "the father of the Sceptics," and Carneades the Academic Sceptic, as well as, notably, Epicurus.[86] Thus, Cudworth conceived of Hobbes as a dangerous moral sceptic, indeed reviving an ancient form of moral scepticism, and a major intention of Cudworth's was to expose such views as both internally incoherent, and inconsistent with the atomical philosophy on which they supposedly rested. Cudworth's arguments against the Hobbesian sceptic are based on his general philosophical system, incorporating metaphysical, epistemological, and psychological elements. I will examine each of these elements in turn.

Cudworth's core metaphysical claim, from which most of the rest follows, is that: "Everything must by its own nature be what it is, and nothing else."[87] This is not, however, the vacuous tautology that it might at first appear to be. Rather, it is a substantive metaphysical thesis to the effect that everything has a nature, or essence, and that this nature cannot be determined by the will of any intelligent being, including even God. This thesis is intended to apply quite generally to all qualities, including sensible ones such as colour: "Neither can Omnipotence itself ... by mere

[83] According to which moral distinctions are constituted by divine will, and enforced by sanctions of reward and punishment.

[84] Hutton (1996*a*, p. xviii).

[85] Cudworth (1731/1996, p. 45).

[86] Cudworth (1731/1996, pp. 11-12).

[87] Cudworth (1731/1996, p. 3).

will make a thing white or black without whiteness or blackness; that is, without such certain natures".[88] It strikes me that Cudworth makes a question-begging assumption here—namely, that all things must *have* natures, or essences, for "a being without a nature [is] a contradiction, and therefore a non-entity."[89] But the voluntarist may simply reject this assumption. For instance, whiteness and blackness (they might say) are not essential natures, but that does not consign them to being non-entities: that only follows if one accepts Cudworth's essentialist premiss, that only entities which possess an essential nature can be real entities, but he gives no argument for that claim; it is simply assumed. Cudworth is on stronger ground when he insists on anti-voluntarism concerning *necessary* truths: against Descartes, he argues that if a necessary truth is dependent on the will of God, then it is not, in fact, necessary; for to make supposedly necessary truths thus dependent "is to make them in their own nature mutable."[90]

After developing this metaphysical line of argument, Cudworth considers what could have led certain philosophers to deny the "absolute essences and truths of all things," given that this position is, in his view, "so wild a paradox".[91] He holds that Protagoras, the "chief" denier, grounded his denial of essential and immutable truths in a combination of two things: firstly, the Heraclitean doctrine of the flux; and, secondly, the atomical philosophy (which Cudworth traces even further back than the ancient philosopher Democritus, to the Phoenicians).[92] Cudworth characterises the "true meaning" of the Heraclitean doctrine of the flux as being that there is "no other being in the world but individual matter, and all knowledge proceeded from the impresses of that matter," that is, sense perception.[93] On this

[88] Cudworth (1731/1996, p. 16).

[89] Cudworth (1731/1996, p. 17).

[90] Cudworth (1731/1996, p. 24).

[91] Cudworth (1731/1996, p. 32).

[92] Cudworth (1731/1996, p. 4, pp. 32-34).

[93] Cudworth (1731/1996, p. 33).

interpretation, the world as flux is the world as the constant motion of matter, which in itself forms no stable basis of identity over time, and therefore precludes any kind of knowledge but what we receive from the impact of this shifting flow of matter on the senses (which, ultimately, he argues is not really knowledge at all). He thus approvingly quotes Plato in the *Theaetetus* as saying that, "These two assertions come all to one, that all things flow like a stream, and that knowledge and sense are one and the self same thing."[94] To this, Cudworth asserts, Protagoras adds the atomistic thesis that:

> [A]ll those sensible qualities … of heat and cold, light and colours, sounds, odours, and sapors, formally considered are not things really and absolutely existing without us, but only passions, sensations, and phantasms in us, occasioned by certain local motions made upon the organs of sense from the objects without us, and so indeed, but relative and fantastical things.[95]

From the combination of the Heraclitean epistemological thesis that all knowledge is sense perception, and the atomistic thesis that sensible qualities are not real, mind-independent existences, but "relative and fantastical", Protagoras then derives (according to Cudworth) the conclusion that there are no essential natures, but all things are merely "relative, fantastical, and imaginary."[96]

Cudworth argues against the Protagorean philosophy that it is internally inconsistent, as it is "asserted for an absolute truth by him [Protagoras], that nothing is absolutely true."[97] But more importantly, Cudworth objects that the Protagorean view is inconsistent with the atomistic theory on which, supposedly, it in part rests: for according to atomism, the size, shape, local motion, and so on, of the atomic

[94] Cudworth (1731/1996, p. 33).

[95] Cudworth (1731/1996, p. 34).

[96] Cudworth (1731/1996, p. 34).

[97] Cudworth (1731/1996, p. 44). Cudworth here again draws upon Plato's *Theaetetus*. For a lucid exposition and defense of Plato's charge of internal inconsistency against Protagorean relativism, see Burnyeat (1976).

parts "are in corporeal things themselves", and hence not "fantastical and relative". Given that our sense-perception, on Protagoras's own showing, cannot in itself inform us of any real, mind-independent existences, the discovery of such properties by the atomistic theory must be due to "a higher and superior intellectual faculty in us that judges of our senses, which discovers what is fallacious and fantastical in them, and pronounces what absolutely is and is not."[98]

This conclusion motivates Cudworth's development of his own theory of knowledge, according to which it is only the inward activity of the mind that permits knowledge, or even ideas, of the essential natures of things. Sense provides the "outward occasion or invitation of those cogitations";[99] but "knowledge is an inward and active energy of the mind itself".[100] Cudworth gives many examples to support this thesis, but what matters for my purposes is his application of it to moral qualities. Cudworth holds that if virtue and vice, justice and injustice are not merely names, but real qualities with their own natures, then it is only the inward activity of the mind that can grasp this nature. The capacity to grasp this nature demonstrates (given Cudworth's metaphysical claim, outlined above) that these qualities cannot be determined by the will of any being, whether that be the Hobbesian sovereign or the Calvinist God.[101] Moreover, alongside this anti-voluntarist argument, Cudworth builds a case for the reality—indeed, superiority—of incorporeal substances, otherwise "intellectuality and morality [which] belong unto them, are but thin and evanid shadows of sensible and corporeal things".[102] In other words, in Cudworth's view corporeal substances are capable only of being passively affected, so cannot be the basis of the internal activity that yields our intellectual and moral conceptions.

[98] Cudworth (1731/1996, p. 47).

[99] Cudworth (1731/1996, p. 84).

[100] Cudworth (1731/1996, p. 72).

[101] Cudworth (1731/1996, pp. 143-152).

[102] Cudworth (1731/1996, p. 145-146).

Cudworth's central project in the *Treatise on Morality*, then, is to erect a bulwark against scepticism quite generally, principally by arguing against a conception of the mind according to which it is passively determined by the senses,[103] and instead for a conception on which there is "an innate cognoscitive power in the soul", which "can be nothing else but a power of raising intelligible ideas and conceptions of things from within itself."[104] He then applies this general thesis about the nature of the mind to the specific domain of moral cognition, to refute the scepticism of denying that there is a natural and essential difference between right and wrong, just and unjust, etc. Specifically, he argues that moral distinctions "aris[e] not from the absolute nature of the objects without, or their bare impressions which they make," but from "the different analogy" which they bear to "some inward and active anticipations which they meet withal in the percipient": "For the man hath certain moral anticipations and signatures stamped inwardly upon his soul".[105] In sum, then, the active nature of the mind in constructing moral distinctions refutes the thesis of the passivity of the soul in this domain, which is the sole basis of the pernicious doctrines of materialism, voluntarism, and (ultimately) relativism which threaten the foundations of morality, in Cudworth's view.

[103] Closely linked to the supposed 'empiricist' doctrine of the mind as *tabula rasa*: see Cudworth (1731/1996, p. 144-145). Of course, none of the major philosophers subsequently grouped together as 'empiricists' in fact believed that the initial state of the mind was wholly a *tabula rasa*.

[104] Cudworth (1731/1996, p. 75).

[105] Cudworth (1731/1996, p. 98; cf. pp. 74-75). As I will show when I come to discuss Lord Shaftesbury (§2.6), these mentions of anticipations in the soul represent a deployment of the core Stoic epistemic conception of *prolepses*—inchoate notions or principles that are part of the innate architecture of the mind, though unlike full-blown innate ideas they require articulation and systematisation to secure genuine understanding and correct application.

*§2.4. Samuel Clarke*

Samuel Clarke is often placed together with the Cambridge Platonists, such as Cudworth, under the banner of "moral rationalism."[106] It is certainly true that there are similarities between the seventeenth-century Platonists and Clarke; however, the significant differences in the views of the latter have hardly been commented upon (as far as I can discover, at any rate). It is worth highlighting some of these differences so as to see how even seemingly closely allied philosophers tackled the challenge of Hobbesian scepticism in notably divergent ways.

Clarke sought to rebut what he saw as various forms of "Atheism, Scepticism, and Infidelity" sharing a fundamental aim: the undermining of rational Christian belief and practice.[107] His rebuttal was set out in two series of Boyle Lectures, *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God* (delivered 1704), and *A Discourse concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion and the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Revelation* (delivered 1705). The target of his lectures is identified in the subtitle of the former as "Mr. Hobbes, Spinoza, and Their Followers." These thinkers were, in his view, the chief proponents of a species of naturalism that constituted the greatest threat to the entire edifice of the Christian religion.[108] Specifically, against these thinkers, Clarke was concerned to defend belief in: the supernatural and superlative attributes of God; God's essential role in creating and sustaining the natural world; a libertarian conception of freedom of the divine will, and of human will; the immateriality of the soul; and the natural and essential

[106] This categorisation goes back to Selby-Bigge's (1897) division of the British moralists into "intellectualists" (which later became "rationalists"), and "sentimentalists". For discussion of the development and applicability of these categories, see Irwin (2008, pp. 204-206).

[107] Clarke (1738, vol. 1, p. 299).

[108] Ezio Vailati (1998, p. xiii) in his introduction to Clarke's *Demonstrations*, describes the naturalism targeted by Clarke as "the view that nature constitutes a self-sufficient system of which we are but a part".

distinctions of virtue and vice, good and evil.[109] All of these, he believed, had been challenged by Hobbes, Spinoza, and their followers, and required a concerted and full-scale defence.[110]

Clarke saw moral scepticism as a key part of this attack on the Christian religion. He is clear that he aims to defend the "Authority of Christ and the Truth of his Religion" against "all Notions of Fatality or Necessity, and all Licentiousness either of Sceptical Opinions or Vicious Practice". Amongst these "Sceptical Opinions", he includes disbelief in "the natural and essential Difference of Good and Evil".[111] Like Cudworth, then, Clarke evidently connects this moral scepticism to necessitarian systems, such as those of Hobbes and Spinoza. Unlike Cudworth, however, Clarke rarely indulges his opponents by fairly and reasonably stating their case, and his response to moral scepticism is no exception:

> …the vain Curiosity and sceptical Discourses, the vicious Inclinations and unreasonable Passions, the evil Affections and perverse Disputings of men of corrupt minds, have sometimes as it were raised a dust to obscure this clearest of all *natural* Truths; Truth, concerning the necessary and eternal Difference of Good and Evil; even in like manner as certain Philosophers of old, undertook by subtil intricacies to confound the plainest Differences of natural and sensible things to prove that Snow was black, or, as the Text expresses it, that Light is the same with Darkness, and Bitter with Sweet….[112]

[109] For discussion of the general nature of Clarke's defence of Christian rationalism, see Vailati (1998), and Russell (2008, pp. 28-30). Harris (2005, Ch. 2) highlights the centrality of the problem of liberty and necessity to Clarke's overall system.

[110] In referring to Hobbes's and Spinoza's "followers," Clarke probably particularly had in mind the circle of "freethinkers" lead by John Toland, Anthony Collins, Matthew Tindal, and John Trenchard. See Jacob (1981, Ch. 5, esp. 151ff.) for details on this circle, and their opposition to Newtonians such as Clarke (whom Jacob discusses in Ch. 3).

[111] Clarke (1738, vol. 1, p. 426).

[112] Clarke (1738, vol. 1, p. 701).

Clarke here makes a reference to the Bible ("the Text"),[113] but more significant for my purposes is his allusion to "certain Philosophers of old". In his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Sextus Empiricus reports that the pre-Socratic thinker Anaxagoras put forward the following argument: snow is frozen water; water is black; therefore, snow is black.[114] There are other sources for Anaxagoras's argument, however, it seems that Clarke is concerned with its deployment as part of sceptical argumentation.[115] As he states, the ancient philosophers that he had in mind intended to "confound" and "obscure" the seemingly most evident sensory distinctions, by constructing arguments that oppose the evidence of senses. He mentions in particular examples of oppositions used by sceptical authors, i.e., light and dark, bitter and sweet.[116] It is possible Clarke had in mind Sextus's *Outlines* itself; at any rate, he again demonstrates his concern with "sceptical Discourses" regarding morality.

Now, Clarke was not only opposed to necessitarian systems, such as those of Hobbes and Spinoza, but agrees with Cudworth in also rejecting voluntarist doctrines concerning morality, which he believed would also undermine its foundations.[117] Instead, morality must be grounded in "the Nature of Things".[118] In

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[113] "Ah, you who call evil good / and good evil, / who put darkness for light / and light for darkness, / who put bitter for sweet / and sweet for bitter!" (Isaiah 5:20, NRSV).

[114] Sextus Empiricus (2000, p. 12). It is not obvious how to interpret Anaxagoras's rather strange argument. In a letter, Leibniz (1666) gives a reconstruction of it, and grants Anaxagoras several suppressed premisses, such as that black is not a colour, but a privation of colour. Leibniz concludes by suggesting that Anaxagoras's argument may have been intended to help the sceptics by showing the conflict between the conclusions of reason ('snow is black') and the senses ('snow is white').

[115] Cicero, Lactantius, and Galen also made references to Anaxagoras's argument; see Olaso (1997, p. 124 n. 11). Olaso's article considers Leibniz's relation to scepticism, and argues (pp. 101-102) that Leibniz's own comments on Anaxagoras's argument were derived from considering Sextus Empiricus's sceptical usage of it.

[116] The oppositions of light and darkness, bitter and sweet, though (as I have said) mentioned as a biblical reference, are also examples deployed by Sextus Empiricus (2000, e.g., pp. 31, 53-55, 83).

[117] See Harris (2005, pp. 47ff.) on Clarke's "attempt to find a middle way" between voluntarism and necessitarianism.

[118] Clarke (1738, vol. 2, pp. 609ff.).

viewing the eternal and immutable truths of morality as *natural*—in opposition to both voluntarist and sceptic views—it might be thought Clarke and Cudworth were advocating the same system. However, the two Christian rationalists had quite different conceptions of what it was for morality to be natural, or grounded in 'the nature of things.' To see this, consider first the following passage from Cudworth:

> …the soul is not a mere naked and passive thing, a *rasa tabula*, which has no innate furniture or activity of its own…. For if it were so then there could not possibly be any such thing as moral good and evil … forasmuch as these differences do not arise merely from the outward objects or the impresses which they make upon us by sense, there being no such thing in them. In which sense it is truly affirmed by the author of *Leviathan*, 'That there is no common rule of good and evil to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves', that is either considered absolutely in themselves, or relatively to external sense only….[119]

Surprisingly, Cudworth here agrees with Hobbes that there is no standard of morality in the "nature of the objects themselves", or (by extension) in the sense-impressions they make upon us. However, instead of concluding from this (as he believes that Hobbes does) that moral distinctions are created by an arbitrary act of volition, Cudworth argues that they arise from the *internal* intellectual activity of the mind—what he calls its "innate furniture". Thus, broadly speaking, he adopts a nativist approach to solving the problem of Hobbesian scepticism, as I have explored in §2.3.

Clarke, by contrast, does *not* accept the Hobbesian ontological thesis that Cudworth quotes, even as a starting point from which to derive very different conclusions.[120] Rather, Clarke holds that there is in nature a moral order, which "necessarily arises" from the nature of things and their relations to one another. This

[119] Cudworth (1731/1996, p. 144-145).

[120] See esp. Clarke (1738, vol. 2, p. 611-612), where he is clear about his anti-Hobbesian, objectivist ontology of morals, arguing that moral properties "unavoidably aris[e] from the differences of the things themselves" (p. 612).

moral order he characterises using the concept of *fitness*, giving two main examples: the fitness of certain people to certain circumstances, and the fitness of certain manners of behaviour between individuals related in a certain way.[121] An example of the first might be that the circumstance of being a charity worker is fit for a benevolent person, but not for a selfish person; and of the second, that a nurturing manner of behaviour is fit for a parent towards their child, but not vice versa.[122] Clarke analogises this concept of moral fitness to mathematical concepts such as congruity and incongruity, which arise from the nature of mathematical figures and their relations. An analogy with mathematics is also drawn by Cudworth, but Clarke uses it differently: he holds that these relations "which are *abstractly* of eternal Necessity, are also in the *Things themselves* absolutely unalterable."[123] Although God decides whether to create the things themselves, and can destroy them at will, he did not create and cannot alter the necessary and eternal laws governing things and the relations between them, and which are instantiated in and between them. Rather than seeing both mathematical and moral laws as constituted by the internal activity of the mind, then, Clarke views them as consisting in a mind-independent order that exists both abstractly by necessity and concretely in the things themselves.

Clarke also, and connectedly, differs from Cudworth in the epistemology of morals. Whereas Cudworth asserts that intellectual and moral ideas arise from the innate furniture of the mind, Clarke holds that the Platonic thesis that "the *Ideas* of all first and simple Truths … are *Innate* and originally *impressed* or *stamped* upon on the mind" is a "mistaken" one.[124] Rather, in Clarke's view, the understanding and will of all rational beings are compelled to assent to, and act in accordance with, the

[121] Clarke (1738, vol. 2, pp. 608-609).

[122] See Perinetti (2013, esp. pp. 346-348) for discussion of what he calls the "Morality in Nature" thesis, and how it is instantiated in Clarke's moral theory, in particular, in the notion of an order of moral fitnesses.

[123] Clarke (1738, vol. 2, p. 627).

[124] Clarke (1738, vol. 2, p. 615).

fitnesses of things.[125] There are thus only two conditions under which a rational being may act contrary to morality, namely, (i) "*negligent Misunderstanding*" and (ii) "*wilful Passions or Lusts*".[126] The fact that (i) is possible shows that, "Men have great need to be taught and instructed in some very plain and easy, as well as certain Truths", which, Clarke states, is "one good Argument for the reasonableness of expecting a *Revelation.*"[127] In other words, even though moral truths, like those of mathematics, are self-evident when "distinctly proposed" to any rational mind, they still must be taught and instructed: reason by itself is not a sufficient means to attain irradicable assent to even elementary moral truths.[128] This may seem to contradict a common interpretation of Clarke's moral epistemology as a kind of "rational intuitionism"[129]—but that interpretation is anyway implausible, as J. B. Schneewind has pointed out.[130] Indeed, Clarke himself explicitly contrasts direct intuition into the essences of things, which he thinks we do not have, with reasoning from their known properties, which is possible:

> *…'Tis plain, we know not the* Essences *of Things by* Intuition, *but can only reason about them from what we know of their different* Properties *or* Attributes.[131]

Thus, Clarke's conception of the role of reason in morality is not that of the innate cognoscitive power of raising up ideas from the internal activity of the mind, such as animated Cudworth. Rather, his conception of reason is actually closer to that of John Locke, who also rejected innate moral ideas or practical principles of any kind,

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[125] Clarke (1738, vol. 2, p. 612).

[126] Clarke (1738, vol. 2, p. 613).

[127] Clarke (1738, vol. 2, p. 618).

[128] Clarke (1738, vol. 2, p. 618).

[129] See, e.g., Sidgwick (1981, p. 86); Darwall (1995, p. 111); and Stratton-Lake (2013).

[130] Schneewind (1998, p. 318).

[131] Clarke (1738, vol. 2, p. 582).

and similarly held deductive reasoning to have a central role in working out the principles of morality. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to suggest that Clarke's moral theory is a natural ally of Locke's, for as we will see, the latter's system contains elements of Epicureanism, voluntarism, and conventionalism that were rebarbative to Clarke. It is to Locke's moral theory, then, that I will now turn.

### *§2.5. John Locke*

It is rather difficult to give a coherent interpretation of Locke's overall moral philosophy. Catherine Wilson has described it as an "Easter basket of thoughts and doctrines" that appears to be "chaos".[132] This is not to say that a coherent account cannot be given; indeed, Wilson proceeds to try to give such an account. Furthermore, it is reasonable to expect some degree of coherence, for—as Nicholas Jolley has persuasively argued—Locke's attempt to establish the basis for a "science of ethics" is a major project with "far-reaching ramifications for an understanding of the *Essay* [*concerning Human Understanding*] as a whole."[133] Intriguingly, Locke recalls in the *Epistle to the Reader* that the project of writing the *Essay* arose from a conversation between "five or six friends meeting at my chamber", one of whom, James Tyrrell, noted in his copy of the *Epistle* that the discussion had concerned "the principles of morality and revealed religion".[134] Although Locke then qualifies this by saying that this discussion was remote from his central concern in the *Essay*, this does not entail that the *foundations* of morality and religion were not crucial parts of his philosophy; rather, it is the principles themselves, their *content*, that he says were distant from his main concern. His main focus was, undoubtedly, the basis in the human understanding for ideas and knowledge of all sorts, and this crucially included moral and religious ideas and knowledge. As Jolley has pointed out, even

[132] Wilson (2007, p. 381).

[133] Jolley (1999, pp. 6-7).

[134] Woolhouse (1997, pp. ix-xi).

Locke's treatment of seemingly non-moral issues turn out to be essential parts of his foundations for a science of ethics: e.g., the rightly famous examination of the nature of personal identity, or the long discussion of freedom of the will in his chapter on power—both of which (personhood and freedom) are, for Locke, necessary conditions of moral responsibility.[135]

My aim, however, will not be to give a coherent general account of Locke's overall moral philosophy. Rather, I want to draw attention to certain sceptical and anti-sceptical ideas and tendencies in Locke's theory of morals. Now, to be sure, as G. A. J. Rogers has argued, Locke himself was no moral sceptic: whilst he rejects "any account of knowledge, and therefore moral knowledge, based on the appeal to innate ideas," he nevertheless holds that God has laid down a moral law that we can know through a combination of reason and sense-experience.[136] Indeed, Locke's moral philosophy, like his political theory, is heavily theocentric.[137] And through reflection on God and our relationship to Him as His creatures and as rational beings, we can not only discern the content of our moral duties, but can do so with a deductive certainty found in few branches of human knowledge:

> The *Idea* of a supreme Being, infinite in Power, Goodness and Wisdom, whose Workmanship we are, and on whom we depend; and the *Idea* of ourselves, as understanding, rational Beings, being such as are clear in us, would, I suppose, if duly considered, and pursued, afford such Foundations of our Duty and Rules of Action, as might place *Morality amongst the Sciences capable of Demonstration*: wherein I doubt not, but from self-evident Propositions, by necessary Consequences, as incontestable as those in Mathematicks, the measures of right and wrong might be made out, to

[135] Jolley (1999, Chs 6 and 7).

[136] Rogers (1996, pp. 62-63).

[137] For interpretations of Locke's political thought that draw attention to its basis in his philosophical theology, see Dunn (1969), and Waldron (2002). On the theocentricity of Locke's moral philosophy, see (amongst others) Ayers (1991, vol. 2, Ch. 16); Rogers (1996); and Colman (2003).

> anyone that will apply himself with the same Indifferency and Attention to the one, as he does to the other of these Sciences.[138]

Locke, however, never ventured to provide such a demonstration, a point on which he was pressed forcefully by some of his contemporaries, though to no avail. This seems to have added to the suspicion that Locke in fact held a sceptical or "Hobbist" position on morality.[139] This suspicion had already arisen with respect to Locke's treatment of morality in the *Essay*, amongst other things as a result of his well-known rejection of moral nativism, a special case of his attack on innate ideas and principles generally.

As Daniel Carey has convincingly argued, whilst it is wrong to think of Locke as a moral sceptic in his core intentions or self-conception, he nevertheless employed argumentative strategies drawn from the sceptical canon in order to undermine moral nativism, broadly conceived.[140] Sceptical arguments were, in classical philosophy, often targeted at Stoic conceptions—in ethics, in particular, at Stoic conceptions of natural law, a target that Locke shared.[141] In the *Essay*'s attack on innate practical principles, Locke only singles out one philosopher by name as his target, *viz.*, Lord Herbert of Cherbury.[142] (Though it is quite plausible that Locke also had in mind the Cambridge Platonists, such as Ralph Cudworth, whose own nativist theory of morals I examined in §2.3.) Being a product of Renaissance humanism,

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[138] Locke (1700/1975, p. 549).

[139] This suspicion is reported to Locke by his defender James Tyrrell; see Tyrrell's letters to Locke, in Locke (2002, pp. 146-149). For a helpful discussion of their exchange on this matter, see Parkin (1999, pp. 215-221). Locke was also pressed on this by Catherine Trotter Cockburn and William Molyneux; see Sheridan (2011, §1.1).

[140] See Carey (2005, Chs 1-3) for a wonderfully rich discussion of Locke's use of sceptical argumentation, and how his attack on innate foundations for morality subsequently became *the* philosophical challenge for Shaftesbury and Hutcheson.

[141] See, e.g., Annas and Barnes's (1985) study of ancient scepticism, which notes that the Pyrrhonians viewed the Stoics as their "main dogmatist opponents" (p. 101; cf. 14, 202).

[142] Locke (1700/1975, pp. 77-80).

Cherbury's philosophy invoked ideas from many classical schools of thought.[143] Of particular interest is Cherbury's use of the Stoic idea of *koinai ennoiai*, or "common notions," which Locke characterised as "*innate Principles*; some primary Notions … Characters, as it were, stamped on the Mind of Man".[144] According to the Stoics, moral distinctions were built into human nature in the form of these common notions. The conception of human nature as imprinted with such notions grounded the fundamental distinction between virtue and vice.[145] The sceptics argued, by contrast, that if human nature was thus imprinted, there ought to be certain ideas, principles, or inclinations which received universal agreement; but when we examine the records of actual beliefs, habits, and practices around the world, this is not what we find.[146] And if there is no imprinted morality, this undermines any attempt to establish a *criterion* for moral truth or knowledge.[147]

Locke agreed with the classical sceptics in rejecting any innate ideas or principles that enabled us to draw the distinction between moral good and evil. He held that both universal agreement and conformity of action were necessary for a legitimate claim of innateness.[148] Drawing both on ancient sources and on contemporary travel accounts (of which he was an enthusiastic collector), Locke argued that these necessary requirements were not met.[149] He utilises the (purported) empirical evidence derived from these accounts in an attempt to demolish any

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[143] See Hutton (1996*b*, pp. 16-18) for a discussion of Cherbury's moral philosophy and its influences.

[144] Locke (1700/1975, p. 48). As I will show in §2.6, Shaftesbury equates the Stoic common notions and their doctrine of innate *prolepses*, and argues in their favour, in vociferous opposition to Locke.

[145] See Scott (1988).

[146] See Sextus Empiricus's "tenth mode" (2000, pp. 37-40) in which he argues from the diversity of moral opinions, customs, and practices; as well as his reflections on whether virtue is "by nature good" (pp. 197-205). See also Carey (2005, pp. 42-51).

[147] On criteria of truth (or 'standards of truth,' in some translations), see the long discussion in Sextus Empiricus (2000, pp. 72ff.).

[148] Locke (1700/1975, pp. 66-67).

[149] See Carey (2005, Ch. 3). According to Carey (p. 25), Locke owned 195 works of travel literature, including multi-volume compendia, at the time of his death.

complacent assumption of the uniformity of moral opinion and action—for example, in the following list:

> ($\alpha$) It is familiar amongst the *Mengrelians*, a People professing Christianity, to bury their Children alive without scruple. ($\beta$) There are Places were they eat their own Children. ($\gamma$) The *Caribes* were wont to geld their Children, on purpose to fat and eat them. ($\delta$) And *Garcilasso de la Vega* tells us of a People in Peru, which were wont to fat and eat the Children they got on their female Captives, whom they kept as Concubines for that purpose; and when they were past Breeding the Mothers themselves were kill'd too and eaten. ($\varepsilon$) The Vertues, whereby the *Tououpinambos* believed their merited Paradise, were Revenge, and eating abundance of their Enemies. ($\zeta$) They have not so much as a Name for God … The Saints, who are canonized amongst the *Turks*, lead Lives, which one cannot with Modesty relate.[150]

Locke's argument from the diversity of moral opinions and practices against any innate moral principles was certainly a major factor in his reception. But this by itself may not have been sufficient to generate accusations of moral scepticism, or Hobbism—also contributing to that impression were certain aspects of Locke's own positive account of the basis of our moral ideas, with which he attempted to supplant the nativist dogma (as he saw it). Three such aspects are particularly salient.

First, there was the matter of Locke's hedonic egoism, perhaps most evident and striking in his claim that there *is* in fact one innate practical principle:

> Nature, I confess, has put into Man a desire of Happiness, and an aversion to Misery: These indeed are innate practical Principles, which … constantly … operate and influence all our Actions, without ceasing….[151]

Locke conceives of happiness in explicitly hedonic terms: "*Happiness* then in its full extent is the utmost Pleasure we are capable of, and *Misery* the utmost Pain".[152] Thus,

[150] Locke (1700/1975, p. 71).

[151] Locke (1700/1975, p. 67).

[152] Locke (1700/1975, p. 258).

we are naturally and unavoidably motivated by the anticipation of pleasure, and repelled by the prospect of pain. This motivational hedonic egoism was regarded as an essential part of Epicureanism, which was revived in the modern period, and thought to have sceptical implications for morality, especially after the interventions of Thomas Hobbes.[153]

Secondly, Locke held a version of the voluntarist view of the notion of moral obligation, according to which it is the will of a legislator, backed up by sanctions (rewards and punishments) that marks certain actions out as right, and others as wrong:

> Good and Evil, as hath been shewn … are nothing but Pleasure or Pain, or that which occasions, or procures Pleasure or Pain to us. *Morally Good and Evil* then, is only the Conformity or Disagreement of our voluntary Actions to some Law, whereby Good and Evil is drawn on us, from the Will and Power of the Law-maker; which Good and Evil, Pleasure or Pain, attending our observance or breach of the law, by the Decree of the Law-maker, is that we call *Reward* or *Punishment*.[154]

This is connected to his hedonic egoism, in that, for Locke, God's rewards and punishments in the afterlife were a crucial part of the motivation to act in accordance with the divine law:

> That God has given a Rule whereby Men should govern themselves, I think there is no body so brutish as to deny. He has a Right to do it; we are his Creatures: He has Goodness and Wisdom to direct our Actions to that which is best: and he has Power to Enforce it by Rewards and Punishments, of infinite weight and duration, in another Life…. This is the only true touchstone of *moral Rectitude*; and by comparing them to this Law, it is, that Men judge of the most considerable *Moral Good* or *Evil* of their Actions; that

[153] For a recent study of Epicureanism in the early modern period, see Wilson (2008, esp. Ch. 8.2 on "Locke's hedonism"). On the fashioning of the Hobbes's identification as an Epicurean by his opponents, see Parkin (2007, pp. 133-135). For further discussion, examining neo-Stoic critiques of Hobbes's "Epicureanism," see Brooke (2012, Ch. 5).

[154] Locke (1700/1975, p. 351).

> is, whether as *Duties*, or *Sins*, they are like to procure them happiness, or misery, from the hands of the ALMIGHTY.[155]

Thirdly, an important factor leading to the sceptical interpretation of Locke's moral thought was his emphasis on the impact of local mores on people's ideas of virtue and vice. Besides the divine law, Locke identifies two other sorts of moral laws "to which Men generally refer, and by which they judge of the Rectitude or Pravity of their Actions"[156]—one is the civil law, and the other what Locke calls the "law of opinion or reputation":

> [T]he measure of what is every where called and esteemed *Vertue* and *Vice* is this approbation or dislike, praise or blame, which by a secret and tacit consent establishes it self in the several Societies, Tribes, and Clubs of Men in the World: whereby several actions come to find Credit or Disgrace amongst them, according to the Judgment, Maxims, or Fashions of that place.[157]

According to Locke, then, the local mores of a society, tribe, or club, supply standards of reputation and esteem, and these standards are affixed with praise or blame as people conform to or violate them, hence leading people to ethicise them; i.e., to take them to be the standards of virtue and vice. But, of course, the diversity or variability of local mores across different nations or groups would then imply a relativistic conception of morality, such as (as we have seen) was regarded as radically undermining the foundations of morality.

Locke defended himself against the charge that he was endorsing the law of opinion or reputation as the true standard of morality—rather, he was merely attempting to describe "how men came by moral Ideas or Notions … [which] they did by comparing their actions to a rule", such as the divine law, civil law, or the law

[155] Locke (1700/1975, p. 352).

[156] Locke (1700/1975, p. 351).

[157] Locke (1700/1975, p. 353).

of reputation:

> [I] cannot be accused for not haveing treated more amply of those rules in that place or enterd into a just disquisition of their nature force or obligation when if you will looke into the end of that chapter you will finde 'tis not of concernment to my purpose in that chapter whether they be as much as true or noe but only that they be considered in the mindes of men as rules to which they compare their actions and judg of their morality.[158]

He is clear elsewhere that "the true ground of Morality ... can only be the Will and Law of a God, who sees Men in the dark, has in his Hand Rewards and Punishments, and Power enough to call to account the Proudest Offender."[159] This, of course, brings us back to the issue of his apparent theological voluntarism again. One point that seems clear is that Locke does not maintain that the force of God's commands flows purely from his absolute power: rather, in Locke's view, God has *rightful authority* over us.[160] It has been persuasively argued that, for Locke, God's authority over us stems from his being our creator, with commentators holding differing views on whether God's "right of creation" is consistent with and supports Locke's voluntarism, or whether it is inconsistent with and undermines it.[161]

It is beyond the remit of this brief discussion of Locke's moral philosophy to determine whether it is ultimately consistent and coherent; and it is also unnecessary for my purposes. It is sufficient that I have drawn attention to Locke's anti-sceptical defence of a rationally accessible, theistically-based moral law, whilst also noting patterns of argumentation and particular views that are, in some respects, continuous with the sceptical tradition. As we will see in the next section, the latter elements were certainly sufficient to colour the reaction of even a sophisticated

[158] Locke's letter to James Tyrrell, 4 August 1690, in Locke (2002, pp. 151-152).

[159] Locke (1700/1975, p. 69).

[160] Locke (1700/1975, p. 352).

[161] For example, the former conclusion is defended by Colman (1983, pp. 46ff.), and (2003, pp. 112ff.); and the latter is argued for by Schneewind (1994) and Ayers (1991, vol. 2, Ch. 16).

moral philosopher to Locke's system, and yield a renewed attempt to secure the foundations of moral philosophy from the sceptical threat.

### *§2.6. Lord Shaftesbury*

Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury, was the author of the great tome of early eighteenth-century optimism, the *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711). Being a one-time pupil and long-standing interlocutor of Locke's, he was deeply influenced by his engagement with Locke's works. However, this influence was far from uniformly positive, with Shaftesbury writing thus in a letter to a friend:

> In general truly it has happened, that all those they call *free writers* now-a-days have espoused those principles which Mr. Hobbes set a-foot in this last age. Mr. Locke, as much as I honour him on account of other writings …, and as well as I knew him, and can answer for his sincerity as a most zealous *Christian* and believer, did, however, go in the self-same tract….
>
> It was Mr. Locke that struck the home blow: for Mr. Hobbes's character and base slavish principles in government took off the poison of his philosophy. 'Twas Mr. Locke that struck at all fundamentals, threw all order and virtue out of the world, and made the very ideas of these (which are the same as those of God) *unnatural*, and without foundation in our minds. *Innate* is a word he poorly plays upon; the right word, though less used, is *connatural*. For what has birth or progress of the fœtus out of the womb to do in this case? The question is not about the time the ideas entered, or the moment that one body came out of the other, but whether the constitution of man be such that, being adult and grown up, at such or such a time, sooner or later (no matter when), the idea and sense of order, administration, and a God, will not infallibly, inevitably, necessarily spring up in him.[162]

Shaftesbury here attacks Locke for his rejection of innate principles. He goes on to criticise him for founding personal merit or virtue on "fashion and custom", and for basing "morality, justice, equity" on the will of God, in which case "if He [God] wills

[162] Shaftesbury (1900, p. 403).

it, it will be made good; virtue may be vice, and vice virtue in its turn, if he pleases."[163]

Indeed, both Hobbes and Locke were connected, for Shaftesbury, with a pernicious moral scepticism, constituting a major threat to the foundations of morality, and a major challenge to respond to in developing his own system. In an unpublished note towards the end of his life, he wrote that, "*Hobs Lock &c.* [are] still the same man, same Genius at the Bottom", for they proclaim that, "*Beauty* is nothing!… *Virtue* nothing… But these are the greatest Realitys of things".[164] Shaftesbury explicitly associates this Hobbist-Lockean position with scepticism. For instance, in *Sensus Communis*, he considers arguments from the great difference in the moral "opinions and customs" of different nations, to the conclusion that "virtue and vice had … no other law or measure than mere fashion and vogue." Applied to morality alone, this is (in Shaftesbury's words) a "partial scepticism," but partial scepticism, he suggests, is unstable. If this form of argument is valid in respect of morality, then it applies to all human affairs, which would entail an "endless scepticism".[165] He acknowledges that such a "general scepticism" may be useful in combatting "the dogmatical spirit which prevails in some particular subjects", and, in *Miscellany II*, suggests that scepticism is not necessarily problematic if it just means admitting a lack of certainty. However, he clearly believes that there is a strand of this tradition, associated for him with Hobbes and Locke's anti-nativism and voluntarism, that constitutes "the worst sort of scepticism, such as spared nothing but overthrew all principles, moral and divine."[166] Refuting it is, *inter alia*, a major aim of the *Characteristics*.[167]

Christopher Brooke, in recent study of Stoic influences on moral and political

[163] Shaftesbury (1900, p. 404).

[164] Cited in Milton (2014, p. 112).

[165] Shaftesbury (1711/2000, pp. 38-39).

[166] Shaftesbury (1711/2000, pp. 45, 369, 242).

[167] For more discussion of Shaftesbury's relation to the sceptical tradition, see Klein (2000, pp. xi, xiv-xv); Carey (2005, pp. 134-135); and Kail (2013).

thought in the early modern period, refers to "Shaftesbury's fashioning of a more thoroughgoing kind of modern Stoicism in the various pieces that make up his *Characteristics*".[168] As we saw in the last section, one of Locke's central targets was exactly the Stoic conception of the human mind and morality. However, Shaftesbury was not sectarian in his appropriations of the ideas of ancient philosophers concerning morality, and shows strong signs of being influenced by Platonic notions; indeed, like the Cambridge Platonists who strongly influenced him (chiefly Benjamin Whichcote and Cudworth), he fused together Platonic and Stoic ideas concerning the mind and ethics.[169] This is not to say that Shaftesbury wholly departed from the Lockean psychological framework: he accepts that human motivation is determined by the affections, rather than by pure intellectual perception, and that we are drawn by the passions to a multiplicity of objects, rather than always and unfailingly to our perceived good.[170] Nevertheless, Shaftesbury held that the specifics of Locke's view of affective motivation, and the modes of ethical judgement and behaviour that it yields, had dangerously sceptical implications for morality, which he was determined to refute.

Integral to Shaftesbury's moral philosophy is a conception of all creatures as having an 'end' or 'purpose' flowing from their natural constitution:

> We know that there is in reality a right and a wrong state of every creature, and that his right one is by nature forwarded and by himself affectionately sought. There being therefore in every creature a certain interest or good, there must be also a certain end to which everything in his constitution must naturally refer.[171]

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[168] Brooke (2012, p. xvi); also see (pp. 111-124) for his substantiation of this claim.

[169] On the influence of Whichcote and Cudworth on Shaftesbury, see Passmore (1951, pp. 96-100), who goes so far as to say that "Shaftesbury was fundamentally a Cambridge Platonist" (p. 99), though this is perhaps overstating the point.

[170] See Schneewind (1998, pp. 298-300).

[171] Shaftesbury (1711/2000, p. 167).

But each creature is part of a kind or species, and that species itself is part of a wider ecological system including all other creatures. Moreover, all species are part of a global system, which itself is embedded into even greater systems. Ultimately, for Shaftesbury, the end of each creature must be understood as embedded in a fully integrated, universal teleological order:

> If therefore, in the structure of this or any other animal, there be anything which points beyond himself and by which he is plainly discovered to have relation to some other being or nature besides his own, then will this animal undoubtedly be esteemed a part of some other system. […] So that the creatures are both of them to be considered as parts of another system, which is that of a particular race or species of living creatures, who have some one common nature or are provided for by some one order or constitution of things subsisting together and co-operating towards their conservation and support.[172]

> Now, if the whole system of animals, together with that of vegetables and all other things in this inferior world, be properly comprehended in one system of a globe or earth and if, again, this globe or earth itself appears to have a real dependence on something still beyond, as, for example, either on its sun, the galaxy or its fellow-planets, then is it in reality a part only of some other system. And if it be allowed that there is in like manner a system of all things and a universal nature, there can be no particular being or system which is not either good or ill in that general one of the universe, for, if it be insignificant and of no use, it is a fault or imperfection and consequently ill in the general system.[173]

Shaftesbury's moral thought is inextricably imbricated with this teleological perspective, which, applying to all created beings, is the key to understanding the normative concepts of rational creatures capable (at least partially) of comprehending this order—that is, human beings. Indeed, Shaftesbury's theory of normativity, and hence of moral standards, is grounded in a very robust conception

[172] Shaftesbury (1711/2000, p. 168).

[173] Shaftesbury (1711/2000, p. 169).

of the intrinsic nature of human beings. As Daniel Carey succinctly puts it, "[t]hroughout his discussion, Shaftesbury operated with a powerful conception of nature as a defining norm."[174]

But what in human nature provides this norm? In the first instance, Shaftesbury draws attention to the importance of our "natural affections"; in particular, those that are "suited towards the public good or good of the species". Such affections are constitutive of a good natural temper. However, according to Shaftesbury this sort of 'good' is "within the reach and capacity of all sensible creatures," whereas he is concerned specifically to uncover the basis of *virtue*, which is "allowed to man only".[175] The distinctive capacity underlying the discernment of virtue within human beings is the capacity for reflection:

> In a creature capable of forming general notions of things, not only the outward beings which offer themselves to the sense are the objects of the affection, but the very actions themselves and the affections of pity, kindness, gratitude and their contraries, being brought into the mind by reflection, become objects. So that, by means of this reflected sense, there arises another kind of affection towards those very affections themselves, which have been already felt and have now become the subject of a new liking or dislike.[176]

This "new liking or disliking"—a kind of second-order affection—is then the foundation of moral approval and disapproval. Shaftesbury holds that these second-order affections are the product of a "natural moral sense"[177] that is part of the human constitution, and has therefore been regarded as a proponent of *sentimentalism* in moral philosophy. However, Shaftesbury is clear that reason has a fundamental role in the formation of moral judgements:

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[174] Carey (2005, p. 110).

[175] Shaftesbury (1711/2000, p. 172).

[176] Shaftesbury (1711/2000, p. 172).

[177] Shaftesbury (1711/2000, p. 180).

> And thus we find how far worth and virtue depend on a knowledge of right and wrong and on a use of reason sufficient to secure a right application of the affections, that nothing horrid or unnatural, nothing unexemplary, nothing destructive of that natural affection by which the species or society is upheld, may on any account or through any principle or notion of honour or religion be at any time affected or prosecuted as a good and proper object of esteem.[178]

In fact, Shaftesbury does not sit neatly on either side of the rationalist vs. sentimentalist dichotomy. Case in point, he distinguishes between the "sensible affections," which all sensible creatures possess, and the "rational affections," which only human beings possess, and draw us towards "rational objects of moral good."[179] But the notion of a "rational affection" makes no sense in the framework of a sharp divide between the domains of sentiment and reason. Neither a rationalist seeking to denigrate the role of affect in laying the foundations of morality, nor a sentimentalist who argues for a subordinate and narrowly circumscribed role for reason in morality, Shaftesbury upsets a standard way of dividing up the period. As we will see, such a split only really begins to set in with Francis Hutcheson's moral works.

This collaboration of reason and affection in determining the boundaries of right and wrong is interesting given Shaftesbury's view of the metaphysical status of moral qualities. Shaftesbury's metaphysics of morals emerges most clearly in his dialogue, *The Moralists*. The dialogue is narrated by Philocles, described as "a proselyte to Pyrrhonism," and a follower of "sceptic principles".[180] In opposition to Philocles's scepticism, the character Theocles explicitly defends the author of "a certain fair *Inquiry*", i.e., Shaftesbury himself.[181] Describing his metaphysics of

[178] Shaftesbury (1711/2000, p. 175).

[179] Shaftesbury (1711/2000, pp. 175-176).

[180] Shaftesbury (1711/2000, pp. 301, 302).

[181] Shaftesbury (1711/2000, p. 265). The *Inquiry* referred to is Shaftesbury's *Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit.*

morals, Theocles states that virtue:

> *…is really something in itself and in the nature of things, not arbitrary or factitious (if I may so speak), not constituted from without or dependent on custom, fancy or will, not even on the supreme will itself, which can no way govern it but, being necessarily good, is governed by it and ever uniform with it.*[182]

This, Shaftesbury declared, was the view definitive of "*a realist in morality*".[183] As J.A. Passmore has noted, this is an almost verbatim recapitulation of Cudworth's view of the ontology of morality.[184] Now it might be wondered how Shaftesbury's self-styled realism about morality could be grounded in an epistemology of morals that makes our natural sentiments or affections so central: if virtue is something in the nature of things, totally independent of "custom, fancy or will", how is it that our affections can inform us of the presence, let alone the nature, of virtue? On this head, the contrast with Cudworth is instructive: as we have seen in §2.3, Cudworth regards our knowledge of the eternal and immutable truths of morality as derived from an intellectual power of the mind that constructs *a priori* necessary conceptions through its internal activity. By contrast, Shaftesbury, as per the above, holds that the natural moral sense generates second-order sentiments of liking or disliking which, under the direction of reason, allows for a "right application of the affections".[185] Cudworth backs up his realism in morality with a theory of (moral) cognition robust enough to explain our possession of a conception of virtue as something eternal and immutable; Shaftesbury, it might seem, does not.

However, this overlooks a major point of epistemological similarity between Cudworth and Shaftesbury, which can be traced to their common ancient

[182] Shaftesbury (1711/2000, p. 266-267; italics in original).

[183] Shaftesbury (1711/2000, p. 267).

[184] Passmore (1951, p. 98).

[185] Shaftesbury (1711/2000, p. 175).

philosophical influences. Shaftesbury says in the *Inquiry* that the natural moral sense is based on a "prepossession of the mind in favour of this moral distinction."[186] Elsewhere, Shaftesbury refers to this as a "preconception," "presensation," or "natural anticipation".[187] Just as Cudworth referred to "moral anticipations and signatures" in the soul, Shaftesbury anchored our moral and aesthetic senses in:

> …our natural anticipation in behalf of nature, according to whose supposed standard we perpetually approve and disapprove and to whom in all natural appearances, all moral actions … we inevitably appeal and pay our constant homage....[188]

The key to Shaftesbury's thinking here is in the footnote to the just-quoted passage, in which he identifies these anticipations, preconceptions, presensations, etc., as various ways of referring to "the προλήψεις" *(prolepses)*.[189] The notion of a *prolepsis* was, as Carey says, "a Stoic adaptation of what was originally an Epicurean concept", though, as Henry Dyson has pointed out in a recent monograph devoted to the subject, there are reasons to be doubtful that the Stoic concept was similar to the Epicurean one.[190] The Stoic conception of *prolepses* was that they are innate notions, but rather than being inherently fully developed ideas, they are inchoate elements of cognition that require articulation and systematisation in order to yield standards by which one may judge the veracity of one's beliefs (i.e., to become criteria of truth).[191] Thus, Shaftesbury goes on to situate the notion of *prolepses* in the context of (what Jean Le Clerc called) the "controversy among learned men … especially in Britain, concerning innate ideas," demonstrating that Shaftesbury thought of

[186] Shaftesbury (1711/2000, p. 178).

[187] Shaftesbury (1711/2000, pp. 282, 326, 329, 429).

[188] Cudworth (1731/1996, p. 98); Shaftesbury (1711/2000, p. 429).

[189] Shaftesbury (1711/2000, p. 429 n. 12).

[190] Carey (2005, p. 112); Dyson (2009, pp. xvi-xvii).

[191] Dyson (2009, pp. xviii-xix).

prolepses as innate mental entities, a doctrine found in the later Stoics such as Epictetus and Seneca (and presented as Stoic doctrine by Cicero). But when characterising exactly what is innate, he again approvingly quotes Le Clerc, saying that they are just the "seeds planted within us, which finally come forth into the light of day" as one attains the faculty of reason.[192]

Now, a crucial feature of *prolepses*, for Shaftesbury, was that they enabled him to refute the main Lockean criticism of innate ideas: viz., the argument from diversity. For the notion of *prolepses* would actually lead one to predict significant variations in moral opinions, customs, and actions. Hence, the fact that there is a high degree of diversity, far from counting against the nativist theory of cognition favoured by Shaftesbury, is explanatorily consonant with it. In what way would such a conception lead one to expect a high degree of diversity? To start with, the innate prolepses could fail to be articulated and systematised, and thus might come to be misapplied:

> [A]s there are many occasions where the matter of right may even to the most discerning part of mankind appear difficult and of doubtful decision, it is not a slight mistake of this kind which can destroy the character of a virtuous or worthy man. But when, either through superstition or ill custom, there come to be very gross mistakes in the assignment or application of the affection, when the mistakes are either in their nature so gross, or so complicated and frequent, that a creature cannot well live in a natural state nor with due affections compatible with human society and civil life, then is the character of virtue forfeited.[193]

This misapplication of the affections thus stems from a corruption of our "natural state". As Shaftesbury states in his *Miscellaneous Reflections*:

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[192] Shaftesbury (1711/2000, p. 429 n. 12). Several commentators have held, following Sandbach (1930), that the early Stoics such as Chrysippus did *not* think of *prolepses* as innate conceptions containing tacit knowledge such that, when articulated and systematised, they could serve as criteria of truth. However, Sandbach's view has been persuasively challenged by Scott (1988) and, more recently, Dyson (2009, esp. Introduction).

[193] Shaftesbury (1711/2000, p. 175).

> …to each species there belongs a several humour, temper and turn of inward disposition, as real and peculiar as the figure and outward shape which is with so much curiosity beheld and admired. If there be anything ever so little amiss or wrong in the inward frame, the humour or temper of the creature, it is readily called vicious and, when more than ordinarily wrong, unnatural.[194]

He then expands his argument along the lines of the Inquiry, maintaining that the virtue of human beings qua social creatures consists in an orderly orientation of the affections towards the good of the species as a whole; and, qua rational beings who are conscious of "the universal system and principle of intelligence", it consists in pious submission to "that supreme cause or order of things". As it is thus the highest actualisation of human nature, Shaftesbury is clear that "*virtue is his* [man's] *natural good, and vice his misery and ill.*"[195] But to see *how* exactly the corruption of our natural affections and reason occurs, and leads us to fail to apply the innate *prolepses* correctly, one must look again to the *Inquiry*. There, Shaftesbury argues that:

> *Sense of right and wrong* therefore being as natural to us as natural affection itself, and being a first principle in our constitution and make, there is no speculative opinion, persuasion or belief which is capable immediately or directly to exclude or destroy it. That which is of original and pure nature, nothing beside contrary habit and custom (a second nature) is able to displace. And this affection being an original one of earliest rise in the soul or affectionate part, nothing beside contrary affection, by frequent check and control, can operate upon it so as either to diminish it in part or destroy it in the whole.[196]

And again:

> This can proceed only from the force of custom and education in opposition

[194] Shaftesbury (1711/2000, pp. 429-430).

[195] Shaftesbury (1711/2000, pp. 432-433; original italics).

[196] Shaftesbury (1711/2000, p. 179; original italics).

> to nature, as may be noted in those countries where, according to custom or politic institution, certain actions naturally foul and odious are repeatedly viewed with applause and honour ascribed to them.[197]

Thus, Shaftesbury maintains that custom, habit, and education, particularly those distinctive of different political societies, may corrupt our "original and pure nature" by setting up a "second nature" in opposition to the primary one. This second nature cannot exercise a direct influence through speculative or theoretical beliefs alone, but only via unnatural affections, with Shaftesbury mentioning, in particular, the "settled sedate affection[s] towards a conceived private good" and "sudden, strong and forcible passion[s], as of lust or anger". In Shaftesbury's view, these unnatural affections are reinforced not so much by atheism, but rather by "false religion or fantastical opinion".[198]

A distinct but closely related aspect of Shaftesbury's theory that strengthens it against the Lockean argument from diversity is his dispositionalism about innate notions. Descartes neatly summarises the essential idea behind dispositional nativism in his *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*:

> I have never written or taken the view that the mind requires innate ideas which are something distinct from its own faculty of thinking. I did, however, observe that there were certain thoughts within me … which came solely from the power of thinking within me; so I applied the term 'innate' to the ideas or notions which are the forms of these thoughts in order to distinguish them from others, which I called 'adventitious' … This is the same sense as that in which we say that generosity is 'innate' in certain families, or that certain diseases such as gout or stones are innate in others: it is not so much that the babies of such families suffer from these diseases in their mother's womb, but simply that they are born with a certain 'faculty' or tendency to contract them.[199]

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[197] Shaftesbury (1711/2000, p. 179).

[198] Shaftesbury (1711/2000, p. 182).

[199] Descartes (1984-91, vol. 1, pp. 303-304).

In other words, the dispositionalist does not hold that innate ideas exist *qua* ideas in the mind from birth or earlier, but rather that the mind is so constituted that it has a propensity towards the formation of certain ideas, which propensity may be triggered by various factors such as maturation, exposure to certain experiences, non-experiential environmental influences, etc. Locke himself held that the dispositionalist account is vacuous, as it asserts no more than that we have the capacity to form certain ideas, which of course everyone accepts, and which would yield the odd result that all ideas are innate, since it must be true of any idea that we *do* form that we possess the capacity to form it.[200] Thus, in order to distinguish the dispositional account as a genuine form of *nativism*, one must differentiate between a disposition to form certain ideas and a mere capacity to do so. I need not enter into this interesting philosophical debate, but will merely note that Descartes's examples suggest there must be some such account available, for otherwise we could not differentiate someone who has the *capacity* to contract a disease (e.g., a capacity for contracting cancer, which all of us have, but often does not become actual), from someone who is *disposed*—as we now believe, by the structure of their genetic code—to develop a certain disease (e.g., sufferers of Huntington's disease).

Shaftesbury seems to have held a dispositionalist account.[201] Thus, he queries in the letter to Michael Ainsworth, quoted at the beginning of this chapter: "What has birth or progress of the fœtus out of the womb to do in this case"? What is crucial is not the "time the ideas entered," but "whether the constitution of man be such that", at some appropriate stage, "the idea and sense of order, administration, and a God" will naturally develop in him.[202] He argues likewise on the subject of morality. In *The Moralists*, Philocles asks Theocles whether "these mental children, the notions and principles of fair, just and honest" are innate. Theocles replies that the

[200] Locke (1700/1975, pp. 50-51).

[201] As did (arguably) the Stoics and the Cambridge Platonists, philosophers who heavily influenced Shaftesbury, as discussed. On these two groups, see Scott (1988) and (1990), respectively.

[202] Shaftesbury (1900, p. 403).

"[a]natomists" may dispute the time at which certain bodily or psychological features were formed, but for the philosopher this topic is "of no great importance". What matters is whether the ideas and principles arise from "art or nature"—i.e., from culture, habit, and education; or from a natural "instinct" which resides in our constitution, in the same manner as do the principles of formation of "the several organs" of our body, "particularly those of generation".[203]

Shaftesbury's nativist theory is thus based on combining the Stoic conception of *prolepses* with a dispositionalist theory of nativism according to which these innate (or 'connatural') mental entities are not present from birth, but are formed by a kind of cognitive maturation analogous to our bodily development. Both of these aspects of Shaftesbury's theory enabled him to refute Locke's anti-nativist argument from diversity. Diversity is to be expected, as our *prolepses* may fail for two reasons: first, there may be a failure in the process of maturation and development of the *prolepses* and the moral sense that they underpin; and second, even if we develop the natural *prolepses* that dispose us towards virtue and piety, custom and education can corrupt and subvert their operation, and lead us to misapply them. These two potential failures are sufficient to explain deviations from the norm that, Shaftesbury maintains, is provided for us by our natural constitution.[204]

In the next section, I will examine the views of a philosopher who holds a rather different view of our natural constitution; far from nature constituting a fundamental norm—deviation from which is thereby a corruption that frustrates the pursuit of our inbuilt end or *telos*—our nature is in itself inherently corrupt and depraved, with serious, and potentially irremediable, consequences for our moral predicament.

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[203] Shaftesbury (1711/2000, p. 325).

[204] For more discussion of this issue, see Carey (2005, pp. 110-119), and on the political dimensions of diversity in Shaftesbury, which I have left aside (pp. 119-129).

*§2.7. Bernard Mandeville*

Mandeville was a Dutch physician and author of the notorious *Fable of the Bees: Or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits* (first edition, 1714). Mandeville was most deeply influenced by the French "super-sceptic" Pierre Bayle[205]—indeed, in the judgement of one scholar (John Robertson), Mandeville "explicitly presented himself as Bayle's expositor to an English readership, rehearsing his arguments and restating his conclusions".[206] And as with his mentor Bayle, Mandeville was very much indebted to the French sceptical tradition stemming from Montaigne.[207] In this section, I will look primarily at Mandeville's sceptical opposition to the neo-Stoic system of Shaftesbury.

The original target of Mandeville's *Fable* was not Shaftesbury.[208] However, with the publication of the second edition in 1723, and especially with the addition of two new essays, 'An Essay on Charity, and Charity-schools' and 'A Search into the Nature of Society,' Mandeville increasingly directed his attack against the author of the *Characteristics*.[209] In the latter essay, Mandeville singles out the "Noble Writer…

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[205] See Popkin (2003, pp. 283ff.) on Bayle's 'super-scepticism.'

[206] Robertson (2007, p. 259); for substantiation of this claim, see (pp. 261-280). For further evidence of the depth of Bayle's influence on Mandeville, see Kaye (1988, pp. ciii-cv), who entitles him Mandeville's "great thought-ancestor" (p. xlii); and James (1975).

[207] Recently, Bayle has been interpreted as an Academic sceptic; though he himself is quite clear that there is not much difference between the Academic and Pyrrhonian schools—Bayle (1734-38, vol. 4, p. 653). This view was first advanced by Maia Neto (1997) and, in more detail, (1999); and has been endorsed and developed by Lennon (2002), and Hickson (forthcoming). Bayle's sceptical status has been challenged—e.g., by Jonathan Israel (2006, pp. 558, 669-670)—however, it is persuasively defended from these challenges in Laursen (2011). On Mandeville's scepticism, see Horne (1978, Ch. 2); Hundert (1994, pp. 30-39); and Romão (2015*a*) and (2015*b*). Apart from Bayle's obvious influence on Mandeville, it is clear that Mandeville independently read, and was strongly influenced by, the sceptical humanist Montaigne (and his disciples, Charron and La Mothe Le Vayer). See, for example, Irwin Primer's recent edition of Mandeville's *A Modest Defence of Publick Stews*, which reveals his extensive borrowings from Montaigne (2006, pp. 43, 45-46 n. 60, 47 n. 67, 48 n. 74, 77 n. 139, 87 n. 160, 93 n. 173 and n. 175). See also Mandeville's (1732/1988, vol. 1, p. 5) remark in the Preface to the *Fable*, in which he aligns his project with Montaigne's attempt to expose the "Defects of Man-kind," against those who would rather heap encomiums on the "Excellencies of human Nature".

[208] Brooke (2012, pp. 153-159).

[209] Kaye (1988, pp. lxxii ff.).

Lord Shaftesbury", and in particular his doctrines that man "ought to be born with a kind Affection to the whole, of which he is a part"; that all acts done for "the Publick Good [are] Virtuous", and "all Selfishness" is a "Vice"; that virtue and vice are "permanent Real[i]ties that must ever be the same in all Countries and all Ages"; that morality can be discovered by "Rules of Good Sense"; and that man can "govern himself by his Reason with as much Ease and Readiness as a good Rider manages a well-taught Horse by the Bridle." He then forcefully signals his opposition:

> [T]wo Systems cannot be more opposite than his Lordship's and mine. His Notions I confess are generous and refined: They are a high Compliment to Human-kind, and capable by the help of a little Enthusiasm of Inspiring us with the most Noble Sentiments concerning the Dignity of our exalted Nature: What Pity it is that they are not true….[210]

Much of 'A Search…' is taken up with an attack on those who assert the "the Reality of the *pulchrum & honestum,*" i.e., "whether there be a real Worth and Excellency in things … which every body will always agree to that well understands them".[211] Drawing on examples of widely diverging opinions and practices, he argues that "our Liking or Disliking of things chiefly depends on Mode and Custom," and that "[i]n Morals there is no greater Certainty" than in any other sphere of human evaluative practice.[212] Clearly targeting Shaftesbury's attempt to disentangle the natural affections (based on innate *prolepses*) from the corrupting effects of custom and habit, Mandeville pointedly remarks:

[210] Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 1, pp. 323-324).

[211] Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 1, p. 325).

[212] Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 1, p. 330).

> What Men have learned from their Infancy enslaves them, and the Force of Custom warps Nature, and the same time imitates her in such a manner that it is often difficult to know which of the two we are influenced by.[213]

The conclusion that Mandeville draws from this (purported) observation is that our sense of right and wrong is not to be conceived along what Shaftesbury entitled "realist" lines (see §2.6). In contrast to our artistic judgements of paintings, where the subjectivity of our evaluations is at least tempered by the existence of "a Standard to go by that always remains the same"—namely, its verisimilitude as "an Imitation of Nature"[214]—our moral judgements cannot be compared to a standard in the nature of things. Remarking on marriages between siblings and between parents and their children (which supposedly took place in "the *East*"), Mandeville says:

> …it is certain that, whatever Horror we conceive at the Thoughts of them, there is nothing in Nature repugnant against them, but what is built upon Mode and Custom.[215]

After surveying several such examples of the diversity of moral opinions and practices, he concludes that "the hunting after this *Pulchrum & Honestum* is not much better than a Wild-Goose-Chace".[216] Mandeville's antecedents in this regard include Locke and Bayle. Bayle repeatedly emphasises, in John Christian Laursen's words, "the weakness of reason and the strength of custom and education" in the formation of our moral ideas and beliefs, which he traces, in his *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique*, to the ancient traditions of Pyrrhonian and Academic

[213] Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 1, p. 330). Cf. Bayle (1708/2005, p. 69): "The Power of Custom, and a turn given to the Understanding in the earliest Infancy, may happen to represent an Action as honest and seemly, which in it self is quite otherwise."

[214] Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 1, p. 326); though see (vol. 2, pp. 32-36), where Mandeville seems to have changed his mind, or at least presents a contrary viewpoint on aesthetic standards.

[215] Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 1, p. 330-331).

[216] Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 1, p. 331).

scepticism.[217] Similarly, Locke's law of opinion or reputation (examined in §2.5) catalogues the diversity of moral opinions and practices in different societies in order to establish that our notions of virtue and vice are not universal, naturally formed notions, but based on local "Temper, Education, Fashion, Maxims, and Interests".[218]

He then goes on in the essay to argue that Shaftesbury's affirmation of morally benevolent affections in human nature, which led him to the conclusion that we "may be Virtuous without Self-denial", is, in fact, "a vast Inlet to Hypocrisy". On this head, he attempts to demonstrate that what Shaftesbury conceives of as the sociable natural affections which, when under our power of rational self-government ("as a good Rider manages a well-taught Horse by the Bridle"[219]), supposedly guide us to virtue, are actually various manifestations of our self-love, or pride.

Rejecting the "calm Virtues recommended in the Characteristicks" as "good for nothing but to breed Drones" and certainly not liable to "fit [one] for Labour or Assiduity or stir him up to great Achievements and perilous Undertakings",[220] Mandeville turns instead to some classical models of virtue: *viz.*, Alexander the Great; Cicero; and Cato the Younger. Regarding the latter (who was, notably, a follower of the Stoic philosophy that so influenced Shaftesbury), Mandeville challenges the common idea that his strongest motivation was love of his country, pointing out that instead of submitting to Caesar, in which case he might have continued to serve Rome, he instead "chose Death, because it was less terrible to his Pride" than allowing Caesar to demonstrate his magnanimity.[221]

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[217] Laursen (2011, p. 138); see (pp. 137-141) for ample evidence of Bayle's belief that our moral ideas can be traced to the influence of custom and education, and hence lack any rational certainty. On the sceptical pedigree of his view, see Bayle's articles on Arcesilaus, Carneades, and Pyrrho in the *Dictionnaire*: Bayle (1734-38, vol. 1, pp. 407-414; vol. 2, pp. 325-335; vol. 4, pp. 653-658). For his application of this perspective to the issue of toleration, see Bayle (1708/2005, esp. Pt. II, Chs 8-10; and Pt. IV, e.g., pp. 471, 473, 519).

[218] Locke (1700/1975, p. 356).

[219] Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 1, p. 324).

[220] Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 1, p. 333).

[221] Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 1, p. 336).

Mandeville then takes aim at another crucial "Argument to prove the … real Affection we have for our Species," namely, our love of company and aversion to solitude. In contrast to Shaftesbury's paeans to polite society, Mandeville argues that "[e]ven the most polite People … give no Pleasure to others that is not repaid to their Self-Love".[222] Indeed, he goes further by developing, in the rest of the essay, an extended argument for the thesis that it is the "Bad and Hateful Qualities" and "Imperfections" that constitute the "first Causes" of our supposedly natural sociability.[223] I will not venture to explain Mandeville's argument here, as his genealogy of sociability is quite complex. I will only note that it rests, crucially, on the centrality of our endeavouring to gratify our many desires, in the face of various obstacles:

> [B]e we Savages or Politicians, it is impossible that Man, mere fallen Man, should act with any other View but to please himself while he has the Use of his Organs, and the greatest Extravagancy either of Love or Despair can have no other Centre.[224]

The reference here to "mere fallen Man," alongside the emphasis on the motivational force of pleasing oneself, provides a strong clue as to Mandeville's intellectual influences. Recent interpretations of Mandeville's philosophical system have viewed him as combining ideas from the conflicting traditions of Augustinianism and Epicureanism.[225] The Augustinian aspect, deriving from St. Augustine of Hippo's *The City of God against the Pagans*, manifests itself in Mandeville's insistence that

[222] Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 1, p. 336, p. 342).

[223] Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 1, p. 344).

[224] Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 1, p. 348).

[225] See Force (2003, Ch. 2); Robertson (2007, pp. 127ff.; and pp. 261-280); and Brooke (2012, pp. 149-151, pp. 153-159). These interpretations are all influenced by Jean Lafond's (1996) work, on the confluence between Augustinianism and Epicureanism in late seventeenth-century philosophy (for more on which, see below).

pride stemming from self-love is the key to unlocking most of human motivation. Central to Augustine's work is the notion of two opposed loves: the love of self, and the love of God.[226] In Book XIV, Augustine sets out his account of Adam and Eve's life in Eden, their Fall from Paradise due to Adam's disobedience, and the consequent existence of Original Sin. According to Augustine, it was Adam's being "too well pleased with himself", and thus coming to believe that he could act on the basis of his private will, rather than subordinating it to God's, that led to his disobedience and subsequent fall from Paradise. In other words, Adam's self-love grew excessive, to the point where he forsook "the foundation upon which the mind should rest [i.e. the love of God], and [sought] to become and remain, as it were, [his] own foundation."[227] This is the source of Original Sin; the desire to live according to one's own will, rather than subordinating it to the will of God. Hence Mandeville's reference to "mere fallen Man": in his post-lapsarian condition, man is unable to transcend his essentially prideful nature, except by the grace of God.[228]

As Thomas A. Horne points out, in his survey of Mandeville's relation to the French moral tradition, Mandeville's Augustinian conception of human nature is connected to his deployment of sceptical notions:

> Both Jansenist fideism [a kind of Augustinianism[229]] and skepticism begin with an awareness of the weakness of reason, the strength of the passions, and particularly the power of pride and vanity; and both stress the unmasking of

[226] Augustine (426/1998, p. 632).

[227] Augustine (426/1998, p. 608).

[228] It is worth noting that Augustine was particularly exercised by the Stoic philosophy, which held that vice originated in emotional disturbances in the mind, and could therefore be attenuated or eliminated through reflective self-control. This, Augustine held, hubristically rejected man's moral dependence on God, and thus he described the Stoics as "proud and elated in their impiety" Augustine (426/1998, p. 602). This Augustinian critique of the Stoics is reflected in Mandeville's critique of Shaftesbury's system, as we have seen.

[229] Jansenism—which claimed adherents such as Arnauld, Nicole, and Pascal in seventeenth-century France—is a strict version of Augustinianism, deriving from Cornelius Jansen's *Augustinus* (1640).

> supposedly virtuous activity and the reduction of that activity to the working of self-love.[230]

Thus, Mandeville's Augustinian conviction in the fallen nature of man is imbricated with a sceptical view of our rational and moral powers. Instead of Shaftesbury's portrayal of man as able to govern himself by the rational affections, Mandeville conceives human nature to be "*a compound of various Passions,* [which] *as they are provoked, and come uppermost, govern him by turns, whether he will or no.*"[231] So far, I have surveyed some of Mandeville's sceptical conclusions: that our judgements of virtue and vice are derived from mode and custom rather than nature; that we are thus unable to discern with any certainty what true virtue requires; and that what we take to be instances of sociable, benevolent, and noble behaviour are, in fact, motivated by pride or self-love. Now it can be seen that these sceptical conclusions are underwritten by his Augustinian conception of our fallen nature.

Now, Augustine states that "the Epicurean philosophers live according to the flesh".[232] And there were, indeed, significant points on which Augustinian and Epicurean thought were completely opposed. The existence of divine providence, which Augustine regarded as crucially important to the whole narrative arc of humanity, was denied by Epicureans. The Epicureans furthermore did not regard man as inherently sinful in virtue of his pleasure-seeking tendencies, and indeed assessed actions in terms of their utility. However, developments in seventeenth-century thinking, particularly in the work of the French Augustinians, managed to break down some of the barriers between these philosophical systems.[233] Of particular importance for understanding Mandeville's moral theory is a line of

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[230] Horne (1978, p. 19). For further discussion of the connection between Jansenist Augustinianism and scepticism, see Lennon (1977) and Maia Neto (1995, esp. Ch. 1).

[231] Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 1, p. 39).

[232] Augustine (426/1998, p. 582).

[233] See Robertson (2007, pp. 127-134), who gives an accessible presentation in English of Lafond's (1996) argument to this effect.

thought according to which people pursuing their self-interested passions could lead not only to a functioning society, but a flourishing one. Mandeville's argument, as I will briefly discuss, seized on this line of thought and ran with it to generate some rather paradoxical conclusions.

Hobbes, like Mandeville, recognised the problem caused by pride to the stability of civil society, even noting that the *Leviathan* was named for the description in the biblical book of Job of the sea monster Leviathan as the "King of the Proud".[234] Hobbes's own recommendation for controlling pride was, in essence, to suppress it: thus his ninth law of nature is the law *against pride*; and, like all the laws of nature, it requires "the terrour of some Power, to cause [it] to be observed"—that is, of course, the terror of the sovereign power.[235] However, Mandeville, in contrast to Hobbes, held that fear of punishment, and even of death, whilst a strong component in maintaining public order, could nevertheless be overcome by pride. In accordance with Mandeville's Augustinian commitments, pride is "in Man … so inseparable from his very Essence… that without it the Compound he is made of would want one of the chiefest Ingredients".[236] Pride's insistence on maintaining a belief in one's own value may, in certain contexts, require suppressing the passion of self-preservation: or, as Mandeville puts it, the fear of shame may outweigh the fear of death.[237] In Mandeville's view, then, political leaders cannot simply rely on their subject's fear of the sovereign's superior power to subdue the inordinate desire for gratification of their pride, in particular, the need to feel superior.

Mandeville's solution to the problem posed by pride was to turn pride back against itself. In his 'An Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue,' he argues that:

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[234] Hobbes (1651/1991, p. 221). I am grateful to Chris Brooke for pointing this out, many years ago now, in a tutorial.

[235] Hobbes (1651/1991, p. 107, p. 117).

[236] Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 1, p. 44-45).

[237] Mandeville develops this theme at length in Remark R of the *Fable*; see in particular, Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 1, pp. 206ff).

> [T]he first Rudiments of Morality, broach'd by skilful Politicians, to render Men useful to each other as well as tractable, were chiefly contrived that the more Ambitious might reap the Benefit from, and govern vast Numbers of them with the greater Ease and Security.[238]

How did Mandeville propose that these astute politicians might have introduced the first rudiments of morality? The first stage of Mandeville's account was to suggest that they made use of the "bewitching Engine" of flattery, representing the nature of man as supremely excellent, and conferring "a thousand Encomiums on the Rationality of our Souls". Given the prideful nature of man, such flattery was bound to capture people's sentiments. The second stage is well-explained by Mandeville himself:

> Having by this artful way of Flattery insinuated themselves into the Hearts of Men, they began to instruct them in the Notions of Honour and Shame; representing the one as the worst of all Evils, and the other as the highest Good to which Mortals could aspire: Which being done, they laid before them how unbecoming it was the Dignity of such sublime Creatures to be solicitous about gratifying those Appetites, which they had in common with Brutes, and at the same time unmindful of those higher Qualities that gave them preeminence over all visible Beings. They indeed confess'd, that those impulses of Nature were very pressing; that it was troublesome to resist, and very difficult wholly to subdue them. But this they only used as an Argument to demonstrate, how glorious the Conquest of them was on the one hand, and how scandalous on the other not to attempt it.[239]

In other words, once one has captured men's sentiments by representing man as supremely excellent by virtue of his unique rationality, it is a short step to constructing the notions of honour and shame as living up to, or falling short of, those standards, respectively. As the standards of excellence relate to man's superior

[238] Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 1, p. 47).

[239] Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 1, p. 43).

rationality, separating him from the instinctually motivated, pleasure-seeking, selfish brutes, it follows that insofar as a man is able to suppress his natural passions—i.e., to exercise self-denial—and act instead in the common good, he is honourable, and insofar as he fails he is shameful.

The third stage is a straightforward corollary of the second: the artful politicians then "divided the whole Species into two Classes", to wit, the honourable (rational, self-denying, public-spirited), and the shameful (brutish, pleasure-seeking, selfish).[240] By this point, those apparently able to suppress their natural passions would join the politicians in extolling the excellence of doing so. Those who failed at this act of "Self-Conquest" would admire those who could do what they could not, or else would be too afraid of the joint force of the politicians and the already converted subjects, to openly contradict them.[241]

The final stage of Mandeville's account is then to argue that, the politicians' scheme having been largely successful, any dissenters would soon appreciate that it is more favourable to their own interests to benefit from the public-spiritedness of others, rather than to decry it, and so would agree to label shameful behaviour a *vice*, and honourable behaviour a *virtue*.[242]

To be clear, however, Mandeville does not hold that those who manage to suppress their natural passions and act in a public-spirited fashion are thereby virtuous. For Mandeville, the motive is what determines the morality of an action:

> …it is impossible to judge of a Man's Performance, unless we are thoroughly acquainted with the Principle and Motive from which he acts.[243]

[240] Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 1, pp. 43-44).

[241] Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 1, pp. 45-46).

[242] Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 1, pp. 48-49).

[243] Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 1, p. 56).

What, then, is the criterion by which we are to evaluate the virtuousness or viciousness of the principle or motive from which an action is performed? Mandeville is clear on this, stating that when the definition of virtue and vice were established, men agreed

> …to call every thing, which, without Regard to the Publick, Man should commit to gratify any of his Appetites, VICE; if in that Action there cou'd be observed the least prospect, that it might either be injurious to any of the Society, or even render himself less serviceable to others: And to give the Name of VIRTUE to every Performance, by which Man, contrary to the impulse of Nature, should endeavour the Benefit of others, or the Conquest of his own Passions out of a Rational Ambition of being good.[244]

By this definition, however, it seems that the 'virtue' that Mandeville's scheming politicians engender in their subjects is not authentic virtue.[245] As has been shown, the motive is not actually a pure rational ambition of being good, but is a redirection of pride:

> …the nearer we search into human Nature, the more we shall be convinced, that the Moral Virtues are the Political Offspring which Flattery begot upon Pride.[246]

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[244] Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 1, pp. 48-49).

[245] John Colman (1972) disputes this, and argues that Mandeville maintains a coherent moral theory according to which virtue is not only real, but is obtainable by men *without divine assistance*. However, Colman's argument relies on taking the seemingly rigoristic, Augustinian aspects of Mandeville's system to be a satirical device used primarily to highlight the hypocrisy of the clergy. See James (1975, esp. pp. 56ff.) for a refutation, in my view decisive, of attempts to downplay Mandeville's moral rigorism.

[246] Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 1, p. 51).

> Thus Sagacious Moralists draw Men like Angels, in hopes that the Pride at least of Some will put 'em upon copying after the beautiful Originals which they are represented to be.[247]

Even those men who "from no other Motive but their Love to Goodness, perform a worthy Action in Silence" exhibit:

> …no small Symptoms of Pride, and the humblest Man alive must confess, that the Reward of a Virtuous Action, which is the Satisfaction that ensues upon it, consists in a certain Pleasure he procures to himself by Contemplating on his own Worth: Which Pleasure, together with the Occasion of it, are … certain Signs of Pride….[248]

That Mandeville thinks of the 'virtuous' behaviour brought about by the artful machinations of politicians—and reinforced by the beautiful representations of moralists—as not being authentic virtue is revealed in the subtitle of the second 1714 edition of the *Fable*, which runs:

> CONTAINING, Several Discourses, to demonstrate, That Human Frailties, *during the degeneracy of* MANKIND, may be turn'd to the Advantage of the CIVIL SOCIETY, and made to supply the Place of *Moral Virtues.*[249]

Thus the redirection of the natural passions, most centrally pride, is not authentic virtue, but merely supplies their place during our degenerate existence (i.e., our earthly existence, marred by original sin). However, as the subtitle also indicates, this redirection is necessary for the maintenance of large, flourishing societies. This can be seen in the moral of Mandeville's opening poem, *The Grumbling Hive: Or, Knaves turn'd Honest*:

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[247] Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 1, p. 52).

[248] Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 1, p. 57).

[249] Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 2, reproduction opposite p. 392).

> *…Fools only strive*
> *To make Great an Honest Hive*
> *T' enjoy the World's Conveniencies,*
> *Be fam'd in War, yet live in Ease,*
> *Without great Vices, is a vain*
> EUTOPIA *seated in the Brain.*[250]

He returns to this theme in Volume 2 of the *Fable*, which consists largely of six dialogues between Cleomenes and Horatio, with the former representing Mandeville's own views, and the latter generally representing those of Shaftesbury.[251] To take a straightforward example, Cleomenes declares that:

> …my Friend [Mandeville] demonstrates in the first place, that the National Happiness which the Generality wish and pray for, is Wealth and Power, Glory and Worldly Greatness; to live in Ease, in Affluence and Splendour at Home, and to be fear'd, courted and esteem'd Abroad: In the second, that such a Felicity is not to be attain'd to without Avarice, Profuseness, Pride, Envy, Ambition and other Vices. The latter being made evident beyond Contradiction, the Question is not, whether it is true, but whether this Happiness is worth having at the Rate it is only to be had at….[252]

In a similar vein, responding to Horatio's argument that we could place no confidence in those occupying "Posts of Honour and Profit" unless assured that they were, generally speaking, virtuous, Cleomenes argues:

> …if Virtue, Religion, and future Happiness were sought after by the Generality of Mankind, with the same Sollicitude, as sensual Pleasure, Politeness, and worldly Glory are, it would certainly be best, that none but Men of good Lives, and known Ability, should have any Place in the Government … But to expect that this ever should happen … in a large,

[250] Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 1, 36).

[251] Mandeville owns Cleomenes's views for his own in the Preface (1732/1988, vol. 2, p. 21); though see (p. 21 n. 2) where Mandeville's editor, F. B. Kaye, inserts a minor qualification to this. In the Third Dialogue, Horatio claims that "Lord *Shaftsbury* is my favourite Author" (p. 107), and Mandeville reinforces his fictional interlocutor's Shaftesburian outlook in the Preface (p. 20).

[252] Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 2, p. 106).

> opulent and flourishing Kingdom, is to betray great Ignorance in human Affairs….[253]

Mandeville's argument, then, is that there is a stark trade-off between Virtue and Utility: an honest hive cannot be made great without ridding it of its honesty, and a great hive cannot be made honest without dismantling the preconditions of its greatness. As Mandeville evidently holds it to be in vain to recommend or try to pursue the second option,[254] which would be to eliminate the basis of large, flourishing societies, he can be understood to be recommending this redirection of human vices to "supply the place of moral virtues," and at least allow the public to benefit, on the whole, from their human frailties.

The harsh Augustinian verdict on our moral condition is thus tempered by what E. J. Hundert refers to as, "[t]he Epicurean provenance of *The Fable*'s most basic and influential argument, Mandeville's conjectural account of social formation".[255] Mandeville's Epicurean tendency allows general utility—derived from the skillful management by politically astute law-givers of the interactions of pleasure-seeking and self-interested individuals—to count as some kind of good, even if not a *virtuous* or *morally praiseworthy* good.[256] Nevertheless, just as Mandeville's Augustinian view of our predicament leads to sceptical conclusions, so to do his Epicurean commitments. Evidently, Mandeville's claim that our very ideas of morality are artificial,[257] resulting from a redirection of the natural passion of pride, and thus incapable of inspiring genuine moral action (absent divine

[253] Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 2, p. 335).

[254] Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 2, pp. 335-336).

[255] Hundert (1994, p. 48); on Mandeville's Epicureanism more generally, see (pp. 45ff.).

[256] Mandeville states that the word "good" is ambiguous, and only in the sense where it is equivalent to *virtuousness* does it entail self-denial, or the conquest of the natural passions (1732/1988, vol. 2, p. 109). He thus allows that there is a non-moral sense of "good" that does not entail suppressing the natural impulses or passions.

[257] That is, they have their origins in the artifice of politicians and moralists, rather than in our natural constitution.

intervention, at least), generates a serious sceptical problem. If we are so deceived about the motives of our actions, and the morality of an action depends entirely upon said motives, then how can we know whether we are ever truly acting morally?

But the problem cuts deeper than this, for we are not just, on Mandeville's picture, deceived about the motives of our actions, but about our very nature. The supposed divide in terms of rationality and control over the passions separating human beings and non-human animals (central to Descartes's philosophy, but also, as we saw in §2.6, key to Shaftesbury's neo-Stoic project), is brought into question. Mandeville utilises a common sceptical argumentative strategy, familiar from Montaigne and Bayle: he undermines belief in the distinctive human capacity for rational self-control by drawing analogies between supposed paradigmatic exercises of this capacity, on the one hand, and the behaviour of non-human animals, on the other.[258] Indeed, as John Callanan has suggested, Mandeville deploys this sceptical stratagem in a unique way, in arguing that it is our extraordinary (non-rational) pride that causes the desire to think ourselves more rational and in control of our passions than other animals, and thus generates our second-order affections—i.e., our liking of our (imagined) first-order motives.[259] That is, *contra* Shaftesbury, our capacity for evaluating our own affections is not an innate principle drawing us to "rational objects of moral good."[260] Rather, it is grounded in the non-rational and ultimately vicious principle of pride, which primes us for inculcation with a self-image that is, fundamentally, a monumental piece of self-deception.

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[258] See Luciano Floridi (1997) on the history of sceptical arguments, going back to Sextus Empiricus, that appeal to analogies with non-human animals to "undermine the exaggerated confidence in human cognitive capacities" (p. 30). Mandeville would certainly have been influenced by the discussions of this subject in *An Apology for Raymond Seybond* by Montaigne (1580-95/2003, pp. 489-683, esp. pp. 503ff.), and by Bayle in his *Dictionnaire* article 'Rorarius' (1734-38, vol. 4, pp. 900-916).

[259] Callanan (2015).

[260] Shaftesbury (1711/2000, pp. 175-176).

In summary, Mandeville attacks Shaftesbury's Stoic conception of virtue as embedded in a teleologically ordered nature, arguing that our moral distinctions derive not from the nature of things but from mode and custom. Human beings have no natural moral sense, and such sociable behaviour as they engage in is in fact motivated by their vicious qualities; chiefly, that of pride (or, in his later reconceptualisation, self-liking).[261] In other words, virtue, according to Mandeville is entirely artificial—there is no such thing as natural virtue. Furthermore, he proffers an account of the origin of this artificial moral distinction between virtue and vice, in terms of the redirection of man's vicious natural passions, most significantly pride, by politicians seeking to render men fit to govern. This social process of redirection does not, however, yield authentic virtues, but only a simulacrum that supplies their place. Nevertheless, the simulated virtues are beneficial to the stability and prosperity of society—i.e., they promote general utility—and thus constitute a kind of good, if not that of virtuousness.

As with Hobbes, it is easy to perceive why Mandeville's moral theory would be regarded as a form of dangerous moral scepticism. In the next section, I will look at one of Mandeville's most perceptive and influential critics, Francis Hutcheson.

### *§2.8. Francis Hutcheson*

Francis Hutcheson is most well known in contemporary history of philosophy for his anti-rationalist and sentimentalist theory of morals, and particularly for the influence this had on the young Hume's developing ideas. The most significant and strongest interpretation in this vein (as I briefly discussed in §1.2) is that of Norman Kemp Smith, developed in his book *The Philosophy of David*

[261] I have not explored here Mandeville's later development of the distinction between self-love and self-liking, as it is not crucial for the points I wanted to make in this section. For his statement of this distinction, see Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 2, pp. 129ff.). For commentary on how this distinction complicates Mandeville's moral psychology, see Kerkhof (1995).

*Hume*. Recent commentators have argued that Kemp Smith's influential interpretation is overstated, and that there were major disagreements between Hutcheson and Hume that the interpretation is unable sufficiently to accommodate.[262] I agree with these commentators that the influence of Hutcheson on Hume was less thoroughgoing and positive in nature than Kemp Smith argued, but that is not the issue I want to concentrate on for now (I will come back to it). What I want to highlight to begin with is that the formulation of an anti-rationalist position was not, in the first instance, the central motivation behind Hutcheson's moral theory; rather, it was his opposition to (what he conceived of as) Hobbes's and Mandeville's hedonic egoism regarding morality.

Hutcheson's first philosophical work, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (first edition, 1725), was aimed squarely at Mandeville and in defense of Shaftesbury, the subtitle stating that it is a work, "*In which the Principles of the late Earl of Shaftesbury are Explain'd and Defended, against the Author of the Fable of the Bees.*" His next work—*An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections, with Illustrations on the Moral Sense* (first edition, 1728)—built on this foundation. And, indeed, there are many affinities between Shaftesbury's system and that of Hutcheson: the doctrine of a moral sense; the comparison of morality to aesthetics; the importance of affections to morality; the alignment of virtue with the natural end of man; the identification of vice as a corruption of our original nature by custom and habit; the opposition to hedonic egoism (or 'Epicureanism'); and more. Nevertheless, Hutcheson's philosophy differed from Shaftesbury's in significant respects, with two major differences being that: (i) Whereas Shaftesbury's system is presented in the format of polite essays adopting a rhetorical style, Hutcheson's treatises are much closer to our analytical, argumentative mode of philosophising; and (ii) Shaftesbury, as we have seen, was largely hostile to Locke's philosophical approach, not just in style but in substance—

[262] See in particular Moore (1994); Turco (2003); and Wright (2007, Chs 8 and 9).

especially the substance of his moral theory—whilst Hutcheson was much more sympathetic towards certain fundamental Lockean ideas regarding human understanding, not least with respect to Locke's rejection of innate ideas or principles, including those of morality. In this section, I will not have much to say about the first of these divergences, but the second, more substantive issue will feature prominently.

Hutcheson's theory of morals is based on an important distinction between two aspects of our ethical life, both of which stand in need of explanation: firstly, we morally approve or disapprove of the affections and actions of other people and ourselves (moral approbation); secondly, we are motivated to perform or not perform certain actions by moral considerations (moral motivation).[263] Hutcheson then invokes two distinct features of human nature in order to explain these two aspects:

(1) We possess a *moral sense* that, antecedently to any considerations of interest or advantage, leads us to approve of benevolence, and disapprove of its contrary; and

(2) We possess *benevolent affections* that motivate us to do that which will help others, or is in the public good.

For Hutcheson, it is only because of (1) and (2) that moral considerations have any grip on us; indeed, if we were to lack them, we would not take certain facts (e.g., 'that such-and-such an action will cause immense suffering') to count as *moral* considerations at all—they could only affect our judgements or our motives if they appealed to some non-moral sense or instinct, such as self-interest.[264]

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[263] Hutcheson sharply distinguishes these at the beginning of his *Illustrations*: see (1742/2002, pp. 133-134). The distinction is also clear in his earlier *Inquiry on Virtue*, of which Section I and Section II are entitled, respectively: *Of the Moral Sense by which we perceive Virtue and Vice, and approve or disapprove of them in others*; and *Concerning the immediate Motive to virtuous Actions* (1726/2004, pp. 89ff. and 101ff.).

[264] Hutcheson distinguishes two kinds of reasons for action corresponding to (1) and (2): "justifying reasons" are considerations that engage our moral approbation, and thus depend on our possessing a moral sense; and "exciting reasons" are considerations that move us to action, hence they depend

Thus, Hutcheson opposed the hedonic egoism of philosophers such as Hobbes and Mandeville, who regarded morality as reducible to self-love:

> There are two Opinions on this Subject entirely opposite: The one that of the old *Epicureans*, as it is beautifully explained in the first Book of *Cicero*, *De finibus;* which is revived by Mr. *Hobbes*, and followed by many better Writers: "That all the Desires of the *human Mind*, nay of all *thinking Natures*, are reducible to *Self-Love*, or *Desire of private Happiness:* That from this Desire all Actions of any Agent do flow." Our *Christian Moralists* introduce other sorts of Happiness to be desired, but still "'tis the *Prospect of private Happiness*, which, with some of them, is the sole *Motive of Election*. And that, in like manner, what determines any Agent to *approve* his own Action, is its *Tendency to his private Happiness* in the whole, tho it may bring *present Pain* along with it: That the *Approbation* of the Action of another, is from an Opinion of its Tendency to the Happiness of the *Approver*, either *immediately* or more *remotely*…."[265]
>
> The other Opinion is this, "That we have not only *Self-Love*, but *benevolent Affections* also toward others, in various Degrees, making us desire their Happiness as an *ultimate End*, without any view to private Happiness: That we have a *moral Sense* or Determination of our Mind, to *approve* every *kind Affection* either in our selves or others, and all publickly useful Actions which we imagined do flow from such Affection, without our having a view to our *private Happiness,* in our Approbation of these Actions."
>
> These two Opinions seem both intelligible, each consistent with itself. The former seems not to present human Nature as it is; the other seems to do it.[266]

As can be seen from the above, Hutcheson, unlike Shaftesbury, does not explicitly identify his opponents as moral sceptics. Rather, he identifies them, as previous philosophers had done with Hobbes, as Epicureans.[267] As we have seen, though,

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on instincts and affections—in particular, moral motivation depends on our having benevolent affections. See Hutcheson (1742/2002, p. 138).

[265] Hutcheson (1742/2002, pp. 134-135).

[266] Hutcheson (1742/2002, p. 136).

[267] See, e.g., Hutcheson (1726/2004, p. 143) and (1742/2002, pp. 22-23, 26, 29, 134-135).

Hobbes was also regarded as a moral sceptic by certain thinkers. The same, I should point out, can be said for Mandeville. For example, George Blewitt,[268] whom F. B. Kaye describes as the "most painstaking" critic of Mandeville, characterised Mandeville's ethics thus:

> The Doctrine of *Pyrrho* … was much to the same Purpose. He said, *There was nothing excellent, or shameful, or just, or unjust, and so of other Things; that there was nothing in* Reality, *but that Men did every Thing from Law and Custom, that one Thing was not rather to be chosen than another*; or as the Author of the *Fable* has stumbled upon a pretty good Explanation of his Words, there is *no real Worthy and Excellence in things, no Pre-eminence of one above another.* […] From this *Pyrrho, Scepticks* were called *Pyrrhonians,* or *Pyrrhonists*; and from hence that Treatise of *Sextus Empiricus* had its Name; in one Part of which he endeavours to overturn the Certainty of Right and Wrong, by collecting a great many monstrous Opinions and Customs of People contrary to the common ones. From hence, or rather from *Montaigne*, who has borrowed it from hence, has our Author [Mandeville] again borrowed what he has given us to the same Purpose, and in Pursuit of the same laudable End.[269]

Blewitt thus explicitly connects Mandeville, through Montaigne, to the sceptical tradition, and he was not the only contemporaneous commentator to make the connection.[270] Now, certain remarks made by Hutcheson suggest that he is not fundamentally in disagreement with Blewitt's categorisation of Mandeville as a moral sceptic. Hutcheson states in the Preface to his *Inquiry* that, in opposition to moral systems based on pleasure derived from advantage or interest (such as Mandeville's), Hutcheson seeks to defend the "Reality of Virtue" by showing that it

[268] Sometimes spelt 'Bluet' or 'Bluett'.

[269] Blewitt (1725, pp. 87-88). For Kaye's comment, see Mandeville (1732/1988, vol. 2, p. 409).

[270] See, for example, Fiddes (1724, pp. x-xii, xvi-xvii, 404-405); Brown (1751, p. 257); and Hume (M 5.3, p. 214).

is instead based on a moral sense, or power of perception.[271] He expands on this theme in his *Essay* on the passions:

> …it is enough for some *Writers*, who affect to be wondrous shrewd in their Observations on human Nature, and fond of making all the World, as well as themselves, *a selfish Generation*, incapable of any real *Excellence* or *Virtue*, without any *natural Disposition* toward a *publick Interest*, or toward any *moral Species*; to get but a "Set of different *Words* from those commonly used, yet including the same *natural Dispositions*, or presupposing them," …and they are sufficiently furnished to shew, that there is no real *Virtue*, that all is but *Hyppocrisy, Disguise, Art,* or *Interest.*[272]

Thus, Hutcheson characterises the aim of moral egoists such as Mandeville as being to re-describe our natural dispositions in self-interested terms, in order to demonstrate that there is no "real *Excellence* or *Virtue*". This is clearly very close to Blewitt's identification of Mandeville's moral scepticism with the thesis that "there is *no real Worthy and Excellence in things*".

Hutcheson could, then, have identified his opponents, such as Hobbes and Mandeville, as not just Epicureans, but as sceptics. Another supporter of Shaftesbury, Pierre Coste, does just this:

> These new Scepticks, after the Example of *Hobbes*, allow of no *Generous Passion*, no *Social Affection*. Our Author [Shaftesbury] therefore shews, that these Sentiments are implanted in the Heart of Man; that *Hobbes* himself could not divest his Soul of these Principles; and that his Followers have irresistibly submitted to the Power of the *Social Charm*.
>
> …From hence he overthrows the Doctrine of *Epicurus*, *Hobbes*, and all their Followers, sets off the native Charms of Virtue, and shews she is not to be won by mean, self-interested Views.[273]

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[271] Hutcheson (1726/2004, p. 8).

[272] Hutcheson (1742/2002, p. 100).

[273] From Coste's preface to his French translation of Shaftesbury's *Sensus Communis*, translated into English in [Roche] (1722, vol. 1, pp. 87-88). For an account of Coste's approval of Shaftesbury's opposition to Locke, despite his having been Locke's translator, see Milton (2008).

Why does Hutcheson not adopt a similar approach to Coste? I can only speculate, but it seems to me plausible that Hutcheson had reason to avoid framing the debate in terms of scepticism. Shaftesbury, we may recall, attacked Locke for being a sceptic because of the latter's denial of innate ideas or principles, especially those of morality, the former basing his own doctrine of the moral sense on innate notions (or '*prolepses*'). But Hutcheson is in agreement with Locke that "the vast Diversity of moral Principles… is indeed a good Argument against innate Ideas, or Principles".[274] And as Hutcheson himself points out:

> Nothing is more ordinary among those who, after Mr. Locke have shaken off the groundless Opinions about innate Ideas, than to alledge, "That all our Relish for Beauty, and Order, is either from prospect of Advantage, Custom, or Education," for no other Reason but the Variety of Fancys in the World…."[275]

The worry then is that, because Hutcheson also follows Locke in having "shaken off" innate moral ideas on the grounds of the vast diversity of moral opinions, he is likewise committed to the idea that our moral perceptions arise from the prospect of advantage, custom, or education. Hutcheson's response to this worry is to insist that his moral sense may ground morality without relying on innate ideas, and do so consistently with the diversity of moral opinions.[276] This creates some apparent tension in his position: even as Hutcheson purports to be defending Shaftesbury's doctrine of moral sense, he at the same time states that "this moral Sense has no relation to innate Ideas",[277] and so places himself in straightforward opposition to Shaftesbury. Indeed, rather than taking his lead from Shaftesbury, Hutcheson in fact

[274] Hutcheson (1726/2004, p. 138).

[275] Hutcheson (1726/2004, p. 66). Hutcheson here remarks on aesthetic, rather than moral, beauty, but his position—that they are not based on innate ideas or principles, but a power of perception—is the same for both.

[276] See, e.g., Hutcheson (1726/2004, pp. 9, 67, 100).

[277] Hutcheson (1726/2004, p. 9).

models his moral sense on Lockean epistemology—in particular, Locke's claim that we have simple ideas of pleasure and pain that are "suggested to the mind *by all the ways of Sensation and Reflection.*"[278] Hutcheson develops this thought, arguing that we may give the name of 'sense' to "*every Determination of our Minds to receive Ideas independently on our Will, and to have Perceptions of Pleasure and Pain*".[279] Such determinations of the mind cannot be confined to external senses (sight, touch, taste, etc.), but must include the internal senses of regularity, harmony, uniformity; a public sense or *sensus communis*; a sense of honour; and, crucially, the moral sense. Hutcheson's moral sense is thus actually significantly closer to a Lockean sensory faculty than it is to Shaftesburian innate principles or notions.[280]

In general, then, Hutcheson seems keen to play down his disagreement with Shaftesbury. In particular, by avoiding couching his critique of Mandeville and others in terms of an intention to refute moral scepticism, Hutcheson avoids emphasising his deep disagreement with Shaftesbury on the nativism issue. Instead, as I have said, Hutcheson chooses to label his opponents 'Epicureans,' which highlights his opponents' hedonic egoism and concomitant reduction of morality to self-love, positions which he agrees with Shaftesbury in fundamentally opposing.[281]

What Hutcheson did share with Shaftesbury was a confidence that human nature, and in particular the moral sense, supplied a norm governing conduct. In stark opposition to Mandeville, Hutcheson held that, as our nature could not by itself be corrupt, any corruption must be the effect of customs and opinions:

> To define *Virtue* by *agreeableness to this moral Sense*, or describing it to be *kind Affection*, may appear perhaps too uncertain; considering that the Sense

[278] Locke (1700/1975, p. 121; see also pp. 128-131 for his discussion of these ideas).

[279] Hutcheson (1742/2004, p. 17).

[280] See Carey (2005, pp. 161-172) for further discussion of Hutcheson's absorption of Lockean epistemic and psychological notions.

[281] Kail's (2013, p. 104) claim that it would have been "rhetorically useful" for Hutcheson to categorise his opponents as 'sceptics' is, from this perspective, highly questionable.

> of particular Persons is often depraved by *Custom*, *Habits*, false Opinions, Company….[282]

Furthermore, again contrary to Mandeville, Hutcheson held that it was not hard to disentangle this corrupting influence from the natural state of the moral sense. By "abstracting from particular Habits or Prejudices" it becomes evident that it is integral to our constitution to approve of benevolence, especially "*universal calm Benevolence*", which is the "Perfection of Virtue":

> Our *moral Sense* shews this to be the highest Perfection of our Nature; what we may see to be the *End* or *Design* of such a Structure, and consequently what is requir'd of us by the Author of our Nature: and therefore if any one like these Descriptions better, he may call Virtue, with many of the Antients, "*Vita secundum naturam*;" or "acting according to what we may see from the Constitution of our Nature, we were intended for by our Creator."[283]

As Hutcheson's editor, Aaron Garrett, remarks in a footnote to this passage, the *vita secundum naturam*, or 'life according to nature,' is "a central Stoical ethical doctrine".[284] Like Shaftesbury, then, Hutcheson embeds his conception of the moral sense in a teleological system influenced by the Stoics. It might be thought that Hutcheson's ascription of a positive role to the affections runs contrary to the Stoics, who regarded all emotions, or affective states, as a disturbance in the soul with wholly negative psychic effects. However, this is a false dichotomy. As Margaret R. Graver states in a recent book on *Stoicism and Emotion*, even "the person of perfect understanding [the Stoic sage] will be capable of every feeling it is in human nature to have", but in a corrected, rational form, which the Stoics called *eupatheiai*.[285] In a similar vein, Hutcheson says:

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[282] Hutcheson (1742/2002, p. 7).

[283] Hutcheson (1742/2002, p. 8).

[284] Hutcheson (1742/2002, p. 8 n. 5).

[285] Graver (2007, p. 51).

> Our *Passions* no doubt are often matter of Uneasiness to our selves, and sometimes occasion Misery to *others*, when any one is indulged into a Degree of Strength beyond its *Proportion*. But which of them could we have wanted, without greater Misery in the whole?[286]

Hutcheson, like the Stoics, accepts that our passions may, when unbalanced, be a great source of disturbance, and has much to say about their disruptive effects:

> …the Sense of particular Persons is often depraved by *Custom, Habits*, false Opinions, Company: and that some *particular kind Passions* toward some Persons are really pernicious, and attended with very unkind Affections toward others, or at least with a Neglect of their Interests.[287]

But when in harmony, the natural affections promote happiness and virtue:

> They are by Nature ballanced against each other, like the *Antagonist Muscles* of the Body; either of which separately would have occasioned *Distortion* and irregular *Motion*, yet jointly they form a Machine, most accurately subservient to the *Necessities*, *Convenience*, and *Happiness* of a *rational System*. We have a Power of *Reason* and *Reflection*, by which we may see what Course of Action will naturally tend to procure us the most valuable *Gratifications* of all our Desires, and prevent any intolerable or unnecessary Pains, or provide some support under them. We have Wisdom sufficient to form Ideas of *Rights*, *Laws*, *Constitutions*; so as to preserve large Societies in Peace and Prosperity, and promote a *general Good* amidst all the *private Interests*.[288]

The reference to man as "a *rational System*" draws attention to a subject on which some commentators have perhaps misunderstood the nature of Hutcheson's anti-

[286] Hutcheson (1742/2002, p. 119).

[287] Hutcheson (1742/2002, pp. 7-8).

[288] Hutcheson (1742/2002, pp. 119-120).

rationalism.[289] It is well known that Hutcheson's views—although, as I have said, initially directed at hedonic egoist conceptions of morality—were criticised by moral philosophers who gave a much more central place to reason in moral thought and action; i.e., the rationalists. The most famous engagement of these was with the rationalist Gilbert Burnet.[290] However, rather than focussing on the details of this debate, I will consider some features of Hutcheson's position that complicate the picture of him as a thoroughgoing moral anti-rationalist.

As noted above, Hutcheson divided the moral sphere into two domains, that of *approbation*, and that of *motivation*. These correspond to a broad division that Hutcheson makes in the faculties of the mind, between those that are supervised by the understanding, and those supervised by the will. As he says in an addition to the third edition of the *Illustrations*:

> Writers on these Subjects should remember the common Divisions of the Faculties of the Soul. That there is 1. *Reason* presenting the natures and relations of things, antecedently to any Act of *Will* or *Desire:* 2. The *Will*, or *Appetitus Rationalis*, or the disposition of Soul to pursue what is presented as good, and to shun Evil.[291]

This broad division corresponds to the distinction between what philosophers nowadays refer to as the cognitive faculties and the conative faculties.[292] Hutcheson's theory of faculties, as was common in the period, takes an explicitly hierarchical form. The understanding (also 'reason' or 'the intellect') and the will (or the '*appetitus rationalis*') are the highest faculties, and below them Hutcheson places the

[289] For the following discussion, I am very much indebted to Peter Millican and Amyas Merivale for exceedingly helpful correspondence on the matter.

[290] Burnet and Hutcheson (1735). For detailed commentary on this debate, see Gill (2006, Ch. 12).

[291] Hutcheson (1742/2002, p. 214).

[292] Millican (2009*a*, p. 18). Millican surveys the background to Hume's conception of the faculties of the mind, including Hutcheson's views. See especially the Appendix to the article, where he gives a detailed diagram of Hutcheson's view of the faculties, which I have drawn on here.

senses and the sensitive appetites, respectively.[293] As Hutcheson says in his Latin works, the *Synopsis on Metaphysics* and the *Short Introduction to Moral Philosophy*, the senses, both internal and external, "report to the understanding".[294] The moral sense, then, like the other senses, is supervised by reason. What is the faculty of reason, on Hutcheson's conception? Hutcheson states that: "Reason is understood to denote our *Power of finding out true Propositions*".[295] It follows that, if reason is the supervisory faculty of the moral sense, then the moral sense must be capable of delivering reports that enable the finding out of true propositions. And he says as much:

> If what is intended in this Conformity to Reason be this, "That we should call no Action *virtuous*, unless we have some *Reason* to conclude it to be virtuous, or some *Truth* shewing it to be so." This is very true; but then in like manner we should count no Action *vicious*, unless we have some *Reason* for counting it so, or when 'tis *Truth* "that it is vicious."[296]

Hutcheson is here rebutting the view that what distinguishes virtue from vice is that virtue consists in conformity to reason and truth, and vice the opposite. Even in the course of attacking this rationalist thesis, Hutcheson is clear that there are truths about whether an action is virtuous or vicious. This is perfectly compatible with Hutcheson's view that there is no reason or truth that may lead us to approve or disapprove of an action, as he puts it, "independently of any *moral Sense*".[297] Indeed,

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[293] See the rest of the passage just quoted at Hutcheson (1742/2002, p. 214). A similar point is made in a footnote to the *Essay*: Hutcheson (1742/2002, p. 32 n.).

[294] Hutcheson (1747/2007, p. 7; also, pp. 25ff.) and (1744/2006, pp. 112ff.). James Moore (1990) has argued that, as a result of their pedagogic context, Hutcheson's Latin works represent a different philosophical system from his earlier works. However, as Hutcheson depicts a similar relationship between the senses and the understanding in both the *Essay* and the *Illustrations* (see the previous footnote), it is reasonable to assume that, on this point at least, the different systems (if such they be) concur.

[295] Hutcheson (1742/2002, p. 137).

[296] Hutcheson (1742/2002, p. 147).

[297] Hutcheson (1742/2002, p. 144).

he observes, "we judge of all our *Senses* by our *Reason,*" but it does not follow that "these Qualities are perceivable antecedently to any *Sense*, by our *Power of finding out Truth*":

> [W]e must not… conclude, that it is any *reasoning* antecedent to a *moral Sense*, which determines us to approve the Study of publick Good, any more than we can… conclude, that we perceive *Extension, Figure, Colour, Taste,* antecedently to a Sense. All these Sensations are often corrected by *Reasoning*, as well as our *Approbations* of Actions as Good or Evil: and yet no body ever placed the *Original Idea* of *Extension, Figure, Colour, or Taste,* in *Conformity to Reason.*[298]

Our moral sense is thus supervised by reason, and our moral perceptions can be corrected by it, but this does not entail that reason itself is capable of receiving moral perceptions. This is the crux of Hutcheson's anti-rationalist case with respect to the moral sense. His anti-rationalism with respect to moral motivation is more straightforward. The central argument is direct: all motivation requires a desired or intended end; an end cannot be desired or intended unless the agent possesses an affection of some kind; so there cannot be any motivation without affection, i.e., no motivation by reason alone.[299] The anti-rationalist case regarding moral motivation is more straightforward, as I say, because the affections and instincts underpinning motivation are under the supervision not of reason (as the moral sense is), but of the will, which Hutcheson (as I have indicated) is insistent constitutes a distinct supervisory faculty of the mind. There is, then, a significant disanalogy between his weak anti-rationalist thesis regarding the moral sense (which he regards as fundamentally cognitive in nature), and his much stronger anti-rationalism concerning moral motivation, which belongs to another domain altogether (the conative).

[298] Hutcheson (1742/2002, pp. 150-151).

[299] Hutcheson (1742/2002, p. 139).

In the next section, I will turn to a philosopher who, whilst he agreed with some of the Stoic principles of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, and with their opposition to both hedonic egoism and more stringent forms of moral rationalism, nevertheless felt that their response was inadequate to rebut the moral sceptic. That figure is Bishop Joseph Butler.

### *§2.9. Joseph Butler*

Joseph Butler, like Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, was an opponent of 'Epicurean' theories of motivation and morality, which, in Butler's own terms, are responsible for:

> ...explaining away all particular Affections, and representing the whole of Life as nothing but one continued Exercise of Self-Love.[300]

His opposition is set out in his *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel* (first edition, 1726). In the Preface added to the second edition of the sermons (1729), Butler remarks that this self-love theory leads to "Confusion and Perplexity in the *Epicureans* of old, *Hobbs*, the Author of *Reflexions Sentences et Maximes Morales* [La Rochefoucauld], and this whole Sett of Writers".[301] No doubt in this set of writers, Butler also has in mind Bernard Mandeville.

Butler's central objections to the proponents of the self-love theory, or hedonic egoism more generally, are presented in Sermon XI, in the context of an analysis of the Biblical injunction, *love thy neighbour as thyself*. The specific aim of this Sermon is to refute the idea that there is a "peculiar Kind of Contrariety between Self-love and the Love of our Neighbour, between the pursuit of publick and of private Good". In other words, Butler seeks to establish that benevolence and self-

[300] Butler (1729, p. xxv).

[301] Butler (1729, p. xxv).

love do not necessarily conflict; at least, no more than self-love is in conflict with *any other* passion or affection for some object. By establishing this, he hopes to obviate any "secret Prejudice" or "open Scorn" directed at "Talk of publick Spirit, and real Good-will to our Fellow creatures" from its being thought particularly contrary to what is in one's own interest.[302]

In order to make this broader argument, Butler determines that it is necessary to consider the nature of self-love as distinct from other passions and appetites. He notes that: "The Principle we call Self-love never seeks any Thing external for the sake of the Thing, but only as a Means of Happiness or Good".[303] Butler then makes the all-important move of distinguishing the principle of self-love from what he calls the 'particular passions':

> That all particular Appetites and Passions are towards *external Things themselves*, distinct from the *Pleasure arising from them*, is manifested from hence; that there could not be this Pleasure, were it not for that prior Suitableness between the Object and the Passion: There could be no Enjoyment or Delight from one thing more than another, from eating Food more than from swallowing a Stone, if there were not an Affection or Appetite to one thing more than another.[304]

The 'particular passions' are thus passions for objects in themselves, i.e., distinct from and prior to the pleasure which those objects engender. Butler puts it in terms of passions for external things, as opposed to the internal objects of enjoyment or satisfaction. But this way of putting things may mislead: what matters is not whether the object of the passion is internal or external to the *agent*; after all, Butler goes on to mention the particular passions for greatness and honour, presumably (at least partly) internal qualities. What matters, rather, is that the objects of the particular

[302] Butler (1729, p. 204).

[303] Butler (1729, p. 206).

[304] Butler (1729, pp. 206-207).

passions are properly external to the hedonic state of the agent, that is, what is desired in the object is not its pleasure-causing properties as such.

Armed with this distinction, Butler then mounts his case against the self-love theories of motivation and virtue. His first move is a linguistic one. He notes that, because "every particular Affection is a Man's own, and the Pleasure arising from its Gratification his own Pleasure," some will argue that every affection is a manifestation of self-love. In response, Butler makes two points: (1) this is not the ordinary use of these terms, "not the Language of Mankind"; and (2) even if one grants this non-standard use of terms, there is, as specified above, still an identifiable difference between the principle of self-love in Butler's sense, on the one hand, and the particular passions, on the other—hence, we would simply have to invent other terms to express the difference.[305]

Having warded off any such simple linguistic manoeuvre by the self-love theorist, Butler makes what has been regarded as a powerful argument for supposing that said theorists typically get back-to-front the relation between our passions or affections, on the one hand, and pleasure or happiness, on the other:

> Happiness or Satisfaction consists only in the Enjoyment of those Objects which are by Nature suited to our several particular Appetites, Passions, and Affections. So that if Self-love wholly engrosses us, and leaves no room for any other Principle, there can be absolutely no such thing at all as Happiness or Enjoyment of any Kind whatever; since Happiness consists in the Gratification of particular Passions, which supposes the having of them. Self-love then does not constitute *This* or *That* to be our Interest or Good; but, our Interest or Good being constituted by Nature and supposed, Self-love only puts us upon obtaining and securing it.[306]

In other words, if all our affections were manifestations of self-love, they would all have the same object: pleasure or happiness. But how would we obtain this pleasure?

[305] Butler (1729, pp. 207-208).

[306] Butler (1729, p. 210; cf. xxvii-xxviii).

Only by satisfying some particular passion. But, *ex hypothesi*, we have no other passions. So if all passions were reducible to self-love, pleasure and happiness would be impossible. As this is not the case, we must have some other, particular passions, which have objects other than pleasure—though satisfying these passions brings pleasure, giving self-love something at which to direct itself. Thus self-love is, as it were, parasitic on the particular passions.

This is the core of Butler's case against the self-love theorists. His opposition to such 'Epicurean' ideas, plus the Stoic themes in his moral philosophy—some of which I will look at below—has led several commentators to ally him with Shaftesbury and Hutcheson against Hobbes, Mandeville, and others. However, it has recently been argued in a persuasive paper by Aaron Garrett that Butler's criticisms of self-love theory derive from a more general rejection of any "tendency to over-simplify the human frame and morals and then to extend it beyond what could be observed or known as probable."[307] That is, the self-love theorists are guilty of over-simplification in their attempt to extend one principle to the whole human frame, and explain all affection and motivation in terms of it. This is not consistent with a careful examination of the actual parts and relations between them in the human constitution, and hence amounts to a kind of dogmatism. This tendency, so Butler thought, was as much present in Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, as in Hobbes or Mandeville. I will consider, then, some points over which Butler was highly critical of these neo-Stoic figures.

Whereas Hutcheson seems to have been inclined to disguise his significant disagreements with Shaftesbury (see §2.8), Butler directly confronted Shaftesbury in the 1729 Preface, accusing him of conceding too much to the moral sceptic. I will quote at length, as his argumentative strategy here is important:

[307] Garrett (2012, p. 185).

> The not taking into Consideration this Authority [of conscience], which is implied in the Idea of reflex Approbation or Disapprobation, seems a material Deficiency or Omission in *Lord Shaftsbury's Inquiry concerning Virtue*. He has shewn beyond all Contradiction, that Virtue is naturally the Interest or Happiness, and Vice the Misery, of such a Creature as Man, placed in the Circumstances which we are in this World. But suppose there are particular Exceptions; a Case which this Author was unwilling to put, and yet surely it is to be put: or suppose a Case which He has put and determined, that of a Sceptick not convinced of this happy Tendency of Virtue, or being of a contrary Opinion. His Determination is, that it would be *without Remedy*. One may say more explicitly, that leaving out the Authority of reflex Approbation or Disapprobation, such a one would be under an Obligation to act viciously; since Interest, one's own Happiness, is a manifest Obligation, and there is not supposed to be any other Obligation in the Case. "But does it much mend the Matter, to take in that natural Authority of Reflexion? There indeed would be an Obligation to Virtue; but would not the Obligation from supposed Interest on the side of Vice remain?" If it should, yet to be under two contrary Obligations, *i.e.* under none at all, would not be exactly the same, as to be under a formal Obligation to be Vitious, or to be in Circumstances in which the Constitution of Man's Nature plainly required that Vice should be preferr'd. But the Obligation on the side of Interest really does not remain. For the natural Authority of the Principle of Reflection, is an Obligation the most near and intimate, the most certain and known: Whereas the contrary Obligation can at the utmost appear no more than probable; since no man can be *certain* in any Circumstances, that Vice is his Interest in the present World, much less can he be certain against another: And thus the certain Obligation would intirely supersede and destroy the uncertain one; which yet would have been of real Force without the former.[308]

Butler's objection to Shaftesbury derives from the centrepiece of his moral philosophy, the 'principle of conscience,' his preferred name for the moral faculty. The objection, simply put, is that Shaftesbury rests his whole case against the sceptic on an argument for the concurrence of virtue and happiness, but this concurrence, whilst perhaps it generally obtains, may nevertheless be liable to "particular Exceptions". As such, Shaftesbury's attempt to combat moral scepticism is at best incomplete, as it leaves it open for situations in which an agent, in order to promote

[308] Butler (1729, pp. xvii-xviii).

their own happiness, is obligated to act viciously. In Butler's view, it must be shown not only that virtue generally concurs with happiness; but, more importantly, that virtue has *its own* obligation, deriving from the authority of conscience—an authority distinct from, and superior to, any obligation to happiness.

It is important to note that there is a significant epistemic dimension to Butler's argument. As he says in the quoted passage, the obligations deriving from conscience are the most "near and intimate," "certain and known," and so on. These claims are not terribly clear, but he elaborates upon them. Even what Shaftesbury regarded as the "greatest Degree of Scepticism" possible would, Butler says,

> …still leave Men under the strictest Moral Obligations, whatever their Opinion be concerning the Happiness of Virtue. For that Mankind upon Reflection felt an Approbation of what was good, and Disapprobation of the Contrary, He thought a plain Matter of Fact, as it undoubtedly is, which none could deny, but from mere Affectation. Take in then that Authority and Obligation, which is a constituent Part of this reflex Approbation, and it will undeniably follow, though a Man should doubt of every thing else, yet, that he would still remain under the nearest and most certain Obligation to the Practice of Virtue; an Obligation implied in the very Idea of Virtue, in the very Idea of reflex Approbation.[309]

The authority of conscience is so well-known and intimate because it is a "constituent Part" of the reflexive evaluations of actions of which we have immediate experience; thus, the mere fact that we make such evaluations obliges us to act or not act in certain ways. These ideas Butler summarises in the principle "that Man is … by his very Nature a Law to himself".[310] By contrast, the obligation to pursue our own happiness or interest is much less certain or known: discharging this obligation requires probable reasoning about the likely consequences for one's interest of pursuing a particular course of action, and Butler holds that this involves less

[309] Butler (1729, pp. xviii-xix).

[310] Butler (1729, p. xx).

certainty than the inward examination of one's conscience. In other words, Shaftesbury does not appreciate the ignorance we lie under with regard to our capacity to realise our own interest or happiness.

In the dissertation 'Of the Nature of Virtue'—appended to his *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature*—Butler criticises Hutcheson's view (discussed in §2.8) that "Virtue is resolvable into Benevolence, and Vice into the Want of it".[311] After presenting particular cases where, Butler thinks, acting from one's sense of benevolence does not determine one to act virtuously, or may even occasion vice, he turns to a more general problem:

> [T]hough it is our Business and our Duty to endeavor, within the Bounds of Veracity and Justice, to contribute to the Ease, Convenience, and even Cheerfulness and Diversion of our Fellow-creatures; yet, from our short Views, it is greatly uncertain whether this Endeavor will, in particular Instances, produce an Overballance of Happiness upon the whole; since so many and distant things must come into the Account.[312]

The criticism is redolent of his objection to Shaftesbury. If Hutcheson were right that virtuous action is "resolvable into" benevolence, we would be unable to pursue it. Our ignorance, or "short Views," frustrates the endeavour to achieve "an Overballance of Happiness" by our own efforts. From this perspective, the main difference between Shaftesbury and Hutcheson is as follows. Shaftesbury (as we saw in §2.6) starts with the interest of the individual human being, and works outwards, locating this individual interest in the promotion of more general goods—the species, and ultimately the universal system. Hutcheson, however, starts with the observation that we possess benevolent affections guiding us towards the common interest or public utility, and consequently identifies man's individual interest as a moral agent with action based on such affections. Nevertheless, Butler sees both

[311] Butler (1736, p. 316).

[312] Butler (1736, pp. 319-320).

philosophers as entertaining grand notions of placing ordinary human morality in the context of an objective universal teleology. As such, they strike him as being overly ambitious, striving to go beyond the bounds of comprehension set by our natural ignorance.[313]

None of this is to say that Butler denied the teleological conception of virtue found in Shaftesbury and Hutcheson. Like them, he held that a virtuous life was one led in accordance with nature: his first three sermons are, he says, intended "to explain what was meant by the Nature of Man," and that "Virtue consists in following, and Vice in deviating from it".[314] And, as I have indicated, Butler's principle of conscience is invoked precisely to supply the order and regulation to human nature that it requires if it is to constitute an authoritative moral guide. In this sense, he concurred with their Stoic principles.[315]

However, while Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, as we saw, ascribed disharmony and vice to the potentially corrupting effects of factors outside of our original constitution—such as custom, habit, opinion, and education—Butler seems much more comfortable with the influence of these factors, emphasising that they are necessary for "Moral Discipline and Improvement".[316] In general, he was less keen, as Aaron Garrett puts it, to "reduce complex moral psychology to simplifying (and confused) concepts like happiness, benevolence, interest," and so on:

> On Butler's account, our nature involves multiple principles—conscience, self-interest, desires for particular passions—which can either conflict or be in harmony. But the fact that happiness, obligation, and virtue can be brought into harmony does not mean that happiness, obligation, and virtue are simple, much less that they are identical.[317]

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[313] Garrett (2012, pp. 180-185).

[314] Butler (1729, p. vii).

[315] For more on Butler's Stoicism, see Brooke (2012, pp. 165-167).

[316] Butler (1729, Ch. 5, esp. pp. 81ff.).

[317] Garrett (2012, pp. 182, 183).

Unlike Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, then, he was must less confident in our capacity to discern an harmonious plan in nature, a general system that would assure us that following conscience was ultimately in the interest and happiness of ourselves and everyone else. Again, this is *not* to deny that Butler believed in divine providence, in the design and moral governance of the universe by the Christian God: he is clear that he does believe in these things.[318] But in contrast to our other neo-Stoics, he was much more keen to emphasise our ignorance with respect to how the "Nature of Man" fits into the general scheme of things, in particular, the constitution and course of nature as governed by divine providence. In Sermon XV, 'Upon the Ignorance of Man,' Butler dwells at length on "the Shallowness of our Reason".[319] He divides his discussion into two parts, concerning: (i) the extent of our ignorance, and (ii) what follows from this for our conduct. In answer to (i), he says:

> [W]e may know somewhat concerning the Designs of Providence in the Government of the World, enough to enforce upon us Religion and the Practice of Virtue; yet, since the Monarchy of the Universe is a Dominion unlimited in Extent, and everlasting in Duration, the general System of it must necessarily be quite beyond our Comprehension. And since there appears such a Subordination and Reference of the several Parts to each other, as to constitute it properly one Administration or Government, we cannot have a thorough Knowledge of any Part without knowing the Whole. This surely should convince us, that we are much less competent Judges of the very small Part which comes under our Notice in the World, than we are apt to imagine.[320]

Note that Butler holds not only that the general system of providence is beyond our comprehension, but also that, as one fully comprehends a part only in relation to the whole, we cannot fully comprehend even that part of which we have some limited

[318] Butler (1736, Ch. 3).

[319] Butler (1729, p. 307).

[320] Butler (1729, p. 303).

understanding. In answer to (ii), then, what does Butler hold to be the consequences of this ignorance for our conduct? Butler draws four conclusions from this, but I will leave aside the second and fourth points (not important for my purposes), mentioning only the first and third. Firstly, Butler holds that in both moral and religious matters, we must be satisfied with "any Evidence whatever, which is real". We should not expect a "distinct comprehensive View of the whole Subject, clear of Difficulties and Objections", for we have no such knowledge of "any Science whatever."[321] He illustrates this point with the example of a man walking at twilight. Of course, he says:

> It would not be altogether unnatural for him to reflect, how much better it were to have Day-light; he might perhaps have great Curiosity to see the Country round about him; he might lament that the Darkness concealed many extended Prospects from his Eyes, and wish for the Sun to draw away the Veil: but how ridiculous would it be to reject with Scorn and Disdain the Guidance and Direction which that lesser Light might afford him, because it was not the Sun itself! If the Make and Constitution of Man, the Circumstances he is placed in, or the Reason of Things, affords the least Hint or Intimation, that Virtue is the Law he is born under; Scepticism itself should lead him to the most strict and inviolable Practice of it; that he may not make the dreadful Experiment, of leaving the Course of Life marked out for him by Nature, whatever that Nature be, and entering Paths of his own, of which he can know neither the Dangers nor the End. For though no Danger be seen, yet Darkness, Ignorance and Blindness are no manner of Security.[322]

This, in a manner, summarises Butler's reply to moral scepticism. Rather than taking our ignorance as a reason to reject virtue, any evidence that suggests that we lie under a duty towards virtuous action should be followed: to do otherwise is to reject what little light there is for darkness.

[321] Butler (1729, p. 309).

[322] Butler (1729, pp. 310-311).

Butler's third conclusion is that we "should apply ourselves to that which is level to our Capacities". The weakness of our understanding shows that "Knowledge is not our proper Happiness." Rather than obtaining knowledge for the sake of having it, we should recognise that "the only Knowledge, which is of any Avail to us, is that which teaches us our Duty, or assists in the Discharge of it."[323] Thus, not only is our ignorance a reason for conforming ourselves to duty, it is a reason for regarding knowledge to be *subordinate* to duty. For Butler, our epistemic limitations are evidence that expanding our knowledge and understanding is not suitable to our nature, except insofar as it is useful in promoting the living of good, virtuous lives.

This brings out, though perhaps in an unfamiliar manner, Butler's opposition to certain rationalist views regarding morals and religion. Butler's first extant philosophical work, written while he was still a student at Oxford, is his critical engagement with the ideas of Samuel Clarke, published as *Several Letters to the Reverend Dr. Clarke from a Gentleman in Glocestershire* (1716). I do not intend to engage with this pamphlet, only to observe that this early engagement evidently shaped Butler's conception of the method of moral philosophy, Clarke being unable to persuade the sceptical Butler that demonstrative arguments were the appropriate tool in arguing for God's existence and properties. Butler remained committed instead to the method of probable reasoning based on matters of fact, and carried it over into moral philosophy. This is clear from the well-known passage in the Preface to his Sermons:

> There are two Ways in which the Subject of Morals may be treated. One begins from inquiring into the abstract Relations of things: the other from a Matter of Fact, namely, what the particular Nature of Man is, its several Parts, their Oeconomy or Constitution; from whence it proceeds to determine what Course of Life it is, which is correspondent to this whole Nature. In the former Method the Conclusion is express'd thus, that Vice is contrary to the Nature and Reasons of things: in the latter, that 'tis a Violation or Breaking

[323] Butler (1729, pp. 313, 314).

> in upon our own Nature. Thus they both lead us to the same thing, our Obligations to the Practice of Virtue; and thus they exceedingly strengthen and enforce each other. The first seems the most direct formal Proof, and in some Respects the least liable to Cavil and Dispute: the latter is in a peculiar Manner adapted to satisfie a fair Mind; and is more easily applicable to the several particular Relations and Circumstances in Life.[324]

It is noteworthy that Butler is not just declaring his preference for a different method of philosophising about morals: the immediate subjects of these two approaches to philosophical inquiry are also different. Where the deductive method of Clarke seeks to discover the "abstract Relations of things"—abstract, quasi-mathematical truths of morality—Butler's method of probable reasoning from matters of fact is directed at uncovering the nature of man in terms of its parts and their relations, and a morality based on the organisation of that inner constitution. The different methods, he says, lead to the same thing in *practical* terms, i.e., to our obligations. But the immediate subjects, inquiry into which enables us to infer these obligations, are distinct.

This is crucial for Butler's response to scepticism. One might suspect that demonstrative arguments would be preferable in defeating the sceptic about virtue or religion; that probable arguments would not be as convincing, because leading only to probability and not certainty. However, in Butler's view, this is wrongheaded. What matters more for how efficacious the approach is in warding off the sceptic is the subject-matter: the abstract relations of things, Clarke's 'moral fitnesses,' are just the sort of metaphysical qualities of which Butler holds that our ignorance prevents clear comprehension. By contrast, our internal nature is much more accessible, and in particular (as we saw in Butler's criticism of Shaftesbury) the principle of conscience is the most near and intimate, the most certain and known.

Butler indeed seems to suggest as much towards the end of *The Analogy of Religion*. Butler admits that in this work he has "omitted [something] I think true,

[324] Butler (1729, p. vi-vii).

and of the utmost Importance, because by Others thought unintelligible, or not true"—*viz.*, "the moral Fitness and Unfitness of Actions, prior to all Will whatever". He omits also the "Principle of Liberty," as it is denied by the fatalists. He then says that:

> [T]hese two abstract Principles of Liberty and moral Fitness being omitted, Religion can be considered in no other View than merely as a Question of Fact; and in this View it is here considered.[325]

Evidently, he notes, the historical basis of Christianity is a question of fact, but so too, he holds, is natural religion:

> [N]atural Religion is, properly, a Matter of Fact. For, that there is a righteous Governor of the World, is so; and this Proposition contains the general System of natural Religion.[326]

Nevertheless, perhaps the principles of liberty and moral fitness would be of use in a proof of the truths of natural religion. So why does Butler omit them? He explains by way of an analogy with mathematical truths:

> …That the three Angles of a Triangle are equal to two right ones, is an abstract Truth; but that they appear so to our Mind is only a Matter of Fact. And this last must have been admitted, if any thing was, by those ancient Scepticks, who would not have admitted the former; but pretend to doubt, Whether there were any such thing as Truth; or, Whether we could certainly depend upon our Faculties of Understanding for the Knowledge of it in any Case.[327]

The sceptic who doubts an abstract truth must nevertheless, Butler asserts, admit

[325] Butler (1736, p. 285).

[326] Butler (1736, p. 286).

[327] Butler (1736, p. 286).

that it appears so to the mind. By comparison:

> …God having given Mankind a moral Faculty, the Object of which is Actions, and which naturally approves some Actions as Right and of Good-desert, and condemns others as Wrong and of Ill-desert; that He will, finally and upon the whole, reward the former and punish the latter, is not an Assertion of an abstract Truth, but of what is as meer a Fact as his doing so at present would be.[328]

Thus, although the existence of moral fitnesses and unfitnesses in things is an abstract truth, the existence of the moral *faculty* (i.e., conscience) in mankind is an evident matter of fact, from which we may construct a probable argument for God's moral government of the world. Butler is aware that this will be considered "a Proof easily cavilled at, easily shewn not to be demonstrative," but nevertheless, he believes, "impossible … to be evaded or answered."[329]

In summary, I have considered Butler's arguments not only against the hedonic egoist theories of Hobbes and Mandeville, but against the Stoic philosophers Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, with whom he shares rather more in common; and finally, against the moral rationalism of Samuel Clarke. A concern with scepticism runs through his engagements with these thinkers, who he believes cannot successfully answer the sceptic. And he deploys a similar approach in each case. By recognising our ignorance about the general systems of providence and natural religion, of God's moral government and the abstract moral fitnesses which determine this regime, we learn instead to trust in a matter of fact of which we have more immediate evidence—the principle of conscience, and its normative status, in our natural constitution. We may, by use of probable arguments, infer things about God's ways and works, but this is secondary to recognising the authority of conscience, its status as a law of our very nature.

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[328] Butler (1736, pp. 286-287).

[329] Butler (1736, p. 287).

*§2.10. Conclusion*

Examining the debate over moral scepticism in the hundred years of British philosophy prior to Hume reveals that it encompassed an almost bewildering array of complex and interrelated topics. Subject-matters touched upon include the relation of morality to custom, convention, and education (*artificiality*); to the will and command, both human and divine (*voluntarism*); to pleasure and self-interest (*hedonic egoism*); to reason or the understanding (*rationalism*); to God's existence (*religion* and *irreligion*); to innate ideas and our natural constitution (*nativism*); to final causes or the end of our constitution (*teleology*); to necessity and liberty (*necessitarianism* and *libertarianism*); to universal principles and local variability (*universalism* and *relativism*); and more. Many of the arguments made, and positions adopted or disputed, do not stay within one or other of these categories, but are rather cross-cutting. Take, for example, Ralph Cudworth's depiction of the moral sceptic as one who denies that virtue and vice are natural and immutable, but makes the distinction out to be positive, arbitrary, and factitious (§2.3). This cuts across the issues of, *inter alia*, artificiality, voluntarism, rationalism, and nativism. And, of course, this is just one statement of one thinker covered. Thus, attempting to give a coherent description of the essential features of moral scepticism as a focus of discussion in the period would be fruitless.

Does this imply that 'moral scepticism' is more-or-less empty of content, perhaps just a term of abuse to be hurled at one's opponents, but too expansive and vague to be a useful category for illuminating structures of thought? Not necessarily. For it might still have substance within the context of the theories of morality of particular thinkers. I am of course interested in what substance it may have within the context of *Hume's* theory of morals, and this may be different from the meaning it had for the other thinkers surveyed in this chapter. Nevertheless, this detailed background gives a sense of the web of conceptual connections that would have shaped Hume's own understanding of the notion. Moreover, they deepen our

interpretation of what sort of intervention Hume took himself to be making; how he might have understood the upshot of the arguments he made and positions he argued for, in relation to the theories of morality developed by recent major philosophers.

Implicit in the foregoing is a basic distinction, which it will be useful to bear in mind. When we ask whether Hume was a sceptic about morality, we must be clear whether we mean by his own lights, or by the lights of others. There is no 'right' understanding of the concept, just different ways it is deployed by different thinkers. To be clear, I am interested in how Hume himself conceived of scepticism in the moral context, and in what ways he would have regarded himself as a moral sceptic, or not, according to his own conception. That is, I am interested in what substantive meaning, or meanings, the term might have within Hume's own moral philosophy, because the Reconciliation Problem (see §1.2) is a problem *within* that philosophy. In doing so, I will be relating Hume's position to the debate amongst these thinkers, which infused his own understanding. But even more significantly, I will be relating it to the positions and arguments taken with respect to the various subject-matters listed above. In the next Chapter, I will look at how Hume's thought evolved regarding three of these topics—artificiality, hedonic egoism, and universalism/relativism—in the context of changes made to his theory of the common point of view. In particular, I will be arguing that these changes were likely motivated by a desire to shore up his moral theory against scepticism.

# 3

# The Progress of Hume's Sentiments

*§3.1. Hume's Sentiments about the Treatise*

In the last Chapter, I explored Hume's question, 'what is meant by a sceptic?', in the context of British moral philosophy from Thomas Hobbes to Joseph Butler. I did so to illuminate the intellectual background to Hume's own treatment of the issue of moral scepticism. However, it should not be assumed that Hume's response to moral scepticism remained uniform throughout his life and works. Indeed, it should not be assumed that even the content of Hume's moral thought, and therefore the intellectual materials out of which he could fashion a response, remained identical over time—if aspects of his moral system changed, perhaps so too might have Hume's response to moral scepticism from within that system.

The issue to which I am alluding is, of course, the relationship of Hume's *Treatise* to his later works, especially the two *Enquiries*. In the twentieth-century, it became generally assumed that the *Treatise* represented the most intellectually serious and advanced expression of Hume's philosophical ideas, with his later philosophical works correlatively assumed to be—whilst perhaps stylistically improved—stripped of much of the technicality, rigorousness, and depth of argument that makes the *Treatise* such an engaging work, ripe for detailed scholarly examination and debate.[330] This attitude has impacted the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, just as much as it has the 'first' *Enquiry*. In his recent intellectual biography of Hume, James A. Harris states:

[330] See Kemp Smith (1941, pp. 519-523) for an account of how the *Treatise* came to be "generally recognised as a philosophical classic" (p. 521).

> For a long time, the [moral] *Enquiry* suffered in the same way as did the *Philosophical Essays/ Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, denied serious attention in its own right because it was regarded as a poor substitute for the authentic Humean philosophy to be found in the *Treatise*.[331]

On the face of it, this prioritisation of the *Treatise* above the rest of Hume's philosophical efforts—indeed, to a large extent above all his intellectual efforts—is a strange phenomenon. Why should Hume's first work, composed in his twenties, be thought the most developed presentation of his philosophy? Furthermore, it is well-known by now that Hume was (to put it mildly) somewhat disappointed with the *Treatise*, a dissatisfaction that set in before he had even published Book 3, and persisted until the end of his life.[332] Just to cite two examples: in his *Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Edinburgh* (1745), Hume says of the *Treatise*:

> I am indeed of Opinion, that the Author had better delayed the publishing of that Book; not on account of any dangerous Principles contained in it, but because on more mature Consideration he might have rendered it much less imperfect by further Corrections and Revisals. (L 41, p. 431).

And towards the end of his life (in 1775), Hume sent a letter to his printer William Strahan, asking that an 'Advertisement' be prefixed to his *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects, Vol. 2* (a volume containing both *Enquiries*, the *Dissertation on the Passions*, and the *Natural History of Religion*). The Advertisement in full runs:

> Most of the principles, and reasonings, contained in this volume, were published in a work in three volumes, called *A Treatise of Human Nature:* A work which the Author had projected before he left College, and which he wrote and published not long after. But not finding it successful, he was sensible of his error in going to the press too early, and he cast the whole anew in the following pieces, where some negligences in his former reasoning and more in the expression, are, he hopes, corrected. Yet several writers, who have honoured the Author's Philosophy with answers, have taken care to direct all

[331] Harris (2015, p. 526 n. 20).
[332] See especially Millican (2006).

> their batteries against that juvenile work, which the Author never acknowledged, and have affected to triumph in any advantages, which, they imagined, they had obtained over it: A practice very contrary to all rules of candour and fair-dealing, and a strong instance of those polemical artifices, which a bigotted zeal thinks itself authorised to employ. Henceforth, the Author desires, that the following Pieces may alone be regarded as containing his philosophical sentiments and principles. (E, p. 2)

As can be observed, Hume's distaste for the *Treatise* only intensified over time: he went from regretting that he had published the *Treatise* without further efforts to improve it, to wishing that it be ignored altogether, dismissed as a "juvenile work," by the end period of his life. At some point,[333] Hume decided that rather than modify the *Treatise*, he ought to recast the ideas contained therein (or some of them) in his mature works of philosophy. In 1751 (a few years after publishing the first *Enquiry*, and the same year as he published the second *Enquiry*), he wrote to Gilbert Elliot saying "I give you my Advice against reading" the *Treatise*; and that the first *Enquiry* contains "every thing of Consequence" regarding human understanding (HL, vol. 1, p. 158). And by 1754, he determines that it was "a very great Mistake" to have "publish[ed] at all the Treatise of human Nature", a book which "so much displeases me, that I have not the Patience to review it." (HL, vol. 1, p. 187). Hume's declaration in the Advertisement that he decided, following the *Treatise*'s failure, to cast his ideas anew, applies just as much to his moral thought—he says as much in 'My Own Life' (MOL 9, p. xxxxvi). According to Hume's design, then, just as the first *Enquiry* should be taken to supplant *Treatise* Book 1, so the moral *Enquiry* should be taken to supplant the third Book of the *Treatise*.

In the Advertisement to the *Essays and Treatises*, Hume mentions that "most of the principles and reasonings" in his mature works could be found in the *Treatise*. Why, then, should he be so dissatisfied with the *Treatise*? One hypothesis I will not consider: that his desire for literary fame resulted in his recasting the ideas of the

[333] Exactly when cannot be determined; the available evidence is too slight. But for some indications from what evidence we do have, see below.

*Treatise* in a more shallow, palatable, easy-going format for members of the general literary culture unable to appreciate the argumentative sophistication and complexity of the earlier work. I take it that this ungenerous interpretation has been sufficiently refuted, and will say no more about it.[334]

A less implausibly uncharitable hypothesis is that the dissatisfaction was entirely, or almost entirely, for reasons of style and presentation. A typical statement of this interpretation can be found in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article on Hume:

> Rather than repudiating the *Treatise*, perhaps his recasting of it represents a shift in the way he *presents* his "principles and reasoning" rather than a *substantive* change in what he has to say. […] He also comments in "My Own Life" that the *Treatise*'s lack of success "proceeded more from the manner than the matter"—more from the *structure* of what he said than what he said. It is not unreasonable to conclude that Hume's recasting of the *Treatise* was designed to address this issue….[335]

This may seem consistent with Hume's remarks that the *Treatise*'s failure "proceeded more from the manner than the matter" (MOL 8, p. xxxv); or that his corrections relate more to "negligences" in his "expression" than in his "reasoning" (in the Advertisement; E, p. 2). However, this is not the only hypothesis consistent with Hume's remarks. It is also quite compatible with what he says that there is a non-trivial change of philosophical substance between the *Treatise* Book 3 and the second *Enquiry*. Or so I shall argue presently.

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[334] This view is based principally on a misconstrual of certain remarks in Hume's autobiographical sketch, 'My Own Life.' For a classic refutation of the view, see Kemp Smith (1941, pp. 526-530); for a more comprehensive refutation, dealing with more recent permutations, see Buckle (1999). (Buckle focusses on the relation of *Treatise* Book 1 to the first *Enquiry*, but his analysis of Hume's motivations is general.)

[335] Morris and Brown (2014, §2; my emphases).

*§3.2. 'Manner' and 'Matter'*

I will make three points to support my approach here. Firstly, even on a cursory reading, one cannot fail to be struck by how enormously different Hume's later works are in presentation: the tone, structure, emphasis, inclusion/omission of topics, and so forth, are very much changed. The moral *Enquiry* is particularly striking in this regard: topics that appeared central to *Treatise* Book 3 are pushed back into appendices, or even footnotes; those only lightly touched on formerly are made central to the *Enquiry*'s argument; the structure is correspondingly completely changed; there is much more of a sense of the "Warmth in the Cause of Virtue" which Hutcheson felt to be lacking from the *Treatise* (HL, vol. 1, p. 32); and many more differences. Thus, when Hume comments that the failure of the *Treatise* was more due to the "manner" than the "matter"—i.e., more a result of the mode of presentation than the substance or content of his philosophical ideas[336]—we may observe the striking and extensive differences in the manner, and reflect that this still permits ample scope for non-trivial differences in the matter. Similarly, even if he has corrected more negligences in the expression than in the reasoning, as he says, that does still imply that he has corrected negligences in his former reasoning, and again, given how much the 'expression' has changed, the 'reasoning' may well have altered in some substantive ways.

Secondly, Hume suggests in his 1775 letter to his printer William Strahan that the Advertisement constitutes "a compleat Answer to Dr Reid and to that bigotted silly Fellow, Beattie." (HL, vol. 2, p. 301). As I briefly noted in the first chapter (§1.1), Reid and Beattie both viewed Hume as a sceptic whose principles would, if true, subvert morality and religion. Reid did not address Hume's moral philosophy during the latter's lifetime, but only posthumously in Reid's *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (1788), so Hume's complaint about Reid must be restricted

[336] Insofar, that is, as these can be distinguished. The distinction must be regarded as a rough-and-ready one, for there is no final separation between 'manner' and 'matter'. As Hume well understood, presentation—especially how a point is expressed—in part determines meaning, and hence content.

to his criticisms of Hume's theory of human understanding.[337] Beattie, however, did attack Hume's moral philosophy, alongside other aspects of the *Treatise*, in the *Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth* (1770), saying that:

> Scepticism is now the profession of every fashionable inquirer into human nature; a scepticism which is not confined to points of mere speculation, but hath been extended to practical truths of the highest importance, even to the principles of morality and religion.[338]

Now, Hume refers to all the works contained in the volume to which the Advertisement is prefixed, including the moral *Enquiry*, when he says that "the following Pieces may alone be regarded as containing [my] philosophical sentiments and principles" (E, p. 2). Furthermore, we may take it that Hume was, *inter alia*, concerned to refute the accusation of pernicious scepticism levelled at his philosophical system as a whole, given the nature of Reid and Beattie's criticisms. It is hard to see how Hume's description of the Advertisement as a "compleat Answer" to these figures could possibly be referring to changes solely to the literary style or presentation of his philosophy. Reid and Beattie did not, after all, attack the mode of presentation of the *Treatise*—they attacked its philosophical content, especially its promotion of what they regarded as a dangerous strain of scepticism that subverted (what they held to be) the self-evident truths of common-sense.[339]

Thirdly, in his autobiographical 'My Own Life,' Hume said that the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, "in my opinion (who ought not to judge on that subject), is of all my writings, historical, philosophical, or literary, incomparably the best." (MOL 10, p. xxxvi). This attitude was reflected in his private correspondence, where he says of the moral *Enquiry*: "I must confess, I have a Partiality for that Work,

[337] Presented in Reid's *Inquiry into the Human Mind* (1764). It is worth noting, though, that even in this work, Reid does suggest that the theory of ideas, which he holds leads to scepticism, is sufficient to "overturn all philosophy, all religion and virtue" (p. ix).

[338] Beattie (1770, p. 6).

[339] A point well made by Nelson (1972).

& esteem it the most tolerable of anything I have composed"; and that it is "my favourite Performance, tho' the other has made more Noise." (HL, vol. 1, pp. 175, 227). These judgements are, I submit, difficult to read as representing a purely 'manner'-based assessment of the relative merit of the moral *Enquiry*. There is no hint of qualification in his determination that it is "incomparably the best" or "the most tolerable" of all his works; no indication that the standard he is deploying is purely that of presentational quality.[340] I suggest that such an unqualified, strong judgement of the merit of the moral *Enquiry* is indicative of at least *some* substantive improvement in his moral ideas themselves, as opposed to just the manner in which he puts them across.

In line with the approach I am taking, recent scholarship engaging in greater depth with Hume's later works has challenged the pre-eminent place given to the *Treatise* in Hume's *oeuvre*, and has revealed quite a different picture of the relationship of Hume's early to his later work.[341] The picture that emerges from in-depth engagement with the later works is that they are not just philosophically interesting and rich in their own right, but in significant respects represent an evolution of Hume's thought on many subjects of importance. They thus constitute his mature and considered position in philosophical matters. In this chapter, I wish to add to the case for the shift of perspective that this scholarship has been recommending.

Of course, as always in these matters, the proof of the pudding is in the eating: the most persuasive argument that the moral *Enquiry* contains some important

[340] N.B. I am not saying that Hume thought it was incomparably the best in all respects, but rather, that he thought it was incomparably the best *all things considered*, a subtly but importantly different claim.

[341] On the relation of *Treatise* Book 1 to the first *Enquiry*, see Peter Millican (2002*a*, 2002*b*, 2006); and on the relation of *Treatise* Book 3 to the second *Enquiry*, see Jacqueline Taylor (2002, 2009, 2013, and forthcoming). Whilst there is no work explicitly serving as a recasting of *Treatise* Book 2, the obvious candidate for comparison is Hume's *Dissertation on the Passions*. However, a recent thesis by Amyas Merivale (2014) convincingly argues that we should see the set of Hume's *Four Dissertations*—the *Dissertation on the Passions*, *Natural History of Religion*, *Of Tragedy*, and *Of the Standard of Taste*—as constituting the true successor to *Treatise* Book 2.

changes from the system of *Treatise* Book 3 is to look at the evidence of the texts. But before I turn to this, I want to examine a little more closely one of the concerns guiding Hume's recasting of his philosophy in the two *Enquiries*. This will help to illuminate one way in which Hume may have reconceived some of the substance of his moral theory—that is, in its relation to moral scepticism.

### *§3.3. Hume's Concern with Scepticism in Recasting his Philosophy*

The first, and only known, review of *Treatise* Book 3 was published in the French literary journal, *Bibliothèque raisonnée* (April-June 1741 issue). It has a rather sarcastic tone, gently chiding Hume for the abstractness of his speculations. The reviewer further criticises Hume for embracing Hutchesonian sentimentalism, which he seems to think faces insuperable problems. But the sharpest barb comes at the end of the review, when examining Hume's account of justice. The reviewer writes that it is merely "Hobbes's system clothed in a new fashion."[342] As we saw in the last chapter, identifying a view as Hobbist was in itself a way of saying that that view is objectionable, if not dangerously sceptical.

In this respect, the reviewer is in broad agreement with the author of the *Specimen of the Principles concerning Religion and Morality &c.*, who says:

> Mr. *Hobbs*, who was at Pains to shake loose all other natural Obligations, yet found it necessary to leave, or pretended to leave, the Obligation of Promises or Pactions; but our Author [Hume] strikes a bolder Stroke… (L 11, p. 424).

Recall that the *Specimen* charged Hume with:

> …sapping the Foundations of Morality, by denying the natural and essential Difference betwixt Right and Wrong, Good and Evil, Justice and Injustice;

[342] Norton and Perinetti (2006, p. 36). Norton and Perinetti provide a full English translation of the review on (pp. 28-36). The French text can be found on (pp. 18-27).

> [and] making the Difference only artificial, and to arise from human Conventions and Compacts. (L 19, p. 425)

In his response, Hume showed himself to be well aware that the charge of "destroying all the Foundations of Morality" would "according to the prevalent Opinion of Philosophers in this Age … certainly be regarded as the severest" condemnation of all (L 36, p. 429). This must be considered also against the backdrop of the accusations of "Universal Scepticism" and "downright Atheism" with regard to his positions on the nature of the human understanding and of religion, respectively (L 14-15, p. 425). Indeed, reviewers of Books 1 and 2 of the *Treatise* tended to regard Hume as excessively sceptical—as one reviewer said, "the spirit of Pyrrhonism … directs his manner of philosophizing".[343]

It seems likely that Hume conceived the project of composing his *Enquiries* (though not then under those titles) around the time of his failure in gaining the chair in moral philosophy at the University of Edinburgh. Hume's *Letter from a Gentleman* (in response to the *Specimen* which had attempted to undermine his candidacy) is dated 8th May 1745. A letter of 1st June communicated his intention to give up his candidacy for the position at the University of Edinburgh.[344] And in a postscript dated 15th June, added to a letter of 13th June to Henry Home (Lord Kames), Hume relates that, whilst he has "scarce [leisure] for writing at present", he intends "to continue these philosophical & moral Essays, which I mention'd to you." (NHL, p. 18). This seems to be a reference to the first and second *Enquiries*: the first being originally entitled *Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding*, and the second also originally being conceived as a set of essays.[345]

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[343] From the *Bibliothèque raisonnée* review of *Treatise* Books 1 and 2, translated by David F. Norton and Mary J. Norton, in Fieser (2005*b*, vol. 3, pp. 44-63, p. 62). See also the review of Book 1 in *The History of the Works of the Learned* (Nov-Dec. 1739), reprinted in Fieser (2005*b*, pp. 1-40, esp. 39).

[344] This letter is apparently lost, but Hume mentions it in another letter: see NHL, p. 15.

[345] Harris (2015, p. 254).

Given the nature of the criticisms levelled at him, and the events surrounding Hume's decision to "cast anew" his philosophical ideas concerning morality, it is reasonable to infer that a concern with clarifying and developing his conception of the relation of his philosophy to scepticism was at the forefront of Hume's mind in conceiving the project of the two *Enquiries*. This inference is corroborated by the fact that Hume later described the *Enquiries*—along with *The Natural History of Religion* and *A Dissertation on the Passions*—as constituting a complete answer to Reid and Beattie, who (as we saw in §3.2) criticised the sceptical implications of Hume's philosophical ideas for both epistemology and morality. To be clear, I do *not* claim that a concern with the relation of his philosophy to scepticism and sceptical notions was the *only* concern guiding Hume in his conception and composition of the *Enquiries*. That is clearly not the case. For instance, another important concern was Reid, Beattie, and other's criticism that Hume was too prone to implausible speculative or metaphysical hypotheses that departed too far from notions of 'common-sense'. Nor do I even contend that it was his *main* concern—this would seem to go against Hume's own attestations, that the main objective was to find a more suitable style, a better way of expressing and communicating his principles. But I do maintain that the concern with scepticism was a *prominent* concern, and that when looking at possible changes that Hume may have made to the substance of his moral thought from the *Treatise* Book 3 to the moral *Enquiry*, it is illuminating to bear it in mind.

In the rest of this Chapter, I will examine one substantive change from *Treatise* Book 3 to the moral *Enquiry*, and then draw some consequences regarding the question of Hume's relation to moral scepticism.

### *§3.4. Sympathy and Humanity*

In the Conclusion of Book 3 of the *Treatise*, summarising his "system of ethics," Hume says that:

> We are certain, that sympathy is a very powerful principle in human nature. We are also certain, that it has a great influence on our sense of beauty, when we regard external objects, as well as when we judge of morals. We find, that it has force sufficient to give us the strongest sentiments of approbation, when it operates alone, without the concurrence of any other principle…. (T 3.3.6.1, p. 618)

Hume gives a fourfold classificatory scheme of the virtues: they are the mental qualities or character traits which are useful to a person himself, or to others, or agreeable to a person himself, or to others (T 3.3.1.30, pp. 590-591). The artificial virtues are all approved of by sympathy, as they derive their merit entirely from their tendency to the good of society, which we only approve of because of sympathy (T 3.2.2.24, pp. 499-500; T 3.3.1.10, pp. 577-578). By like reasoning, those natural virtues which have a tendency to the good of society are approved of because of sympathy (T 3.3.1.10-11, pp. 578-579). Even with respect to the immediately agreeable or disagreeable qualities, they often do not produce an immediate pleasure or pain in the *spectator*. They may be immediately agreeable or disagreeable to the person themself, even if to absolutely no one else; or they may be immediately agreeable or disagreeable to others who have no connection at all to the spectator. In such cases, the moral distinction must be explained by sympathy. Thus, "however directly the distinction of vice and virtue may seem to flow from the immediate pleasure or uneasiness… 'tis easy to observe, that it has also a considerable dependence on the principle of *sympathy* so often insisted on." (T 3.3.1.29, p. 590). As this covers all four sources of the distinction between virtue and vice, when we "compare all these circumstances, we shall not doubt, that sympathy is the chief source of moral distinctions." (T 3.3.6.1, p. 618).

Sympathy, then, is the main sentiment-producing principle underlying morality in Hume's *Treatise* theory of morals. When we turn to the moral *Enquiry*, however, this role seems to go to (what he calls) the principle of humanity:

> When a man denominates another his *enemy*, his *rival*, his *antagonist*, his *adversary*, he is understood to speak the language of self-love…. But when he bestows on any man the epithets of *vicious* or *odious* or *depraved*, he then speaks another language, and expresses sentiments, in which, he expects, all his audience are to concur with him. He must here, therefore, depart from his private and particular situation, and must chuse a point of view, common to him with others: He must move some universal principle of the human frame, and touch a string, to which all mankind have an accord and symphony. If he mean, therefore, to express, that this man possesses qualities, whose tendency is pernicious to society, he has chosen this common point of view, and has touched the principle of humanity, in which every man, in some degree, concurs. […] And though this affection of humanity may not generally be esteemed so strong as vanity or ambition, yet, being common to all men, it can alone be the foundation of morals, or of any general system of blame or praise. (M 9.5, p. 272)

Now, to be sure, Hume has not abandoned all reference to 'sympathy,' but it no longer seems to play the role it did before, nor is it mentioned quite so often as the now fundamental principle of humanity. At least, that is how it appears. However, recently some commentators have sought to dispel this appearance: they have argued that humanity and sympathy are identical, or near-identical, so that the introduction of humanity into Hume's moral theory does not represent the innovation which it appears to. Thus, Kate Abramson has argued that humanity is simply identical with what Hume, in the *Treatise*, calls 'extensive sympathy.'[346] Rico Vitz is more cautious, saying that it is hard to differentiate the two principles (of humanity and sympathy), but nevertheless holds that any difference that may exist will not introduce any discontinuity between the *Treatise* Book 3 and the moral *Enquiry*.[347] Again slightly differently, but in a similar vein, Remy Debes has argued that, whilst not quite identical to sympathy, the principle of humanity does not mark a significant shift away from the moral theory of the *Treatise*, as it is strictly dependent on sympathy in a way that leaves the gap between them very narrow indeed.[348]

[346] Abramson (2001).

[347] Vitz (2004).

[348] Debes (2007*a*, 2007*b*).

Against these commentators, I will argue that the introduction of the principle of humanity in the moral *Enquiry* does mark a substantive shift in Hume's moral theory from Book 3 of the *Treatise*. Jacqueline Taylor has recently argued for a similar thesis, and I join my voice to hers.[349] Like Taylor, I believe that these commentators overlook the way that Hume refines and corrects deficiencies in his earlier work, "developing *new*, more sophisticated philosophical views on morality"—not least with respect to the "*Treatise* characterization of the common point of view, which establishes the standard of virtue".[350] Taylor identifies the major issue with the *Treatise* account as being the "undue role [given] to sympathizing with the *actual* interests and sentiments of the persons who take themselves to be affected by a particular agent's character."[351]

In this Chapter, I will focus on problems that result from a different feature of Hume's account of the common point of view in the *Treatise*, and the resulting attempt to establish a standard of virtue and vice. In brief, the feature is that, on the *Treatise* account, the construction of the common point of view is primarily a linguistic one. Hume is forced into this manoeuvre, I believe, because of the limitations placed on him by his sympathy-based theory of morals: if we adopt a common point of view, it can only be by extending the naturally narrow parameters of sympathy in some way; Hume recognises that it is empirically implausible to postulate that sympathy, as he conceives it in the *Treatise*, can be made to produce an impartial and stable sentiment in each case of correct moral judgement; and having no other fundamental sentimental principle to invoke, he must resort to the notion that the correction of our naturally partial and variable perspective is predominantly a correction of *language*. However, by the time of the moral *Enquiry*, Hume has allowed for a principle of humanity that, unlike the principle of sympathy, is not partial and variable in the same ways. Insofar as we must correct our partial

[349] Taylor (2013) and (2015, esp. Chs 4 and 6).
[350] Taylor (2015, p. 122).
[351] Taylor (2015, p. 122).

and variable sentiments to arrive at a universal standard of morals, then, we may correct it by engaging the principle of humanity, which yields the sentiments by which we make moral distinctions.

I will structure my argument as follows. In §3.5, I will discuss Hume's theory of the common point of view in the *Treatise*, and his account of moral correction. I will then argue that his account of moral correction from the common point of view is problematic for two reasons. In §3.6, I argue that it makes it unclear how Hume can continue to defend the kind of anti-rationalist, sentimentalist moral theory that he had argued for in Part 1 of *Treatise* Book 3. In §3.7, I suggest that Hume's explanation of why we adopt the common point of view implies an unacknowledged degree of artificiality in the construction of the common point of view. The common point of view, of course, is supposed to underlie all our moral judgements, but Hume is keen to deny that "all moral distinctions [are] the effect of artifice and education" (T 3.3.1.11, p. 578). So there is a tension here that he fails to address. In §3.8, I will examine the principle of humanity, and how it underlies the common point of view in the moral *Enquiry*, arguing that it is a distinct, and novel, principle. In §3.9, I discuss how humanity helps Hume avoid the problems raised for the *Treatise* account in §§3.6-7, crucially including the problem of the artificiality of all moral distinctions. In §3.10, I will suggest that Hume's mature theory of the common point of view, based on the principle of humanity, improves his capacity to respond to the moral sceptic regarding two further topics identified as crucial in the historical survey in Chapter 2: namely, hedonic egoism, and universalism/relativism.

### *§3.5. The Common Point of View in the Treatise*

In Book 3, Part 3, Section 1 of the *Treatise*, 'Of the origin of natural virtues and vices,' Hume raises two problems for his hypothesis that our moral sentiments have "a considerable dependence on the principle of *sympathy*" (T 3.3.1.29, p. 590). The first is that "sympathy is very variable", which, given Hume's hypothesis, might

seem to entail that "our sentiments of morals must admit of all the same variations." (T 3.3.1.14, pp. 580-581). In saying that sympathy is very variable, Hume is capturing such phenomena as our sympathising more greatly with our friends and family more than complete strangers; with those in our immediate vicinity that those far removed from us; with people living now as opposed to a long time ago; and so on. Sympathy varies, then, in accordance with *spatiotemporal proximity* and *personal relations*. The problem is that our moral judgements do not thus vary: the same moral qualities are judged to be identical in terms of their virtuousness or viciousness, irrespective of these sorts of factors. Call this the *variability objection*.

The second objection that Hume considers is known as the *virtue in rags objection*. It is possible for someone to possess a virtuous character and yet "particular accidents prevent its operation"; for instance, if a person is in "a dungeon or desart, where the virtue can no longer be exerted in action, and is lost to all the world." (T 3.3.1.19, p. 584). If a person is thus lost to the world, their virtuous character traits cannot trigger the mechanism of sympathy in us, even if we suppose that they have such traits, for they have no relation to other people which would enable them to exercise their virtuous dispositions. Yet we would hold them to be no less virtuous as a result. Again, then, there appears to be a mismatch between the sentiments produced by the principle of sympathy, and our resultant moral judgements, which is problematic for Hume's sympathy-based moral sentimentalism.

Hume's solution to the two objections is to suggest that our sympathy-generated sentiments need to be corrected in order to constitute the basis of our moral ideas and judgements. Hume's explanation of the correction of our sentiments, as is well-known, invokes the notion of a "common point of view" (T 3.3.1.30, p. 591). From the common point of view, we abstract from our private and particular situation to render our judgements less partial and variable; indeed, to make them impartial and stable. To quote Hume's most famous statement of this idea:

> In order, therefore, to prevent those continual *contradictions*, and arrive at a more *stable* judgment of things, we fix on some *steady* and *general* points of view; and always, in our thoughts, place ourselves in them, whatever may be our present situation. […]
>
> In general, all sentiments of blame or praise are variable, according to our situation of nearness or remoteness, with regard to the person blam'd or prais'd, and according to the present disposition of our mind. But these variations we regard not in our general decisions, but still apply the terms expressive of our liking or dislike, in the same manner, as if we remain'd in one point of view. (T 3.3.1.15-16, pp. 581-582)

A plethora of interpretative questions have been raised about Hume's notion of the common point of view, and its role in the correction of our sentiments.[352] I will focus on a particular question concerning the *Treatise* account: what, precisely, is the process by which our sentiments are corrected so as to bring about the impartial and stable judgements of morality proper?

It is clear that some kind of counterfactual reflection plays a significant part in Hume's solution to the first problem, the variability objection:

> Our servant, if diligent and faithful, may excite stronger sentiments of love and kindness than *Marcus Brutus*, as represented in history; but we say not upon that account, that the former character is more laudable than the latter. We know, that were we to approach equally near to that renown'd patriot, he wou'd command a much higher degree of affection and admiration. (T 3.3.1.16, p. 582)

> We blame equally a bad action, which we read of in history, with one perform'd in our neighbourhood t'other day: The meaning of which is, that we know from reflection, that the former action wou'd excite as strong sentiments of disapprobation as the latter, were it plac'd in the same position. (T 3.3.1.18, p. 584)

[352] The secondary literature on the common or general point of view is enormous. Just to mention a handful of important discussions: Baier (1991, Ch. 8); Brown (1994) and (2001); Radcliffe (1994); Sayre-McCord (1994); Cohon (1997) and (2008, Ch. 5); Davie (1998); Abramson (1999); Korsgaard (1999).

We know that were we directly to experience (say) the cruelty of Genghis Khan, we would feel strong disapproval of his actions, and consequently of his character. This counterfactual reflection is the product of causal reasoning based on induction. In the past, whenever I have had experience of someone with a cruel character, I have felt a sentiment of disapproval towards (that aspect of) their character; therefore, whenever I experience a person of cruel character, I will have a similar sentiment. This empirical generalisation (on Hume's analysis of causation) produces a causal belief: experience of cruel character causes in me a sentiment of disapproval. As a result of this causal belief, I may further reason that, were I (*per impossibile*) to experience the cruelty of Genghis Khan, I would feel a sentiment of disapproval as a result. Furthermore, in my experience, this causal relation (between the experience of cruelty and the sentiment of disapproval) also obtains in other moral spectators, who would thus experience similar sentimental reactions in the same (counterfactual) situation. The counterfactual reflection, therefore, is the conclusion of causal reasoning based on induction.

Hume's solution to the second problem, the virtue in rags objection, also involves counterfactual reflections:

> 'Tis true, when the cause is compleat, and a good disposition is attended with good fortune, which renders it really beneficial to society, it gives a stronger pleasure to the spectator, and is attended with a more lively sympathy. We are more affected by it; and yet we do not say that it is more virtuous, or that we esteem it more. We know, that an alteration of fortune may render the benevolent disposition entirely impotent; and therefore we separate, as much as possible, the fortune from the disposition. The case is the same, as when we correct the different sentiments of virtue, which proceed from its different distances from ourselves. The passions do not always follow our corrections; but these corrections serve sufficiently to regulate our abstract notions, and are alone regarded, when we pronounce in general concerning the degrees of vice and virtue. (T 3.3.1.21, p. 585)

The thought is that the circumstances of (e.g.) the benevolent person determine the liveliness of our sympathy-based approbation of their benevolence. If there were a benevolent person with no opportunities for acting benevolently, our sympathy would not be engaged. To correct this, we reflect that if the same person were to have greater opportunities of exercising their benevolence, our sympathy would be more engaged. This counterfactual reflection allows us to form a judgement of the benevolent disposition of the person irrespective of the circumstantial factors which either permit or inhibit its exercise—as Hume puts it above, to "separate, as much as possible, the fortune from the disposition". Hume says this "case is the same" as the former kind of sentimental correction, i.e., the correction of variability. In other words, just as we separate the fortune from the disposition in our moral judgement, so too do we separate spatiotemporal proximity and personal relations from the disposition in judgement. And again, this counterfactual belief is the outcome of causal reasoning.

### *§3.6. First Problem: Reneging on Sentimentalist Anti-Rationalism*

It is quite unclear how these counterfactual reflections are supposed to lead to a correction of my *sentiments*. Why should it be that I feel an impartial and stable sentiment in response to such reflections? In fact, Hume states that counterfactual reflections often do not lead to a corrected sentiment, but only a correction of moral language:

> Experience soon teaches us this method of correcting our sentiments, or at least, of correcting our language, where the sentiments are more stubborn and inalterable. (T 3.3.1.16, p. 582. Cf. T 3.3.1.18, p. 583; T 3.3.1.21, p. 585)

Elizabeth Radcliffe has argued, and I agree, that Hume's statements indicate that altering "our moral pronouncements without any change in the feelings themselves"

is the norm, rather than the exception.[353] Hume does suggest a mechanism whereby we may bring our sentiments *closer* into line with the impartial and stable judgements of virtue and vice that issue from the common point of view. This is to imagine the impact of the person's character on "those who have an intercourse" with them; what he later in Book 3 calls their "narrow circle" (T 3.3.1.17, p. 582; T 3.3.3.2, p. 602). By imaginatively entering into the agent's 'narrow circle', we "fix ourselves… by a sympathy with those, who have any commerce with the person we consider." (T 3.3.1.18, p. 583). However, this imaginative extension of sympathy is still subject to the same variations: when the advantage or harm to others is "very near us" then it "interests us strongly by sympathy", but when "very remote" then our sympathy-based feelings of praise or blame are "fainter and more doubtful" (T 3.3.3.2, pp. 602-603). Thus, the correction of language—based on beliefs about how we *would* feel were we to approach nearer the agent and their narrow circle—is still necessary in establishing a genuinely impartial and stable standard of morals.[354] As Radcliffe says:

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[353] Radcliffe (1994, pp. 43, and 45-46).

[354] Rachel Cohon (2008, Ch. 5, esp. pp. 138-143) has argued, contrary to this, that even in Hume's *Treatise* account of the common point of view the process of correction always produces a new sentiment: an impartial and stable sentiment that can ground moral judgement. She reads Hume as saying that when we correct our sentiments from the common point of view, there are typically two stages: (i) we produce a new calm sentiment that is impartial and stable; and then (ii) we bring our original, more violent sentiment that is felt from our particular perspective into line with the new one. She then interprets Hume's statement that our sentiments can be stubborn and inalterable as the claim that, sometimes, stage (ii) does not go through, i.e., that we cannot always bring our original sentiment into line with the new calm one—in which case, we are left with two contrary sentiments side by side, as it were.

But this "two-sentiment interpretation," as Cohon calls it (p. 140 n. 12), is unsupported by the text. Firstly, it is hard to square with the generality of Hume's assertions, e.g.:

> *In general, all sentiments of blame or praise are variable,* according to our situation of nearness or remoteness, with regard to the person blam'd or prais'd, and according to the present disposition of our mind. But these variations we regard not in our general decisions, but still apply the terms expressive of our liking or dislike, in the same manner, as if we remain'd in one point of view. (T 3.3.1.16, p. 582; my italics)

Hume states that *all* our sentiments of praise and blame—which certainly includes moral approbation and disapprobation—are variable in the ways he describes. If Cohon's reading were correct, Hume ought to say that, whilst all our original 'situated sentiments' of praise and blame are

> Sometimes our proximity to the agent may make it possible for us to sympathize with the narrow circle and base our judgments on our actual feelings. But it is not an exaggeration of Hume's view to think that the latter cases are not very common.[355]

Now, this is a deeply problematic position for Hume to adopt, as it seems to do violence to one of his most fundamental theoretical commitments regarding morals: *viz.*, that moral distinctions are based on sentiment, not on reason. Indeed, as Hume suggests that we come to our moral judgement through counterfactual beliefs derived from causal *reasoning*, it appears he is somewhat going back on the anti-rationalist, sentimentalist approach to moral theory that he argues for earlier in Book 3. Somehow, it seems, counterfactual beliefs lead to a moral judgement—the belief that some quality of mind is virtuous or vicious—by themselves. And Hume explicitly denies that this is possible in Part 1 of *Treatise* Book 3.

What may be said on Hume's behalf? It may be pointed out that the counterfactual belief can lead to a moral judgement only if we already have ideas of virtue and vice, and (Hume may insist) these we can only get by copying the content

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variable, our corrected sentiments are by their very nature immune from this variability; they are the impartial and stable sentiments of morality. He does not say that, I submit, because (typically at least) there is no such sentiment: our actual sentiments remain recalcitrant. The process of correction applies, as he says, to our evaluative *terms*.

Secondly, there is a lack of positive evidence for the two-sentiment reading. Cohon only draws attention to one instance where, she claims, Hume says that we can hold two contrary sentiments regarding the same object at the same time (T 3.3.1.23, pp. 586-587). But the distinction Hume is making there is not between conflicting 'sentiments' in the same sense: it is the tension between sentiments of approbation or disapprobation (i.e., aesthetic or moral evaluative states), on the one hand, and desires or aversions (motivational states), on the other. In Hume's example, we may judge a well-fortified city to be beautiful, even if it is the city of an enemy and hence we desire to destroy those beautiful fortifications. Here our aesthetic sentiment and our interested desire are, in a sense, contrary to one another. The possible tension between sentiment and desire, approbation and motivation, is introduced to ease our sense of the apparent "contradiction…betwixt the *extensive sympathy*, on which our sentiments of virtue depend, and that *limited generosity* which I have frequently observe'd to be natural to men" (T 3.3.1.23, p. 586). This tells us nothing about whether it is possible to hold two contrary *evaluative* states of the same sort regarding the same object at the same time.

[355] Radcliffe (1994, p. 46).

of a sentiment, not by reason alone. Even if causal reasoning is intimately involved in erecting the standard of morals, it is necessary for formulating that standard that we possess moral ideas; and these ideas cannot be derived from reason alone, but must be copied from the appropriate impressions, i.e., sentiments. Furthermore, there is no necessity, once we have derived ideas from the appropriate impressions, for us to confine our application of those ideas to situations in which the source-impressions are experienced or elicited. Radcliffe points out that a consequence of Hume's genetic theory of meaning is that, once the content of some simple idea has been copied from a simple impression, the propensities of the imagination can modify the scope and limits of our application of the idea, and, in particular, can do so reflectively, in accordance with "general rules".[356] That is, a more reflective and rule-governed use of the concepts may yield a standard that can check the biases and distortions in our natural propensities and reactions.[357]

However, this is a weak defence of Hume's consistency. The anti-rationalism that he articulates in *Treatise* Book 3, Part 1 is much stronger than just the claim that our (simple) moral ideas must be derived from sentiments and not from reason alone. For Hume, of course, all simple ideas, of whatever kind, are copied from our impressions, so none of the elements of thought are derived from reason alone. This would make Hume's moral anti-rationalism an unexceptional instance, or application, of his general empiricist theory of ideas. But Hume's claim that moral distinctions are not derived from reason means more than that. As I will argue in Chapter 5 (especially §§5.3-4), he also means (at least) that moral beliefs are not

[356] Radcliffe (1994, pp. 48-49). Millican (2009*b*, pp. 662-666) explains a parallel point at greater length, in the context of Hume's two definitions of causation: there is no need for the two definitions of 'cause' to be co-extensive, Millican argues, if the "subjective" definition only seeks to reveal the origin of the idea in our impressions. The other, "objective" definition then specifies the conditions under which the idea is to be applied, and this can be refined and systematised through reflection, but with no requirement that the extension of its application be confined to the conditions which elicited the original impression.

[357] See Hearn (1970, esp. §5) on Hume's general rules in the context of his theory of moral correction.

produced by any operation of the understanding, conceived of as the general faculty of cognition—i.e., that faculty which discovers, discerns, and judges of truth and falsehood with regard to the deliverances of the senses, intuition, demonstrative reasoning, and causal reasoning.[358] Now, if moral beliefs cannot be engendered by the broad cognitive faculty, how is it that an essentially cognitive operation, such as causal reasoning, ends up producing a moral belief? There must be some extra step, but whatever this extra step is, it cannot be the contribution of the faculty of moral taste or sentiment—as Hume says, the sentiments often remain "stubborn and inalterable" (T 3.3.1.16, p. 582). Radcliffe's invocation of general rules will not get Hume out of this bind: there is no explanation given of why the counterfactual beliefs (i.e., that I would have such a sentiment if I were in such a situation) should so affect the imagination as to enliven our moral ideas to the point of belief, let alone to frame general rules for the proper application of moral ideas, or the formation of moral judgements. And even if entertaining counterfactual reflections could enliven our moral ideas to the point of beliefs, that would still seem to be inconsistent with his anti-rationalist position that moral beliefs cannot be caused by the operations of reason, which can only discern or judge of truth and falsehood. I conclude, then, that in Hume's *Treatise* account of the common point of view, he lacks the resources to render the correction of moral judgements consistent with the sentimentalist, anti-rationalist position established earlier in *Treatise* Book 3.

### *§3.7. Second Problem: Artifice in the Common Point of View*

The second issue I will discuss interacts with and compounds the first problem. This problem arises when the account of moral correction discussed in the last section (§3.6) is combined with Hume's explanation for why we enter into the

[358] In order to establish this, he argues that moral beliefs are not capable of being true or false, because there is no such thing as a moral relation of ideas or moral matter of fact with which they might agree or disagree.

common point of view in the first place. Hume is consistent about why we adopt this point of view:

> 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. Besides, every particular man has a peculiar position with regard to others; and 'tis impossible we cou'd ever converse together on any reasonable terms, were each of us to consider characters and persons, only as they appear from his peculiar point of view. In order, therefore, to prevent those continual *contradictions*, and arrive at a more *stable* judgment of things, we fix on some *steady* and *general points of view; and always, in our thoughts, place ourselves in them, whatever may be our present situation.* (T 3.3.1.15, pp. 581-582)

He repeats this explanation in a couple of places in *Treatise* Book 3 (T 3.3.1.18, p. 583; T 3.3.3.2, pp. 602-603). Now, it is unclear exactly what he means by 'contradictions.' I assume that he does not mean logical contradictions, because our partial and variable sentiments—much as they may create tensions in ourselves and with others—are emotional reactions, and thus do not have the right form to logically contradict each other. Of course, contrary moral *judgements* may (at least apparently) logically contradict: if I judge that David's character is virtuous, and you judge that David's character is vicious, then our judgements seem contradictory. But we can only formulate such moral judgements *from* the common point of view, when we have established some shared standard of morals. As Hume is precisely seeking to explain why we enter this point of view, his explanation cannot involve contradictions that would only emerge from within this point of view.[359] It seems to me that when Hume mentions the problems of 'contradiction' and 'instability' created by our partial and variable sentiments, what he means is that these sentiments do permit us to engage in reasonable conversation and social discourse about people's characters, and, hopefully, converge on a shared verdict. Insofar as

[359] A similar point is made by Sayre-McCord (1994, pp. 216-217).

such discourse and convergence are necessary conditions of avoiding social conflict and promoting social coordination, therefore, our uncorrected sentiments fail us. We may ask why being able to engage in reasoned conversation and social discourse towards shared verdicts about people's characters is something that we seek. Hume does not go into much detail about this, but he seems to assume that it is necessary for various social purposes: we form a "general inalterable standard" that is "sufficient for discourse, and serve[s] all our purposes in company, in the pulpit, on the theatre, and in schools." (T 3.3.3.2, p. 603).

Now, there is nothing wrong *per se* with such an account of why we are motivated to seek a shared standard of character evaluation. Hume in fact repeats the account in his mature work, the moral *Enquiry*, which (I will argue in §3.9) fixes at least some of the problems inherent in the *Treatise* account:

> The more we converse with mankind, and the greater social intercourse we maintain, the more shall we be familiarized to these general preferences and distinctions, without which our conversation and discourse could scarcely be rendered intelligible to each other. Every man's interest is peculiar to himself, and the aversions and desires, which result from it, cannot be supposed to affect others in a like degree. General language, therefore, being formed for general use, must be moulded on some more general views, and must affix the epithets of praise or blame, in conformity to sentiments, which arise from the general interests of the community. […] Sympathy, we shall allow, is much fainter than our concern for ourselves, and sympathy with persons remote from us, much fainter than that with persons near and contiguous; but for this very reason, it is necessary for us, in our calm judgments and discourse concerning the characters of men, to neglect all these differences, and render our sentiments more public and social. Besides, that we ourselves often change our situation in this particular, we every day meet with persons, who are in a situation different from us, and who could never converse with us, were we to remain constantly in that position and point of view, which is peculiar to ourselves. The intercourse of sentiments, therefore, in society and conversation, makes us form some general unalterable standard, by which we may approve or disapprove of characters and manners. And though the heart takes not part entirely with those general notions…; yet have these moral differences a considerable influence, and being sufficient, at least, for

> discourse, serve all our purposes in company, in the pulpit, on the theatre, and in the schools. (M 5.42, pp. 228-229)

The problem, then, is not with this explanation itself. It is rather that if this explanation is combined with Hume's account of the means by which we correct our moral language—typically, without correcting our actual sentiments, but through reflecting on imaginary or counterfactual circumstances—the picture that emerges starts to look an awful lot like the sort of thoroughgoing artificiality theory, or conventionalism, about morals that Hume wants to avoid. It may not be a coincidence that, just before Hume launches into discussing the objections to his sympathy-based theory, and invokes the common point of view in order to attempt to deal with them, he distinguishes his view from those of "some philosophers [who] have represented all moral distinctions as the effect of artifice and education" (T 3.3.1.11, p. 578). For it appears that Hume is now committed to saying that we invent a standard for the application of moral ideas based on counterfactual reflections, and that we do so for reasons of the social coordination of attitudes and interests, which would otherwise create conflict and instability. In other words, judging from the common point of view is a convention, whereby we judge from an impartial and stable perspective, which is established through a reflective and rule-governed application of our moral ideas, and acknowledge our instinctive approval and disapproval of characters to be biased and distorted by the narrowness of our natural sympathy.[360]

It must be admitted that this is not quite to fall into a Mandevillean artificiality theory. As we saw in Chapter 2 (§2.7), on Mandeville's view the artificial construction of moral distinctions was engaged in by political leaders seeking to

[360] I agree in this with Mackie (1980, Ch. 7), Baier (1991, p. 179), and Sayre-McCord (1994), all of whom detect the presence of artifice in Hume's explanation of why we adopt the common point of view. Mackie's discussion is perhaps the most critical of Hume: he argues that the distinction between natural and artificial virtue collapses; that all distinctions of virtue and vice turn out to be artificial; and that part of the artificiality is an erroneous 'objectification' of moral distinctions, which is nevertheless retained as socially useful.

render multitudes of unruly men governable. To do so, they redirected his natural pride against itself, through the bewitching engine of flattery, by teaching him that it was honourable and noble to restrain one's natural passions, and shameful and bestial to give in to them. Hume's account of the construction of moral distinctions as discussed above does not require any such scheming political class. As with Hume's theory of the artificiality of justice, it may be that he would appeal to a gradual historical process to explain the emergence of the convention of using evaluative terms from a common point of view. However, whatever account of the nature of the artifice he would give, it would certainly place Hume more firmly in the camp of those who hold that moral distinctions "*arise from interest and education*" (T 2.1.7.2, p. 295) than he is willing explicitly to admit.

### *§3.8. The Common Point of View in the Moral Enquiry*

As I have said in §3.4, in the moral *Enquiry* something called the principle of humanity seems to displace that of sympathy. But what is the principle of humanity? Hume variously describes the principle of humanity as "a generous concern for our kind and species" (M 2.5, p. 178); "a warm concern for the interests of our species" (M 5.39, p. 225); a "propensity to the good of mankind" (M 5.39, p. 226); a "benevolent concern for others" (M 9.9, p. 275); and other similar expressions. This variety of expressions all seem to capture pretty much the same idea: the principle of humanity is that feature of human nature that produces concern for the welfare of people *just in virtue of their being human.*

The principle of humanity achieves this by producing what Hume frequently refers to as the "feelings" or "sentiments of humanity";[361] these sentiments "arise from humanity" and are "dependant on humanity," by which (I take it) Hume means that they are produced by the *principle* of humanity (M 9.7, p. 273; M 9.8, p. 274).

[361] See, e.g., M 5.40, p. 227; M 5.44, p. 231; M 6.3, p. 234; M 6.5, p. 235; M 7.14, p. 255; M 9.5, p. 272; M 9.7, p. 273; M 9.8, p. M 9.12, p. 276; M App4.14, p. 319.

The sentiments of humanity consist in approval for whatever promotes the wellbeing of people *qua* human beings, and disapproval for whatever harms their wellbeing. Or, as Hume says, "a strong resentment of injury done to men; a lively approbation of their welfare." (M 5.39, p. 225). Hume refers to the sentiments of humanity as "universal sentiments" (M 9.8, p. 274); they constitute an "internal sense or feeling, which nature has made universal in the whole species" (M 1.9, p. 173). The sentiments of humanity are, he says, universal in two main ways: they are possessed by every person, because they derive from principles in-built in human nature; and they can be directed at any person, who thereby becomes the object of moral praise or blame:

> The notion of morals, implies some sentiment common to all mankind, which recommends the same object to general approbation, and makes every man, or most men, agree in the same opinion or decision concerning it. It also implies some sentiment, so universal and comprehensive as to extend to all mankind, and render the actions and conduct, even of the persons the most remote, an object of applause or censure, according as they agree or disagree with that rule of right which is established. These two requisite circumstances belong alone to the sentiment of humanity here insisted on. The other passions produce, in every breast, many strong sentiments of desire and aversion, affection and hatred; but these neither are felt so much in common, nor are so comprehensive, as to be the foundation of any general system and established theory of blame or approbation. (M 9.5, p. 272)

The principle of humanity is also characterised as a kind of general benevolence:[362]

> Benevolence naturally divides into two kinds, the *general* and the *particular*. The first is, where we have no friendship or connexion or esteem for the person, but feel only a general sympathy with him or a compassion for his pains, and a congratulation with his pleasures. The other species of benevolence is founded on an opinion of virtue, on services done us, or on

[362] It is, I believe, not the only kind of general benevolence. In the *Dissertation on the Passions* Hume also describes 'compassion' in terms very reminiscent of general benevolence (P 3.7, p. 19). However, compassion seems to be produced by the mechanism of sympathy in the *Treatise* sense, which the sentiments of humanity are not. I discuss this below.

> some particular connexions. Both these sentiments must be allowed real in human nature; but whether they will resolve into some nice considerations of self-love, is a question more curious than important. The former sentiment, to wit, that of general benevolence, or humanity, or sympathy, we shall have occasion frequently to treat of in the course of this enquiry; and I assume it as real, from general experience, without any other proof. (M App2.5, p. 298 n. 60)

Finally, it is important to note that the principle of humanity is regarded as an *original* principle:

> It is needless to push our researches so far as to ask, why we have humanity or a fellow-feeling with others. It is sufficient, that this is experienced to be a principle in human nature. We must stop somewhere in our examination of causes; and there are, in every science, some general principles, beyond which we cannot hope to find any principle more general. No man is absolutely indifferent to the happiness and misery of others. The first has a natural tendency to give pleasure; the second, pain. This every one may find in himself. It is not probable, that these principles can be resolved into principles more simple and universal, whatever attempts may have been made to that purpose. But if it were possible, it belongs not to the present subject; and we may here safely consider these principles as original: Happy, if we can render all the consequences sufficiently plain and perspicuous! (M 5.17, pp. 219-220 n. 19)

An original principle, instinct, or quality is, in Hume's terms, a "constitution of nature, of which we can give no farther explication" (P 3.6, p. 19).[363] An original principle is responsible for any phenomena that cannot be explained by reference to more general psychological principles: i.e., principles that also enter into the explanation of phenomena other than those at hand. The three main general principles that Hume appeals to in his psychology of the passions in Book 2 of the *Treatise* and the *Dissertation on the Passions* are sympathy, comparison, and the double relation of impressions and ideas. When Hume says, in the above quote, that

[363] See also, e.g., T 1.1.4.6, pp. 12-13; T 2.1.3.3, p. 280; T 2.1.3.6-7, p. 282; T 2.3.9.8, p. 439; T 3.3.1.27, pp. 589-590.

it is unlikely that "these principles [including humanity] can be resolved into principles more simple and universal", so that we can "safely consider these principles as original", he is claiming that humanity cannot be explained by reference to more general psychological mechanisms such as sympathy, comparison, or the double relation. Rather, the principle of humanity must be postulated as a basic, inexplicable feature of human psychology.

Now, as I mentioned in §3.4, there are attempts to deny that Hume has in fact changed the foundational principle of his moral theory. Abramson says, for instance, that the principle of humanity is "shorthand for the imaginative process described explicitly in the *Treatise*", that is, extensive sympathy.[364] The most significant problem for any such interpretation must be that the mechanism of sympathy from the *Treatise* is certainly not an original principle: it can be resolved into other psychological principles, such as the association of ideas, the transfer of vivacity, and the enlivening of ideas into impressions (and that is before we come to the problematic role of counterfactual reflection in somehow 'extending' sympathy, as discussed earlier in the Chapter).[365] If the principle of humanity is an original principle, therefore, it cannot be identical with the mechanism of sympathy.

Remy Debes aligns himself with Abramson, though he does not quite equate the principle of humanity with the sympathy mechanism from the *Treatise*.[366] In

[364] Abramson (2001, p. 55).

[365] The mechanism of sympathy is introduced towards the end of Part 1 of *Treatise* Book 2, in accounting for the love of fame, as a process by which we "receive by communication" the "inclinations and sentiments" of others (T 2.1.11.2, p. 316). The mechanism works as follows. I form an idea of someone else's feelings. The idea of the other person is to some extent related to my idea of self by the three associational relations of resemblance, contiguity, and causation. My idea of self is so intimately present and lively, the liveliness is transferred via association to my idea of the other person's feeling, so that the idea becomes an actual sentiment (recall that, for Hume, only force and liveliness distinguish impressions and ideas with the same content). So, for example, the idea of my brother is strongly associated with that of myself for various reasons (e.g., he lives in the same house, he looks sort of like me, we have a common cause of existence in our parents, etc.). If I see him upset, these associations with myself enliven my idea of his mental state, until it becomes a genuine feeling of upset or uneasiness in me.

[366] Debes (2007*a*, 2007*b*).

Debes' view, the principle of humanity is a disposition to have benevolent desires and to feel moral approval when sympathising with other's feelings. In this way, humanity depends on sympathy to be activated.[367] However, Debes' case for this interpretation is not compelling. It is true that Hume frequently refers to "sympathy" and "humanity" together,[368] but Hume often uses "sympathy" to refer to sentiments or passions in the moral *Enquiry*, clearly not meaning sympathy in the sense of the *Treatise*'s associative mechanism. There is evidence, some of which Debes discusses, that Hume retains a sympathetic mechanism by which feelings are communicated between people in his mature psychology of the passions, though its application is very much restrained compared with Hume's liberal appeals to it in the *Treatise*.[369] There are even a few passages in the moral *Enquiry* which are suggestive of such a mechanism,[370] perhaps alluding to the associative principle of the *Treatise*.[371] I will develop an interpretation of moral correction from the common point of view in the second *Enquiry* that permits the mechanism of sympathy to play a role (though I do not insist on it—the textual basis is too thin). However, as I show, it is not the fundamental principle which generates our moral sentiments, or to which our moral ideas can be traced. That is usurped by humanity.

In Part 2 of Section 5 of the moral *Enquiry*, on 'Why Utility Pleases,' Hume raises a familiar sounding problem:

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[367] Debes (2007*a*, esp. §II.2).

[368] See, for example, M 2.5, p. 178; M 5.45, p. 231; M 6.3, p. 234; M 9.12, p. 276; M 9.12, p. 276; M App2.5, p. 298 n. 60; M App3.2, p. 303.

[369] See Merivale (2014, Ch. 5, esp. §§5.2-4) for the most careful consideration of this issue.

[370] No more than suggestive, however; nowhere in his mature philosophical writings does Hume describe exactly the same mechanism of sympathy that has such a prominent role in the *Treatise*.

[371] I have in mind the account of 'Qualities Immediately Agreeable to Ourselves,' in Section 7, where he talks of our "catch[ing] the sentiment, by a contagion or natural sympathy" (M 7.2, p. 251); and the discussion of moral correction in Part 2 of Section 5 (esp. M 5.41, pp. 227ff.), which I will deal with in more detail below.

> A statesman or patriot, who serves our own country, in our own time, has always a more passionate regard paid to him, than one whose beneficial influence operated on distant ages or remote nations; where the good, resulting from his generous humanity, being less connected with us, seems more obscure, and affects us with a less lively sympathy. We may own the merit to be equally great, though our sentiments are not raised to an equal height, in both cases. The judgment here corrects the inequalities of our internal emotions and perceptions; in like manner, as it preserves us from error, in the several variations of images, presented to our external senses. (M 5.41, p. 227)

This sounds just like variability objection to the sympathy-based account of the *Treatise*. And the solution sounds remarkably similar: "the judgement here corrects the inequalities" of our sentiments. In a footnote, he also makes similar remarks with respect to the virtue in rags objection:

> For a like reason, the tendencies of actions and characters, not their real accidental consequences, are alone regarded in our moral determinations or general judgments…. The judgment corrects or endeavours to correct the appearance: But is not able entirely to prevail over sentiment. (M 5.41, p. 228 n. 24)

But when Hume turns to the nature of the "judgement" that corrects the partiality and variability of these sentiments, he says:

> The more we converse with mankind, and the greater social intercourse we maintain, the more shall we be familiarized to these general preferences and distinctions, without which our conversation and discourse could scarcely be rendered intelligible to each other. Every man's interest is peculiar to himself, and the aversions and desires, which result from it, cannot be supposed to affect others in a like degree. General language, therefore, being formed for general use, must be moulded on some more general views, and must affix the epithets of praise or blame, *in conformity to sentiments, which arise from the general interests of the community*. And *if these sentiments, in most men, be not so strong as those, which have a reference to private good; yet still they must make some distinction*, even in persons the most depraved and selfish; and must attach the notion of good to a beneficent conduct, and of evil to the contrary. (M 5.42, pp. 228-229; my italics)

Thus, the judgement that corrects our more variable sentiments is based on sentiments with arise from our concern with general interests. It is true he says that "the heart takes not part entirely with those general notions, nor regulates all its love and hatred, by the universal, abstract differences of vice and virtue, without regard to self, or the persons with whom we are more intimately connected" (M 5.42, p. 229). But he is not claiming there is no genuine moral sentiment, or that there is merely a correction of language. He is instead making the point that principles of general benevolence (which, as we saw above, includes the principle of humanity) are not predicated on personal love or hatred of people, or our close relationships with them. But that is characteristic (again, as we saw above) of general benevolence; it is what differentiates it from particular benevolence. That Hume has in mind general benevolence—specifically, the principle of humanity—is almost immediately confirmed:

> Thus, in whatever light we take this subject, the merit, ascribed to the social virtues, appears still uniform, and arises chiefly from that regard, which the natural sentiment of benevolence engages us to pay to the interests of mankind and society. (M 5.43, p. 230)

Our "natural sentiments of benevolence" directed at mankind are exactly the sentiments of humanity. And it is these sentiments on which "a *general* distinction between actions" is founded (that is, a moral distinction). When this general benevolence is *supplemented* by particular benevolence—e.g., by feelings derived from an "acquaintance or connexion with the persons,"—then sympathy (as he puts it) can be "enlivened", and our praise or blame may acquire additional "vigour" (M 5.43, p. 230). Thus, even though I accept that a wrong done to my brother is no worse morally than an identical wrong done to a stranger, it is likely I will denounce the wrong to my brother more forcefully. Likewise, though a charitable streak in my

close friend may be no morally better than an equally strong charitable streak in a loose acquaintance, it is likely I will sing my friend's praises much more effusively.

Now, it may be that the enlivening of sympathy to which Hume refers is an operation of the mechanism of sympathy that the *Treatise* makes central to morality. Certainly, the parallel between his remarks about it, and the variability and virtue in rags objections discussed in *Treatise* 3.3.1, make this a plausible suggestion, even if not certain. However, what is clear from the *Enquiry* discussion is that the correction of the "inequalities" in our more lively, personal sentiments is not done through counterfactual reflections which operate on the imagination to get us to correct our language, even if not our feelings. The correction is instead effected by paying attention to the distinction between the genuine moral sentiments produced by general benevolence, as opposed to the personal feelings produced by particular benevolence. The moral distinction, which is based on a general concern for humanity, or general benevolence, is quite separate from the vigour supplied when my moral sentiments are joined by particular benevolent feelings. This is because, even if I cannot in the moment separate the particular feelings of praise or blame from the more general ones of morality, they can nevertheless be distinguished. Indeed, I can distinguish between the vigour my disapproval acquires when something is actually a more serious moral transgression, and the vigour it acquires when it is equally serious but done towards my brother. The first gets its vigour by affecting my general benevolent feelings (e.g., detestation of cruelty, inhumanity, exploitation, and so on) more greatly; the second, by affecting my personal benevolent feelings (e.g., concern based on friendship, regard, etc.) more greatly.

This is not to say that particular benevolent affections do not have a role to play in moral life. Hume asserts that:

> It is wisely ordained by nature, that private connexions should commonly prevail over universal views and considerations; otherwise our affections and actions would be dissipated and lost, for want of a proper limited object. Thus a small benefit done to ourselves, or our near friends, excites more lively

> sentiments of love and approbation than a great benefit done to a distant commonwealth: But still we know here, as in all the senses, to correct these inequalities by reflection, and retain a general standard of vice and virtue, founded chiefly on a general usefulness. (M 5.42, p. 229 n. 25)

And similarly:

> [W]hile every man consults the good of his own community, we are sensible, that the general interest of mankind is better promoted, than any loose indeterminate views to the good of a species, whence no beneficial action could ever result, for want of a duly limited object, on which they could exert themselves. (M 5.38, p. 225 n. 22)

Thus, our more particular benevolent affections play an important role in channelling our moral *actions*. The principle of humanity (recall, a principle of concern for others just in virtue of their being human) is too diffuse to determine by itself how best to act to promote the good of the species which it recommends. Thus, general benevolence must be supplemented by particular benevolence, which can provide a "duly limited object". Whether these "objects" of our feelings and actions are friendships, local community initiatives, national institutions, or whatever, the point is that they must fit the limitations of human nature in terms of the extent of our capacity to care and to act. Of course, we may act (at least nowadays) with global, species-level concerns in our mind. Nevertheless, whilst general benevolence may provide the moral impetus, "private connexions" typically determine the form that such concerns take in one's daily life.

Assuming, for the sake of argument, that the *Treatise* mechanism of sympathy still exists in Hume's later moral psychology, then we can see it will generally contribute to the channelling of moral action via particular benevolence, rather than providing the basis of moral distinctions, which is done by the sentiments of humanity, a form of general benevolence. The strongest counterargument to my interpretation that I can think of would be to query why the principle of humanity must take this role. Are there no other forms of general

benevolence, for example? In fact, I believe that Hume thinks of compassion as at least possibly constituting a form of general benevolence. In the *Dissertation on the Passions*, Hume says:

> Compassion frequently arises, where there is no preceding esteem or friendship; and compassion is an uneasiness in the sufferings of another. It seems to spring from the intimate and strong conception of his sufferings; and our imagination proceeds by degrees, from the lively idea to the real feeling of another's misery. (P 3.7, p. 17)

If compassion can arise where there is no esteem or friendship, it sounds like it may be a kind of general benevolent affection. However, Hume also seems to allude to its being produced by (something like) the sympathy mechanism of the *Treatise*: our idea of someone else's suffering gets enlivened into a real feeling of distress or uneasiness in us.[372] My answer would be that the principle of humanity, having a very general object (a concern with the good of human beings as such) is invariable according to spatiotemporal proximity, personal relations, and so on, whereas compassion clearly is affected by these factors: it is a commonplace that compassion comes more readily when you have to deal with people face-to-face, or when it is someone you care personally about. To this extent, then, compassion is a mixed principle: it is able to produce general benevolent feelings, but is still strongly conditioned by particular relations. This sensitivity to particular relations may indeed result from the fact that compassion is a product of the mechanism of sympathy, which is affected by these factors. As I have said above, of course the sentiments of humanity can be supplemented by more particular forms of benevolence, and our praise or blame may acquire additional vigour as a result. But we can still distinguish the contribution of humanity from that of particular benevolence, and when we do, it is not affected by our proximity, or personal

[372] It is worth noting that Hume does not bring in the role of the idea of the self, which is crucial to the *Treatise* account.

connections, and so on, because it is a principle that regards humans just as such, irrespective of these self-referential features. This is why humanity "can alone be the foundation of morals, or of any general system of praise or blame." (M 9.6, pp. 273).

### *§3.9. Avoiding the Problems with the Treatise Account*

As I argued in §§3.6-7, the *Treatise* account of the common point of view and moral correction faces at least two major difficulties. The first is that Hume holds that the standard of morals is constructed by regulating our use of moral language in accordance with counterfactual reflections, in a way that largely floats free of the underlying sentiments; but this is to hold that a moral belief (indeed, correct moral belief) can be arrived at by a process of reasoning, which contradicts his anti-rationalist position that reasoning can only produce cognitive, or truth-apt, judgements, and that moral beliefs are not such judgements. The second is that Hume's explanation for why we seek a shared moral standard in terms of the social coordination of attitudes and interests, when combined with the largely linguistic nature of the construction of that standard, implies a degree of artifice that is in tension with his outright denial that all moral distinctions (including the natural virtues and vices) might arise artificially.

Does Hume's mature moral theory, based on the principle of humanity, help him to deal with these problems? With respect to the first problem, the answer must be 'yes.' Our moral beliefs or judgements arrived at from the common point of view are no longer the products of regulating our moral language in accordance with counterfactual reflections. Rather, moral judgements issued from the common point of view are regulated by the sentiments of humanity:

> [W]hen [someone] bestows on any man the epithets of *vicious* or *odious* or *depraved*, he then speaks another language, and expresses sentiments, in which, he expects, all his audience are to concur with him. He must here, therefore, depart from his private and particular situation, and must chuse a

> point of view, common to him with others: He must move some universal principle of the human frame, and touch a string, to which all mankind have an accord and symphony. …[H]e has chosen this common point of view, and has touched the principle of humanity, in which every man, in some degree, concurs. While the human heart is compounded of the same elements as at present, it will never be wholly indifferent to public good, nor entirely unaffected with the tendency of characters and manners. And though this affection of humanity may not generally be esteemed so strong as vanity or ambition, yet, being common to all men, it can alone be the foundation of morals, or of any general system of blame or praise. (M 9.6, pp. 272-273)

Correct moral beliefs, then, are not arrived at by a process of reasoning, which could only issue in truth-apt mental states, but by distinguishing between our sentiments regarding other people's qualities and actions, and basing our moral judgements on those that are produced by the principle of humanity. As Hume says, we may find "much reasoning should procede" a moral judgement, but it is sentiment that gets "[t]he final sentence… which pronounces characters and actions amiable or odious, praise-worthy or blameable" (M 1.9, pp. 172-173). Or as he adds later, "*reason* instructs us in the several tendencies of actions, and *humanity* makes a distinction in favour of those which are useful and beneficial." (M App1.3, p. 286).

What about the second problem? As I have said above (§3.7), there is nothing wrong *per se* with Hume's account of why we are motivated to seek a shared standard of character evaluation in terms of social coordination. That Hume repeats the account in his mature work, the moral *Enquiry*, shows (I believe) that he thought it unproblematic. But, I submit, if it is unproblematic, it is because Hume has ditched the idea that the common point of view is something we arrive at through regulating our moral language in accordance with counterfactual reflections. The counterfactual perspective—how I would feel, were I brought nearer to the agent and their narrow circle—is only invoked, it seems, as a solution to the problems involved in coordinating our attitudes and interests. It is not one that human beings are inclined by our natural instincts or propensities to take up, but seems as if we adopt it because we reflect that it brings about an impartiality and stability in our character

evaluations that we are keen to implement to meet our social needs and purposes. As Hume says, finding "so many contradictions to our sentiments in society and conversation," we "fix ourselves so commodiously" by adopting this perspective (T 3.3.1.18, p. 583).

By contrast, the principle of humanity is a universal principle in human nature, and one which naturally has a profound influence: "these principles of humanity and sympathy enter so deeply into all our sentiments, and have so powerful an influence, as may enable them to excite the strongest censure and applause." (M 5.45, p. 231). The distinction of the sentiments of humanity from other kinds of sentiment is

> so great and evident, language must soon be moulded upon it, and must invent a peculiar set of terms, in order to express those universal sentiments of censure or approbation, which arise from humanity, or from views of general usefulness and its contrary. VIRTUE and VICE become then known: Morals are recognized: Certain general ideas are framed of human conduct and behaviour: Such measures are expected from men, in such situations: This action is determined to be conformable to our abstract rule; that other, contrary. And by such universal principles are the particular sentiments of self-love frequently controuled and limited. (M 9.8, p. 274)

Thus, Hume has a plausible story to tell according to which, although there are strong social motives behind our search for a shared standard of character evaluation, the standard that emerges is nevertheless one that reflects a natural sentimental structure of the mind, rather than one that (to a large extent) is manufactured as a convenient solution to the problems of social coordination.

I do not claim that the changes Hume makes to the theory of the common point of view and moral correction definitively settle all the problems for those theories. I do not even claim that these changes definitively settle the problems I have raised. However, they at least seem to give Hume a better answer to the charges of inconsistency I have outlined. Of particular importance, Hume seems better placed

to answer the charge that his moral theory incorporates an unacknowledged element of artifice into the basis of natural moral distinctions.

In the next section, I will discuss the implications of Hume's modifications to his moral theory for two more topics important in early-modern discussions of moral scepticism: namely, hedonic egoism and universalism/relativism.

### *§3.10. Self-Love and Universal Principles*

Hume's theories of the passions and of morals in the *Treatise* seem much closer to the hedonic egoism of Hobbes, Locke, and Mandeville than in his later work. Much has been said about whether Hume was a hedonic egoist about *motivation*, and especially moral motivation.[373] Recently, it has been convincingly argued that Hume was a Lockean style hedonic egoist about motivation in the *Treatise*, but changed his mind upon gaining a more thorough appreciation of Butler's anti-hedonic egoist arguments (for which, see §2.9 above).[374] I do not have the space to delve into this matter here, but I believe it may be importantly connected to Hume's change of mind about the foundation of moral *approbation*. Of course, it is not possible to argue that Hume was a hedonic egoist about moral approval in the *Treatise*. The mechanism of sympathy, which Hume makes the chief foundation of moral approval in the *Treatise*, is not a purely hedonistic or egoist principle. Nevertheless, it does operate by converting the pleasures and pains of others into pleasures and pains for the onlooker; thus, insofar as we care about the pleasures and pains of others, it is mediated by our own pleasure and pain. Indeed, in the *Treatise* Hume explicitly contrasts his sympathy-based account with one that presupposes a "love of mankind, merely as such":

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[373] The debate goes back at least as far as the turn of the nineteenth-century, with an article by E. B. McGilvery (1903), responding to T. H. Green's characterisation of Hume as a Lockean hedonist (1882, pp. 31-32).

[374] Merivale (2014, esp. Ch. 6). Merivale's argument is in my view decisive. He also conducts a thorough review of the literature on this question.

> In general, it may be affirm'd, that there is no such passion in human minds, as the love of mankind, merely as such, independent of personal qualities, of services, or of relation to ourself. 'Tis true, there is no human, and indeed no sensible, creature, whose happiness or misery does not, in some measure, affect us, when brought near to us, and represented in lively colours: But this proceeds merely from sympathy, and is no proof of such an universal affection to mankind, since this concern extends itself beyond our own species. An affection betwixt the sexes is a passion evidently implanted in human nature; and this passion… [inflames] every other principle of affection, and raising a stronger love from beauty, wit, kindness, than what wou'd otherwise flow from them. Were there an universal love among all human creatures, it wou'd appear after the same manner. Any degree of a good quality wou'd cause a stronger affection than the same degree of a bad quality wou'd cause hatred; contrary to what we find by experience. …[I]n the main, we may affirm, that man in general, or human nature, is nothing but the object both of love and hatred, and requires some other cause, which by a double relation of impressions and ideas, may excite these passions. In vain wou'd we endeavour to elude this hypothesis. There are no phaenomena that point out any such kind affection to men, independent of their merit, and every other circumstance. We love company in general; but 'tis as we love any other amusement. An *Englishman* in *Italy* is a friend: A *Europoean* in *China*; and perhaps a man wou'd be belov'd as such, were we to meet him in the moon. But this proceeds only from the relation to ourselves; which in these cases gathers force by being confined to a few persons. (T 3.2.1.12, pp. 481-482)

Our love and hatred of other people are always mediated by particular qualities or relations they possess, and only insofar as these cause pleasures or pains in oneself through associative principles (Hume mentions sympathy and the double relation) do they affect our "kind affections" towards others.

Given that Hume's account in the *Treatise* thus holds that our love or kind affection towards others is always mediated in this self-referential and pleasure- or pain-based way, it is no surprise to see his attempt to explain the apparently impartial and universalist nature of moral thought bears more than a passing resemblance to self-love theorists. I have noted the well-known point that Hume's account of the artificial virtues bears a resemblance to Hobbes and Mandeville's

Epicurean notions (see §§2.2 and 2.7). Here I want to point out another connection, but this time with a poorly known figure, Archibald Campbell. Campbell was a self-love theorist who, interestingly, attempted to argue against Mandeville that accepting self-love as the fundamental principle of human motivation is fully consistent with "the *intrinsick Goodness,* or *Rectitude* of Moral Virtue… *independent* of arbitrary Will and Pleasure".[375] This of course goes against the grain of the hedonic egoists examined in Chapter 2 (including even Locke, who was a voluntarist about the true nature of virtue). What is primarily of interest, however, is how Campbell attempts to deal with Hutcheson's argument that self-love theory cannot account for our moral judgements regarding historical figures or people in distant countries who we have no likelihood of ever coming into contact with, and have the least relation to ourselves possible:

> [W]hen we are thus viewing such a one's Character, we either secretly convey ourselves to that Part of the World, where he immediately acted, or we change the Scene of his Actions to those Places where we are; and, in both Cases, we either really feel, or only imagine ourselves in such Circumstances as make us the fit Objects of his *moral Abilities:* For *Self-love*, as I have already hinted, is *the only Test* we can apply, whereby to judge of their *Goodness.* […] So that I do here profess my self to be so far of the same Opinion with those refin'd Explainers of *Self-love*, whom our *Author* [Francis Hutcheson] condemns for maintaining, "That we hate or love Characters, according as we apprehend we should have been supported or injured by them, had we liv'd in their Days." Nor has he said any Thing that, in the least, invades the Truth of this Principle.[376]

In fact, Hume directly addresses exactly this response of the self-love theorists to Hutcheson's argument in the moral *Enquiry*:

> It is but a weak subterfuge, when pressed by these facts and arguments, to say, that we transport ourselves, by the force of imagination, into distant ages

[375] Campbell (1733, p. 208).

[376] Campbell (1733, pp. 364-366).

> and countries, and consider the advantage, which we should have reaped from these characters, had we been contemporaries, and had any commerce with the persons. It is not conceivable, how a *real* sentiment or passion can ever arise from a known *imaginary* interest; especially when our *real* interest is still kept in view, and is often acknowledged to be entirely distinct from the imaginary, and even sometimes opposite to it. (M 5.13, p. 217)

Nicolas Capaldi has attempted to use this passage to show that Hume rejected the *Treatise* account of sympathy in the moral *Enquiry*.[377] Hume may, in fact, have had in mind Campbell, or perhaps the brief response that Hutcheson considers, or some other text entirely, rather than his own earlier position. But it is certainly noteworthy that the self-love theorist's response to charge that he fails to respect the universality and impartiality of character evaluations so closely resembles Hume's own response to the problems with his sympathy-based theory. Indeed, the underlying assumption of Hume's argument against the self-love theorist seems to be that we should experience a real sentiment when evaluating historically or geographically distant characters, but that assumption operates just as strongly against the *Treatise* account of the construction of a standard of morals.

Finally, the changes in Hume's account of the common point of view and moral correction bear on Hume's approach to the issue of the tension between universal principles and the variability of moral beliefs and practices. A problem in Hume's *Treatise* account that I did not discuss, but which is very well brought out by Jacqueline Taylor, is the way it neglects historical and geographical variations in the kinds of social contexts moral agents may find themselves in, and the impact that will have on our evaluations of characters. Indeed, he simply states that "we give the

[377] Capaldi (1989, pp. 239-241). Vitz (2016, pp. 315-316) responds to Capaldi's claim, asserting that Hume is only saying that "certain kinds of imagined interests" cannot cause us to have a real sentiment, not that imagined interests can play no role in the production of moral sentiment. But Hume does not say that only certain kinds of imagined fail to produce sentiments; he says it is not conceivable how a real sentiment can *ever* arise from an imaginary interest. Vitz cites the example that Hume goes on to discuss, of an imaginary danger provoking a real fear, but Hume immediately argues the moral case is not like this, because in such cases the imagination must be provoked by "the presence of a striking object", which does not exist in the moral case (M 5.14, p. 217).

same approbation to the same moral qualities in *China* as in *England*" (T 3.3.1.14, p. 581). However, as Taylor points out:

> Character traits are recognized and valued in a certain social context, governed by particular cultural norms, including those norms that determine one's role as a member of a particular social group, such as gender or economic class. History shows us, as it showed Hume, that a certain trait word, for example… "troublesome" or "uppity," may be attributed to someone because she is thought to possess traits essential to her gender, class, ethnicity, or race. The method of correction does not help us to distinguish between possibly innocent and more invidious attributions of character that arise because of various cultural norms.[378]

The method of correction by counterfactual reflection (how I would feel were I to have direct experience of the effects of someone's possessing a certain character trait) assumes that the answer to this question is uniform for all moral spectators, and that any variations in the way character traits are understood and appraised in different societies, for different groups, and in different time periods, are negligible enough that we can still derive a "general inalterable standard, by which we may approve or disapprove of characters and manners" (T 3.3.3.2, p. 603). This approach, therefore, does not so much answer the moral relativist who argues that the different moral beliefs, customs, and practices throughout history make it impossible to form such a standard, as completely foreclose the possibility of such relativism by assuming an extremely implausible degree of uniformity.

The central text for Hume's discussion of the issue of universal principles and local variation in his mature moral philosophy is 'A Dialogue', an essay appended to the end of the moral *Enquiry*, in which he attempts to refute the relativistic sceptic. Suffice it to say that it is much more sensitive to the effects of cultural and social context, and how they vary historically and geographically, in his discussion there.

[378] Taylor (2015, p. 116).

In the next chapter, I will discuss this essay, and various other features of Hume's response to moral scepticism in the *Enquiry*.

### *§3.11. Conclusion*

The modifications that Hume made to his accounts of the common point of view and the correction of morals, as a result of revising the fundamental sentimental principle of his moral theory, have ramifications for his approach to issues central to the debate regarding moral scepticism. In this Chapter, I have detailed the changes Hume made, why he may have felt pressured to do so, and the implications these changes had for his doctrines on the artificiality of moral distinctions, on the role of hedonic egoist notions in moral theory, and on the issue of moral universalism and local variation. In the next Chapter, I will discuss in less depth some more general changes that are observable in the *Enquiry*'s approach to moral scepticism.

# 4

# The Reality of Moral Distinctions

## §4.1. *Introduction*

In the last chapter, I argued that Hume changed his mind about a specific aspect of his theory of morals: *viz.*, his theory of the common point of view, and his conception of the correction of sentiments. In this chapter, I will look at some other features of the structure and argument of the moral *Enquiry*, not going into as much detail as with the theory of correction, but attempting nevertheless to give a sense of some other core parts of Hume's project in this mature work. In particular, I will argue that the aspects of the moral *Enquiry* I examine are part of Hume's attempt to give a less sceptical cast to his moral philosophy than it appeared to have in the *Treatise* Book 3. I will also discuss one anti-sceptical argument that Hume did deploy in the *Treatise*, and then carried over to the moral *Enquiry*, but which may have more force given changes made to his theory of morals discussed in the last Chapter.

## §4.2. *Framing the Moral Enquiry*

As far as I can discover, no one in the literature has observed that the moral *Enquiry* begins and ends with discussions relating to moral scepticism—that is, it is framed by the issue of moral scepticism. The first section of the *Enquiry* begins as follows:

> Disputes with men, pertinaciously obstinate in their principles, are, of all others, the most irksome; except, perhaps, those with persons, entirely disingenuous, who really do not believe the opinions they defend, but engage in the controversy, from affectation, from a spirit of opposition, or from a desire of showing wit and ingenuity, superior to the rest of mankind. […]

> Those who have denied the reality of moral distinctions, may be ranked among the disingenuous disputants; nor is it conceivable, that any human creature could ever seriously believe, that all characters and actions were alike entitled to the affection and regard of every one. The difference, which nature has placed between one man and another, is so wide, and this difference is still so much farther widened, by education, example, and habit, that, where the opposite extremes come at once under our apprehension, there is no scepticism so scrupulous, and scarce any assurance so determined, as absolutely to deny all distinction between them. Let a man's insensibility be ever so great, he must often be touched with the images of right and wrong; and let his prejudices be ever so obstinate, he must observe, that others are susceptible of like impressions. The only way, therefore, of converting an antagonist of this kind, is to leave him to himself. For, finding that no body keeps up the controversy with him, it is probable he will, at last, of himself, from mere weariness, come over to the side of common sense and reason. (M 1.1-2, pp. 169-170)

Hume's point here seems fairly straightforward: those who have denied the reality of moral distinctions are being disingenuous, for it is not conceivable that anyone could seriously deny that there is any moral difference between different people. It may be thought, then, that Hume is giving short shrift to moral scepticism. However, this would be too hasty. In his short essay, 'Of the Study of History,' in which Hume recommends such study to female readers, he remarks:

> There is also an advantage in that experience which is acquired by history, above what is learned by the practice of the world, that it brings us acquainted with human affairs, without diminishing in the least from the most delicate sentiments of virtue. And, to tell the truth, I know not any study or occupation so unexceptionable as history in this particular. […] *Even philosophers are apt to bewilder themselves in the subtilty of their speculations; and we have seen some go so far as to deny the reality of all moral distinctions.* But I think it a remark worthy the attention of the speculative, that the historians have been, almost without exception, the true friends of virtue, and have always represented it in its proper colours…. (SH 7, p. 567; my emphasis)

Although Hume says in the *Enquiry* that no one can seriously deny the reality of moral distinctions, here we have him saying that some philosophers have precisely

done so. These are not strictly inconsistent claims, of course: all that Hume need do is to accept that these philosophers are not serious in their denial. But that then raises the question of what Hume means here by 'serious.' A plausible interpretation is that he means that no one can *feel* as though there is no real moral distinction between different people. Thus, in the passage quoted from the start of the *Enquiry*, Hume refers to his "disingenuous disputant" as being "often touched by images of right and wrong", and knowing that others are similarly touched. In fact, Hume considers a similar dialectical situation in Appendix 2 of the moral *Enquiry*, where he considers the "selfish system of morals," maintained (he claims) by Epicurus, Hobbes, and Locke.[379] Hume notes that this selfish system is different from the (supposedly popular) view that "all *benevolence* is mere hypocrisy, friendship a cheat, public spirit a farce, fidelity a snare to procure trust and confidence … while all of us, at bottom, pursue only our private interest" (M App2.1, p. 296). Rather, he says:

> An Epicurean or a Hobbist readily allows, that there is such a thing as a friendship in the world, without hypocrisy or disguise; though he may attempt, by a philosophical chymistry, to resolve the elements of this passion, if I may so speak, into those of another, and explain every affection to be self-love, twisted and moulded, by a particular turn of imagination, into a variety of appearances. But as the same turn of imagination prevails not in every man, nor gives the same direction to the original passion; this is sufficient, even according to the selfish system, to make the widest difference in human characters, and denominate one man virtuous and humane, another vicious and meanly interested.

The proponent of the selfish system, in other words, does not seriously deny that there is a wide difference between different human characters, sufficient for the qualities of one to be affixed with epithets such as *virtuous* and *humane*, and the other *vicious* and *meanly interested*. However, having defended the Epicurean or Hobbist thus far, Hume then adds a twist:

[379] This is, of course, the hedonic egoist view that Hume (arguably) maintained a version of in the *Treatise*; see Chapter 3 of this thesis.

> But though the question, concerning the universal or partial selfishness of man be not so material, as is usually imagined, to morality and practice, it is certainly of consequence in the speculative science of human nature, and is a proper object of curiosity and enquiry. It may not, therefore, be unsuitable, in this place, to bestow a few reflections upon it. (M App2.5, pp. 297-298)

In other words, Hume is drawing a distinction between the relevance of the selfish system to "morality and practice" (which he thinks is minimal, if even relevant at all), and its significance for "the speculative science of human nature", which is potentially great. A similar dialectic, I submit, explains the difference between Hume's remarks of the denial of the reality of moral distinctions. When he says at the start of the *Enquiry* that no one can seriously deny this reality, Hume is claiming that whatever theoretical reason we have for our denial, our sentiments and actions will remain by and large the same as they would have done had we not denied it. But when, in 'Of the Study of History,' Hume says that some philosophers deny the reality of moral distinctions, he is referring to their speculative stance, or theoretical beliefs—hence, he says that their denial is the result of being bewildered by the subtlety of their own speculations. Thus, although Hume begins the moral *Enquiry* by dismissing what I will call *practical moral scepticism* (which he thinks impossible), he is clearly leaving hanging the question of *speculative moral scepticism*.

What about the end of the *Enquiry*? Appended to the end of the moral *Enquiry* is a rich and insightful essay, entitled 'A Dialogue.' The essay engages with one of the most persistent themes that emerged from the historical survey in Chapter 2 of this thesis—to wit, the problem of the diversity of moral opinions and practices in different countries and different ages. It consists of a discussion between the narrator, representing Hume, and an imaginary interlocutor called Palamedes. Palamedes claims to have recently returned from a country called Fourli, "whose inhabitants have ways of thinking, in many things, particularly in morals, diametrically opposite to ours." (M Dial.2, p. 324). In particular, Palamedes relates the story of a Fourlian named Alcheic, who had attempted to seduce a young man,

even though married (and that to his sister); had committed murder and parricide, and assassinated a close friend to whom he had previously been loyal; and later, when his fortunes had a turn for the worse, committed suicide. But Alcheic was, in life and death, held in the greatest esteem by his compatriots. The narrator dismisses Palamedes' account as a fiction, whereupon Palamedes reveals that he had been using the fictional country of Fourli to relate the ethical norms and practices of the ancient Athenians, and Alcheic to represent the character of Brutus. The narrator initially responds by giving a similarly unflattering portrait of the norms and practices of the modern day French—duelling, adultery, approval of tyranny—but Palamedes argues that this is just grist to his mill:

> The Athenians surely, were a civilized, intelligent people, if ever there were one; and yet their man of merit might, in this age, be held in horror and execration. The French are also, without doubt, a very civilized, intelligent people; and yet their man of merit might, with the Athenians, be an object of the highest contempt and ridicule, and even hatred. …These two people are supposed to be the most similar in their national character of any in ancient and modern times…. What wide difference, therefore, in the sentiments of morals, must be found between civilized nations and Barbarians, or between nations whose characters have little in common? How shall we pretend to fix a standard for judgments of this nature? (M Dial.25, p. 333)

Palamedes, then, puts forward the view that the diversity of moral opinions and customs across different countries and ages unsettles the idea that there is a universal moral standard; a perspective that would now be understood as a species of relativism. Where the narrator goes on to argue for the existence of universal principles of morality, Palamedes states that his intention is "to represent the uncertainty of all these judgments concerning characters; and to convince you, that fashion, vogue, custom, and law, were the chief foundation of all moral determinations." (M Dial.25, p. 333). This is, of course, a version of Locke's law of opinion or reputation, which I have discussed in Chapter 2 (see §2.5). Indeed, when ridiculing Palamedes' description of Fourli, the narrator states that "[t]hey exceed

all we ever read of, among the Mingrelians, and Topinamboues"—a clear allusion to Locke's discussion of the problem of diversity in the *Essay*, where he cites accounts of the practices of these tribes.[380] This confirms that Hume was engaging with the sceptical style of argument raised in Locke, and criticised so vociferously by Shaftesbury (see §2.6). And like Shaftesbury, Hume pokes fun at Locke's heavy reliance on spurious travellers' accounts, with Palamedes saying, "you think then, that my story is improbable; and that I have used, or rather abused the privilege of a traveler[?]" (M Dial.12, p. 328). However, unlike Shaftesbury, Hume takes seriously the idea that the same moral principles characterise the ethical opinions and customs of apparently very different societies in different countries and ages.[381] The narrator replies to Palamedes' argument against a universal standard, arguing that we may reconcile these differences:

> By tracing matters … a little higher, and examining the first principles, which each nation establishes, of blame or censure. The Rhine flows north, the Rhone south; yet both spring from the *same* mountain, and are also actuated, in their opposite directions, by the *same* principle of gravity. The different inclinations of the ground, on which they run, cause all the difference in their courses. (M Dial.26, p. 333)

The narrator's argument here is rather nuanced. He argues that very different opinions and customs can be supported by the same affections, governed by the same principles, but operating in very different circumstances. Just to take one example: the ancient Greek opinion of the permissibility of infant exposure may appear grotesque in a modern society, but ask an Athenian parent why he did so, he may reply: "It is because I love it … and regard the poverty which it must inherit from me, as a greater evil than death, which it is not capable of dreading, feeling, or

[380] M Dial.12, p. 328.

[381] As I discussed briefly in Chapter 2, §2.6, Shaftesbury was more keen to dismiss all but a few 'civilised' people and cultures as failing to achieve proper moral development.

resenting." (M Dial.30, p. 334). After going through several such examples, the narrator concludes:

> You see then, continued I, that the principles upon which men reason in morals are always the same; though the conclusions which they draw are often very different. That they all reason aright with regard to this subject, more than with regard to any other, it is not incumbent on any moralist to show. It is sufficient, that the original principles of censure or blame are uniform, and that erroneous conclusions can be corrected by sounder reasoning and a larger experience. Though many ages have elapsed since the fall of Greece and Rome; though many changes have arrived in religion, language, laws, and customs; none of these revolutions has ever produced any considerable innovation in the primary sentiments of morals, more than in those of external beauty. (M Dial.36, pp. 335-336)

A natural question is, what are these universal principles "upon which men reason in morals"? The narrator's answer is unequivocal:

> It appears, that there never was any quality recommended by any one, as a virtue or moral excellence, but on account of its being *useful*, or *agreeable* to a man *himself*, or to *others*. For what other reason can ever be assigned for praise or approbation? Or where would be the sense of extolling a *good* character or action, which, at the same time, is allowed to be *good for nothing?* All the differences, therefore, in morals, may be reduced to this one general foundation, and may be accounted for by the different views, which people take of these circumstances. (M Dial.37, p. 336)

There are additional moves in his argument, which complicate things further, but I will leave these aside for now. What is most notable is that Hume bases the narrator's argument on precisely the definition of virtue, or personal merit, that Hume himself tries to establish in the main body of the moral *Enquiry*. As he says at the start of Section 9: "personal merit consists altogether in the possession of mental qualities, *useful* or *agreeable* to the *person himself* or to *others*." (M 9.1, p. 268). It is rather odd, then, that one of Hume's critics—James Balfour—accused Hume of siding with

Palamedes. Balfour, in his *A Delineation of the Nature and Obligation of Morality* (first edition, 1753), says:

> [N]o body can have a poorer opinion of the insufficiency of our Author's principles than he himself has; for, in the dialogue subjoined to his treatise, he contradicts his own scheme, weak as it is, and represents virtue not at all as founded upon nature, but as the casual and uncertain effect of the capricious humours, and customs of mankind. […]
>
> He observes that, in some countries, certain actions have been deemed virtuous, or vicious, which, in other countries, have passed under the contrary denominations. He illustrates this by a detail of several particular examples; and from thence would seem to deduce the following conclusion … that fashion, vogue, custom, and law were the chief foundation of all moral determinations.[382]

Hume was so exercised by this particular sleight of Balfour's that when he sent a letter in response to Balfour's *Delineation*, he brought this up as his main complaint. After complimenting Balfour's "civilities" (presumably ironically), he says:

> I must only complain of you a little for ascribing to me the sentiments which I had put into the mouth of the Sceptic in the Dialogue. I have surely endeavoured to refute the Sceptic with all the force of which I am master; and my refutation must be allowed sincere, because drawn from the capital principles of my system. (HL, vol. 1, p. 173)

Hume's complaint seems wholly justified. As suggested above, Hume can only plausibly be identified with the narrator, who proposes the exact same foundation of morality in utility and agreeableness as Hume argues to be the very definition of virtue in the *Enquiry*—as Hume says in his letter to Balfour, his refutation of the moral sceptic "must be allowed sincere, because drawn from the capital principles of [his] system."

[382] Balfour (1763, p. 149).

The *Enquiry*, then, is framed by Hume's concern with the matter of moral scepticism. It opens by dismissing practical moral scepticism, but perhaps with the hint that speculative moral scepticism is still an open subject. And it closes with a prolonged discussion of the sceptical argument from diversity against any universal moral standard, and a sophisticated defence of the latter.

### *§4.3. Aspects of Moral Objectivity in the Enquiry*

The fact that Hume gives a definition[383] of 'personal merit' (his preferred moniker for virtue in this work) is not to be thought of as a minor feature of the *Enquiry*. When Hume invoked utility and agreeableness to self or others in the *Treatise*, he did so not to offer a definition of virtue, but rather simply to outline what he took to be the "four different sources" of the pleasurable and painful sentiments of morals (T 3.3.1.30, p. 591). This fourfold classification of the sources of pleasure and pain helped to structure Hume's discussion of the origins of various morally significant passions, but that is about it. In the *Enquiry*, the formulation of a definition of virtue in terms of utility and agreeableness has a much more significant impact.

It is well-known that Hume gave two definitions of 'cause,' the interpretation of which has been an important subject of discussion amongst Hume scholars. Less discussed, though still the subject of a few commentaries, is that Hume offers parallel definitions of 'virtue' in the moral *Enquiry*.[384] These definitions are:

*Definition 1*:

> [P]ersonal merit consists altogether in the possession of mental qualities, *useful* or *agreeable* to the *person himself* or to *others*. […] The preceding delineation or definition of personal merit must still retain its evidence and authority: It must still be allowed, that every quality of the mind, which is *useful* or *agreeable* to the *person*

[383] In fact, two definitions, but I will come to that shortly.

[384] As far as I am aware, the first commentator to point this out was Garrett (1997, pp. 107-111).

*himself* or to *others*, communicates a pleasure to the spectator, engages his esteem, and is admitted under the honourable denomination of virtue or merit. (M 9.1, p. 268; M 9.12, p. 277)

*Definition 2*:

The hypothesis which we embrace is plain. It maintains that morality is determined by sentiment. It defines virtue to be *whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation*; and vice the contrary. We then proceed to examine a plain matter of fact, to wit, what actions have this influence: We consider all the circumstances, in which these actions agree: And thence endeavour to extract some general observations with regard to these sentiments. (M App1.10, p. 289)

These two definitions may be characterised as 'objective' and 'subjective,' respectively. These terms of art are notoriously vague, but I will understand them here in a fairly straightforward sense, which is nicely expressed by Peter Millican: "the first definition… sets out the characteristic (objective) conditions for applying a term whose distinctive (subjective) content is specified by the second."[385] Thus, what was in the *Treatise* only a fourfold classification of the sources of pleasurable and painful sentiments of morals, is elevated to the status of a definition of 'virtue' or 'personal merit.' In giving an objective content to the ascription of virtue to a mental quality, this definition plays an important role.

The definition is established empirically, by identifying the common properties of all those qualities which elicit a sentiment of approbation (Hume outlines this very procedure briefly in the second definition above). Once one has formulated general principles that capture these common properties, these principles then take on a normative role. That is, one may criticise practices recommended by a certain group on the grounds that they go against the general principles definitive of virtue. This is Hume's approach with respect to the so-called 'monkish virtues':

[385] Millican (2009*b*, p. 663). For his full remarks on the two definitions, see (pp. 662-665).

> [A]s every quality, which is useful or agreeable to ourselves or others, is … allowed to be a part of personal merit; so no other will ever be received, where men judge of things by their natural, unprejudiced reason, without the delusive glosses of superstition and false religion. Celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, solitude, and the whole train of monkish virtues; for what reason are they every where rejected by men of sense, but because they serve to no manner of purpose…? We observe, on the contrary, that they cross all these desirable ends…. We justly, therefore, transfer them to the opposite column, and place them in the catalogue of vices; nor has any superstition force sufficient among men of the world, to pervert entirely these natural sentiments. (M 9.3, p. 270)

A similar move is made towards the end of 'A Dialogue.' Palamedes, in a last-ditch attempt to undermine the narrator's confidence in universal standards of morality, brings up two examples of what he calls "*artificial* lives and manners", namely, Diogenes and Pascal. Diogenes is described as believing himself superior to all others; confining his happiness to the contents of his mind; living harshly to make himself about to endure hardship; indulging in all and any pleasures, even in public; and railing against all forms of religion. But Pascal (according to Palamedes) held only contempt for himself; constantly reminded himself of his worldly desires; lived harshly to punish himself; indulged in no pleasures, even in private; and was absurdly superstitious and devout to the extreme. But, says Palamedes, "both of them have met with general admiration in their different ages, and have been proposed as models of imitation. Where then is the universal standard of morals, which you talk of?" (M Dial.56, p. 343). The narrator answers Palamedes thus:

> An experiment, said I, which succeeds in the air, will not always succeed in a vacuum. When men depart from the maxims of common reason, and affect these *artificial* lives, as you call them, no one can answer to what will please or displease them. They are in a different element from the rest of mankind; and the natural principles of their mind play not with the same regularity, as if left to themselves, free from the illusions of religious superstition or philosophical enthusiasm. (M Dial.57, p. 343)

Hume does not respond in exactly the same way as with the monkish virtues. The monkish virtues, being not pernicious and disagreeable, ought actually to be considered vices, according to Hume. The artificial lives and manners of Diogenes and Pascal, by contrast, seem to be beyond assessment in terms of the general principles of morals. They cannot be assessed in these terms as utility and agreeableness are standards to assess the mental qualities of those whose sentiments are governed by the "natural principles of their mind"; that is, those principles uniform enough for a universal standard based on human nature to be generally applicable to the person. As these principles "play not with the same regularity" in Diogenes or Pascal, the same standards as are applied to others may well not apply to them.

In both sorts of examples, Hume does not attempt to add epicycles to his theory to fit them in (as it were), but rather uses his established definition of virtue, based on observations of the regular operation of natural sentiments in common life, to reconceptualise the nature of these 'outlier' cases. *Contra* Palamedes, then, who seems to hold that a sentiment-based ethics is bound to collapse into a species of moral relativism, Hume's quality-based 'objective' definition of virtue allows him to avoid the pitfalls of a purely sentiment-based 'subjective' definition of virtue. The pure sentimentalist would struggle with monkish virtues and artificial lives and manners. It seems she would be stuck on the horns of a dilemma: either she would have to incorporate them into her theory of virtue, but would then find nothing in common with other traits of which we naturally approve; or she would have to exclude them, but have no non-arbitrary way of doing so. Hume is able to exclude them (in different ways), but only because of the objective component of his theory of virtue.

*§4.4. Reason in the Moral Enquiry*

Hume is renowned as perhaps the arch anti-rationalist in the history of moral philosophy. Certainly one of the most famous sentences—if not *the* most famous—in his entire corpus must be: "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them." (T 2.3.3.4, p. 415). It may, therefore, come as somewhat of a surprise when reading Hume's later philosophy to realise that, not only is the most inflammatory anti-rationalist rhetoric entirely absent, but has been replaced by passages such as:

> I am apt to suspect … that *reason* and *sentiment* concur in almost all moral determinations and conclusions. The final sentence, it is probable, which pronounces characters and actions amiable or odious, praise-worthy or blameable … depends on some internal sense or feeling, which nature has made universal in the whole species. […] But in order to pave the way for such a sentiment, and give a proper discernment of its object, it is often necessary, we find, that much reasoning should precede, that nice distinctions be made, just conclusions drawn, distant comparisons formed, complicated relations examined, and general facts fixed and ascertained. (M 1.9, pp. 172-173)

And:

> One principal foundation of moral praise being supposed to lie in the usefulness of any quality or action; it is evident, that *reason* must enter for a considerable share in all decisions of this kind; since nothing but that faculty can instruct us in the tendency of qualities and actions, and point out their beneficial consequences to society and to their possessor. […] In many cases this is an affair liable to great controversy…. This is particularly remarkable in questions with regard to justice…. Were every single instance of justice, like that of benevolence, useful to society; this would be a more simple state of the case, and seldom liable to great controversy. But as single instances of justice are often pernicious in their first and immediate tendency … the case here becomes more intricate and involved. […] [A] very accurate *reason* or *judgment* is often requisite, to give the true determination, amidst such intricate doubts arising from obscure or opposite utilities. (M App1.2, pp. 285-286)

The change in Hume's conception of the role of reason in morality is a large topic, and I cannot explore it in much depth in this section, but it should be mentioned in any discussion of Hume's relation to scepticism in the moral *Enquiry*. The main point I want to emphasise is in accordance with the result of the last section (§4.3)—namely, that reason in the *Enquiry* appears to have a critical function with respect to the sentiments that it did not have in the *Treatise*:

> …in many orders of beauty, particularly those of the finer arts, it is requisite to employ much reasoning, in order to feel the proper sentiment; and *a false relish may frequently be corrected by argument and reflection*. There are just grounds to conclude, that moral beauty partakes much of this latter species, and demands the assistance of our intellectual faculties, in order to give it a suitable influence on the human mind. (M 1.9, p. 173; my emphasis)

How, it may be asked, can a false relish—in the case of morality, a false sentiment of approbation or disapprobation—be corrected by argument and reflection (i.e., reason)? I will come back to this subject when discussing Hume's more sceptical pronouncements regarding reason's role in morality, but for now I want to make an observation that tells in the other (anti-sceptical) direction. Hume appears to hold that, with our first (objective) definition of 'virtue' in hand, we can then use reason to determine what qualities are, or are not, virtuous in certain circumstances.[386] He says as much, we may recall, in 'A Dialogue':

> You see then, continued I, that *the principles upon which men reason in morals* are always the same; though the conclusions which they draw are often very different. *That they all reason aright* with regard to this subject, more than with regard to any other, it is not incumbent on any moralist to show. It is sufficient, that the original principles of censure or blame are uniform, and that *erroneous conclusions can be corrected by sounder reasoning* and a larger experience. (M Dial.36, pp. 335-336; my emphases)

[386] Where 'circumstances' is to be construed very broadly, including not just personal circumstances, but cultural, social, political, economic, geographical, etc., circumstances.

This may just be a shift in emphasis, but if so it is a significant one. Perhaps most significantly, the introduction in 'A Dialogue' of a distinction between the universal principles of morals, on the one hand, and the diverse *applications* of those principles in different cultural, social, political (etc.) contexts, on the other, opens up a huge scope for reason to apply itself in settling moral questions. Indeed, one wonders if Hume was a bit complacent about our capacity to reason about the application of universal principles in such diverse contexts.

One other feature of Hume's mature view of reason's role in morality that deserves to be mentioned is his abandonment of an argument so central to the anti-rationalism of the *Treatise*. This is the argument, spread out across *Treatise* 2.3.3. and 3.1.1. This argument has baffled commentators for a long time, and is still a hot topic of debate.[387] But very few people[388] have noticed that Hume drops this argument completely in his corresponding mature works of philosophy—that is, the *Dissertation on the Passions* and the moral *Enquiry*. It does not feature in either, anywhere. The argument is anyway confused. The argument in 2.3.3. ('Of the influence motives of the will') concerns *motivation*: as Hume expresses it, "reason alone can never produce any action" (T 2.3.3.4, p. 414). But the conclusion he wants to draw in 3.1.1. ('Moral Distinctions not deriv'd from Reason') is about moral *evaluation*: he wants to show that the distinction we draw between virtue and vice, right and wrong, is not founded on reason, but on sentiments of approbation and disapprobation. In Hume's mature works, he is careful to keep these matters separate. Thus, in the *Dissertation on the Passions*, he deals with reason's inability to motivate (see P 5.1-4, pp. 24-25); and in the moral *Enquiry* he discusses whether moral evaluation is founded on reason (see M App.1-21, pp. 285-294). He greatly

[387] For example, a recent volume on *Hume on Motivation and Virtue* edited by Charles Pigden identifies three themes of the collected papers—themes which, he says, "loom large in contemporary ethical thought" (2009, p. 4)—of which two out of three are directly related to this argument.

[388] Honourable exceptions include Merivale (2014) and Millican (forthcoming). This fact was discovered jointly by Amyas Merivale and myself—I do not know whether it has been observed before.

clarifies and tightens up his arguments (of which there are five) in the first appendix of the *Enquiry*, but I will postpone any discussion of them till later, when looking at Hume's scepticism regarding moral rationalism.

### *§4.5. More on Artificiality in the Treatise and the Moral Enquiry*

Almost everything I have said so far about the anti-sceptical aspects of Hume's theory of morals relates to his mature moral philosophy as presented in the moral *Enquiry*. There is a simple reason for this: Hume says very little directly about moral scepticism in the *Treatise*, though of course many aspects of his moral theory there bear indirectly on the subject. However, there is one clear exception to this, where Hume develops an anti-sceptical point in the *Treatise*, which is then carried over (almost verbatim) into the moral *Enquiry*. This is his argument against the artificiality of moral distinctions. Of course, Hume famously argues in both the *Treatise* and the moral *Enquiry* that justice is an artificial virtue, where justice encompasses, roughly, what in the *Treatise* he calls the three fundamental laws of nature: "*that of the stability of possession*, *of its transference by consent*, and *of the performance of promises*." (T 3.2.6.1, p. 526; cf. M App.3.6-7, pp. 305-306).[389] But whilst Hume holds that certain virtues, such as justice, are (in a sense) artificial, what he thinks impossible (or, more precisely, incoherent) is the claim that basis of the general distinction we make between right and wrong, virtue and vice, is likewise artificial. I will quote the passages I have in mind at length, so that the full argument may be appreciated:

> Tho' this progress of the sentiments be *natural*, and even necessary, 'tis certain, that it is here forwarded by the artifice of politicians, who, in order to govern men more easily, and preserve peace in human society, have endeavour'd to

[389] Sometimes Hume seems to include a bit more, sometimes a bit less, under the term 'justice'—see Harris (forthcoming) for discussion of these and other nuances in Hume's conception of justice, in both the *Treatise* and the moral *Enquiry*.

> produce an esteem for justice, and an abhorrence of injustice. This, no doubt, must have its effect; but nothing can be more evident, than that the matter has been carry'd too far by certain writers on morals, who seem to have employ'd their utmost efforts to extirpate all sense of virtue from among mankind. Any artifice of politicians may assist nature in the producing of those sentiments, which she suggests to us, and may even on some occasions, produce alone an approbation or esteem for any particular action; but 'tis impossible it should be the sole cause of the distinction we make betwixt vice and virtue. For if nature did not aid us in this particular, 'twou'd be in vain for politicians to talk of *honourable* or *dishonourable*, *praiseworthy* or *blameable*. These words wou'd be perfectly unintelligible, and wou'd no more have any idea annex'd to them, than if they were of a tongue perfectly unknown to us. The utmost politicians can perform, is, to extend the natural sentiments beyond their original bounds; but still nature must furnish the materials, and give us some notion of moral distinctions. (T 3.2.2.25, p. 500)

> From the apparent usefulness of the social virtues, it has readily been inferred by sceptics, both ancient and modern, that all moral distinctions arise from education, and were, at first, invented, and afterwards encouraged, by the art of politicians, in order to render men tractable, and subdue their natural ferocity and selfishness, which incapacitated them for society. This principle, indeed, of precept and education, must so far be owned to have a powerful influence, that it may frequently encrease or diminish, beyond their natural standard, the sentiments of approbation or dislike; and may even, in particular instances, create, without any natural principle, a new sentiment of this kind; as is evident in all superstitious practices and observances: But that *all* moral affection or dislike arises from this origin, will never surely be allowed by any judicious enquirer. Had nature made no such distinction, founded on the original constitution of the mind, the words, *honourable* and *shameful*, *lovely* and *odious*, *noble* and *despicable*, had never had place in any language; nor could politicians, had they invented these terms, ever have been able to render them intelligible, or make them convey any idea to the audience. So that nothing can be more superficial than this paradox of the sceptics; and it were well, if, in the abstruser studies of logic and metaphysics, we could as easily obviate the cavils of that sect, as in the practical and more intelligible sciences of politics and morals. (M 5.3, p. 214)

Several features of Hume's choice of language make it clear that a principal target of these passages is Bernard Mandeville: the reference to the artifice of politicians; rendering men governable; man's natural ferocity and selfishness; inculcation of the notions of honour and shame; etc. As I argued in Chapter 2 (see §2.7), Mandeville

held the ideas of virtue and vice to be based on such a process, and as such held that all moral distinctions are artificial, that is, based on the invention of human beings.[390] Furthermore, he identifies this view (in the passage taken from the *Enquiry*) as a "paradox of the sceptics", which is "superficial" and "easily obviate[d]".

With regard to Hume's response, it is, in fact, a curious one. He argues that if the sceptic were right about the artificiality of moral distinctions, and moral terms such as 'honourable' and 'shameful,' 'noble' and 'despicable,' etc., were not "founded on the original constitution of the mind," then such moral terms could never have been made intelligible in the first place (and hence could not be inculcated by politicians). This is a curious response because it seems to be open to a fairly obvious reply. The sceptic might say: 'Yes, moral terms are ultimately meaningless; and so much the worse for the foundations of morality.' Hume's response here, then, seems to rely on a suppressed premise, namely, that moral terms are evidently meaningful, and that their very usage depends on their so being. This may not seem obvious: why should the mere fact of usage of a term require its having a meaning? However, in the light of the discussion of the changed role of artifice in the common point of view and the correction of morals in the last Chapter (see especially §§3.7 and 3.9), Hume's confident declaration in this passage may make more sense. In the moral *Enquiry*, Hume can indeed take it for granted that we will recognise the meaningfulness of moral language, because it is based on the powerful and instinctive principle of humanity, which yield sentiments that serve not just as source-impressions for moral ideas that then need to be regulated by artifice. Rather, our moral beliefs are brought to a standard by registering whether the sentiments underlying them are produced by the principle of humanity, or not.

[390] Though I should note that Mandeville holds these artificial virtues not to be authentic—for him, at least as I have interpreted him, authentic virtue is impossible without divine assistance. Again, see §2.7.

*§4.6. Conclusion*

Considering the large-scale changes to a core part of Hume's moral theory detailed in the last Chapter, and the pervasive anti-sceptical framing and direction of argument detailed in this Chapter, it is fair to say that the moral *Enquiry* is in many ways an answer to accusation that Hume's theory of morals in the *Treatise* was guilty of "sapping the foundations of Morality, by denying the natural and essential Difference betwixt Right and Wrong, Good and Evil, Justice and Injustice" (L 19, 36, pp. 425, 429). Despite his notorious scepticism about objectivity, truth, and fact in the moral domain, he was keen to show that the direction of his overall moral theory was anything but destructively sceptical. In the next Chapter, I turn to that sceptical element that does exist in Hume's moral theory, and attempt to show that he was not only a moral anti-realist, but rejected the moral sense theory that could perhaps have served as the most plausible sentimentalist response to destructive moral scepticism.

# 5

# David Hume: Moral Realist?

## §5.1. *Introduction*

In David Fate Norton's important study of Hume's response to scepticism, he claims that:

> Hume is not an affective subjectivist in morals. He does not claim that morality is merely sentiment, feeling, approbation, or disapprobation. On the contrary, Hume is a moral realist who believes that virtue and vice have objective status, and a realist for whom both sentiment and reason have significant epistemological roles to play.[391]

However, Norton's arguments for his realist interpretation are weak. At most, he establishes that Hume takes there to be an objective *aspect* to our conception of virtue and vice, which is not to show that Hume believes virtuous and vicious qualities to be fully mind-independent. In this chapter, I will first (in §5.2) examine Norton's direct arguments for his interpretation of Hume as a moral realist, showing that they rest on a false dichotomy and unrecognised ambiguity. I will then (§5.3) turn to an interpretation of Hume as—if not quite a moral realist—still a cognitivist, and believer in moral truth and fact. This will raise the issue of Hume's conception of reason, cognition, and their relation to morality, which I discuss in §5.4. Lastly, I will argue against taking the notion of Hume as a "moral sense theorist" in any robust sense (§5.5). In general, this chapter will vindicate the interpretation of Hume as a moral anti-realist, who rejects not just moral objectivity, but moral truth, fact, and sense-perception.

[391] Norton (1982, p. 109).

*§5.2. Norton's Realist Interpretation*

Norton claims that Hume is a "moral realist in two senses": he believes the ontological realist thesis,

(OR) "that there are moral distinctions grounded in real existences that are independent of the observer's mind";

and the epistemological realist thesis,

(ER) "that these distinctions can be known".[392]

I will be focussing on Norton's arguments for attributing (OR) to Hume, as (ER) is dependent on (OR), so cannot be attributed to Hume if (OR) cannot. The real existences that ground our moral distinctions, on this interpretation, are (what Norton calls) the "objective correlates of sentiments".[393] What does this terminology mean? Consider one of Hume's "definitions" of virtue:

> [The hypothesis we embrace] defines virtue to be *whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation*; and vice the contrary. (M App1.10, p. 289).

Hume believes that when a spectator forms a moral judgement about someone, they are judging an enduring mental quality, or character trait, that underlies their actions. This mental quality is the "objective correlate" of the sentiment, in Norton's

[392] Norton (1982, p. 120).

[393] Norton (1982, p. 111).

terms; its existence in the agent is independent of the sentiment to which it gives rise in the spectator.[394] Norton contrasts his view with the "purely subjectivistic" interpretation, on which "virtue and vice are identical with, respectively, approbation and disapprobation, that they are merely such sentiments."[395] I agree that Hume clearly does not intend to identify virtue and vice with the moral sentiments of spectators, not least because the former are frequently "said to be the occasion or cause of" the latter, as Norton points out.[396] But Norton's interpretation is not strengthened by this, unless he is resting his argument on a false dichotomy, namely, that virtue and vice are either sentiments, or else the objective correlates of sentiments. If other interpretations are possible (and Norton does not argue they are not), ruling out the crude subjectivism that identifies virtues and vices with sentiments in the mind of the spectator will not support Norton's realist view.

In fact, Norton's phrasing of (OR) is quite ambiguous. What does it mean to say that moral distinctions are 'grounded in' real, mind-independent existences? On one reading, it could be that moral judgements are judgements *of* things that exist independently of the mind of the person doing the judging. But presumably this is far too weak a thesis to warrant labelling Hume a 'moral realist'; indeed, even a moral error-theorist could accept that moral judgements are *of* such things, and that such things (people, dispositions, actions, etc.) exist. They deny only that these people, dispositions, actions, etc., really possess the moral properties that we ascribe to them in our moral judgements. On another reading, it could mean that those properties to which we apply our concepts of virtue and vice—the mental qualities of moral agents—are independent of the mind of the person applying the concept, i.e., the

[394] By calling it a 'correlate' of the sentiment, he seems to mean two things: that the mental quality (in part) causes the sentimental reaction; and that we only have such sentimental reactions when we consider, or are aware of, the signs of such mental qualities: Norton (1982, p. 118).

[395] Norton (1982, p. 111).

[396] Norton (1982, p. 113).

spectator.[397] But it is not clear that this would count as a form of moral realism, either. At most, it establishes that there is an objective component in our concepts of virtue and vice, which is not quite the same as saying that virtue and vice can be conceived entirely independently of the (subjective) reactions of spectators. I will come back to this point later, but for now just briefly consider the analogy with Hume's two definitions of 'cause', which understand that notion in terms of an objective component (the constant conjunction of objects) and in terms of a subjective reaction (the determination of the mind to pass from the perception of one object to the idea of the other). The fact that the first definition of 'cause' highlights an objective aspect to our understanding of causation does not rule out an anti-realist interpretation of Hume's views on causation. The anti-realist interpretation just says that any feature of causal connection above and beyond constant conjunction (in particular, necessary connection) is not to be understood in realist terms (as something that exists mind-independently).[398]

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[397] At this point, I should clarify something about the notion of *mind-independence*. Humean spectators can, of course, have moral sentiments concerning, and moral ideas of, their own mental qualities and actions. Indeed, Hume states that we possess a "constant habit of surveying ourselves, as it were, in reflection" (M 9.10, p. 276); we conduct an ongoing "review of our own conduct", a satisfactory outcome to which is "very requisite to happiness" (M 9.23, p. 283). It may be objected, then, that (in this case) the mental qualities being judged are *not* independent of the mind of the spectator doing the judging; were the mind being judged not to exist, the mind doing the judging would not exist either, as they are identical. However, it is easy enough to clarify the notion of mind-independence so that this objection fails: the mind-independence of our mental qualities is their existence independently, not of minds in general, nor of the mind of the spectator in particular, but of the sentimental reaction to, and consequent moral belief regarding, that mental quality. Thus, I may feel a sentiment of approval towards my own benevolent disposition, and consequently believe that my benevolent disposition is virtuous, but my benevolent disposition does not depend for its existence on such a sentiment or belief. This is demonstrated, for instance, by certain non-human animals, who may display mental qualities that in humans would count as virtues or vices (see, e.g., T 2.2.12.1-8, pp. 397-398; M App2.8, p. 300; M App2.13, p. 302), but as the animals "have little or no sense of virtue or vice", they do not approve or disapprove of qualities "plac'd… in the mind" (T 2.1.12.5, p. 326). It is in this sense, then, that I shall refer to the 'mind-independence' of the mental qualities of moral agents: *viz.*, that our mental qualities exist independently of the moral sentiments, ideas, or beliefs of spectators regarding them, even in regard to their own mental qualities.

[398] That there is an objective component in our understanding of causation must surely be allowed on any interpretation. Hume is clear about this: "As to what may be said, that the operations of nature are independent of our thought and reasoning, I allow it; and accordingly have observ'd, that objects bear to each other the relations of contiguity and succession; that like objects may be observ'd in

For the purposes of this discussion, I assume that Norton's (OR) is meant in a strong sense: that is, that the existence of virtue or vice in a moral agent is *entirely* independent of anyone's sentimental reactions to, or moral beliefs about, them. Norton seems unclear about what exactly his moral realist interpretation amounts to, saying in a footnote that "Hume's ontology of morals is elusive." In the same footnote, he develops the view that moral qualities might, for Hume, be something like "emergent realities", that is, they somehow arise out of "natural states of affairs" but are not epiphenomena of them, though he admits that Hume "did not develop the complex ontological terminology" required to articulate such a position "unambiguously".[399] Despite this lack of clarity, I believe the stronger reading represents Norton's view best. I have indicated already that Norton identifies virtue and vice as the objective correlates of moral sentiments. But he suggests that these objective correlates are the mental qualities of moral agents. Are these not, then, simply the properties to which we apply to concepts of virtue and vice, i.e., entirely natural properties, not making Hume a moral realist in any strong sense? Norton is clear that they are not. The objective correlates must, according to Norton, be non-natural moral qualities: they are, somehow, transformed "from *natural* entities into *moral* entities"; "virtue and vice are on Hume's account qualities that repeatedly emerge… from natural or nonmoral states of affairs."[400] Winkler glosses this by saying that, on Norton's conception of moral realism, "our moral sense does not merely register objectively real features, but *represents* objectively real *moral* features".[401]

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several instances to have like relations; and that all this is independent of, and antecedent to the operations of the understanding." (T 1.3.14.28, p. 168). On the two definitions, Millican (2009, esp. §4) defends a plausible anti-realist interpretation, on which the first definition of 'cause' captures "characteristic (objective) conditions for applying a term whose distinctive (subjective) content is specified by the second [definition]." (p. 663).

[399] Norton (1982, pp. 116-117 n. 21).

[400] Norton (1982, p. 116 n. 21).

[401] Winkler (1985, p. 180; emphases in original).

Norton maintains that this thesis is supported by the fact that, for Hume, "*virtuous* and *vicious* are terms that refer to actions insofar as those actions reflect or proceed from the qualities or character of moral agents".[402] For instance, Hume says:

> If any *action* be either virtuous or vicious, 'tis only as a sign of some quality or character. It must depend upon durable principles of the mind, which extend over the whole conduct, and enter into the personal character. (T 3.3.1.4, p. 575).

He further connects this to Hume's theory of the double relation of impressions and ideas (see, e.g., T 2.1.5.5, pp. 286-287), which is the theory that explains the origins of the four central indirect passions of pride, humility, love, and hatred.[403] Norton draws attention to the following passage in Hume:

> Now since every quality in ourselves or others, which gives pleasure, always causes pride or love; as every one, that produces uneasiness, excites humility or hatred: It follows, that these two particulars are to be consider'd as equivalent, with regard to our mental qualities, *virtue* and the power of producing love or pride, *vice* and the power of producing humility or hatred. In every case, therefore, we must judge of the one by the other; and may pronounce any *quality* of the mind virtuous, which causes love or pride; and any one vicious, which causes hatred or humility. (T 3.3.1.3, p. 575).

Norton argues that this passage shows that "Hume takes *virtue* and *vice* to have reference to items beyond the psychological states of those who utter them. *Virtue* and *vice* also refer to the real qualities of agents and their actions."[404] However, neither Hume's view that actions are only derivatively virtuous or vicious, nor his

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[402] Norton (1982, p. 113).

[403] The four *central* indirect passions, but not the only ones: "[U]nder the indirect passions I comprehend pride, humility, ambition, vanity, love, hatred, envy, pity, malice, generosity, with their dependants." (T 2.1.1.4, pp. 276-277). On the problems that can arise from not distinguishing the four indirect passions generated by the double relation from the other indirect passions, see Merivale (2014, pp. 66-68).

[404] Norton (1982, pp. 115-116).

apparent claim that virtues and vices can be identified as the powers of enduring mental qualities, or character traits, to produce these indirect passions in us, demonstrate that Hume is a moral realist in the sense of Norton's (OR).[405]

To be sure, Hume does take the qualities of the mind, to which we apply moral concepts, to be objective, in the sense that they are "matter[s] of fact, or real existence" (T 3.1.1.26, p. 468), as independent of the indirect passions they cause as bodily qualities (T 3.3.5.1-6, pp. 614-617). These mental qualities are not discerned by the moral sentiments, but by reasoning from observed behaviour: we make "inferences… founded on the experienced union of like actions, with like motives, inclinations, and circumstances" (E 8.27, p. 97); by this means, we "mount up to the knowledge of men's inclinations and motives, from their actions, expressions, and even gestures; and again, descend to the interpretation of their actions from our knowledge of their motives and inclinations." (E 8.9, pp. 84-85; cf. T 2.3.1.14, p. 404; T 3.3.1.7, p. 576). Indeed, whilst it is moral sentiment that "pronounces characters and actions amiable or odious, praiseworthy or blameable", sometimes some complex inference is required to grasp the objective situation before pronouncing:

> [I]n order to pave the way for such a sentiment, and give a proper discernment of its object, it is often necessary, we find, that much reasoning should precede. … [I]n many orders of beauty, particularly those of the finer arts, it is requisite to employ much reasoning, in order to feel the proper sentiment…. [M]oral beauty partakes of this… species (M 1.9, pp. 172-173).

[405] It may be worth noting that there is an ambiguity in Hume's various formulations here that Norton does not acknowledge. In the *Treatise*, Hume sometimes says that virtues and vice are the mental qualities themselves (e.g., T 3.3.4.1, pp. 606-607; T 3.3.4.7, p. 610-611); more often, he just says that mental qualities are (pronounced or denominated) virtuous or vicious (e.g., T 3.2.5.4, p. 517; T 3.3.1.3, pp. 574-575; T 3.3.1.30, p. 591; T 3.3.6.2, p. 618-619); and in the passage above, he apparently identifies virtues and vices with powers that our mental qualities have. In the moral *Enquiry*, he much more consistently identifies virtue and vice with the mental qualities themselves (e.g., M 1.10, p. 173-174; M 8.1, p. 261 n. 50; M 9.1, p. 268; M 9.12, p. 277; M App1.10, p. 289; M App4.1, p. 312). One might have thought that, given Norton's concern to specify the precise nature of Hume's ontology of morals, he would have given this variety of formulations more consideration. I will follow Hume's more consistent, mature formulation, and take it that virtue and vice (at least in their objective aspect) are the mental qualities of moral agents.

The analogy with artistic beauty recalls a passage from *The Standard of Taste*, where Hume says:

> Though it be certain, that beauty and deformity, more than sweet and bitter, are not qualities in objects, but belong entirely to the sentiment, internal or external; it must be allowed, that there are certain qualities in objects, which are fitted by nature to produce those particular feelings. (ST 16, p. 235).

Hume is equally clear here that discerning the qualities of objects which are "fitted by nature" to produce a sentiment of aesthetic approval or disapproval requires the operation of reason (ST 22, pp. 240-241). The discovery of the qualities of objects which are naturally fitted to produce moral or aesthetic sentiments is analogised by Hume (drawing on a story from *Don Quixote*) to the discovery of a key with a leather thong at the bottom of a barrel of wine: those with great delicacy of taste may detect these in a slight metallic or leathery taste to the wine (as per the story), but the key and thong exist independently of these tastes, and would exist there whether or not the wine was drank by someone with enough delicacy of taste to detect them (ST 14-16, pp. 234-236).

Thus, the existence of the mental qualities to which we apply the concepts of virtue and vice are not dependent on the sentimental reactions of spectators. However, as I have said, this does not support Norton's moral realist interpretation. Hume's anti-realism does not consist in denying that we apply moral ideas to objectively existing qualities, but in denying that the existence of virtues and vices is entirely independent of the moral sentiments, ideas, and beliefs of spectators. A similar distinction is made by Rachel Cohon, who puts this in terms of "an ambiguity in the words 'virtue' and 'vice'."[406] On the one hand, 'virtue' and 'vice' may denote "neutrally describable traits": "a quality of a person's mind that can be described in

[406] Cohon (2008, p. 100).

value-neutral terms."[407] For instance, the virtue of benevolence might be described as a disposition to be concerned with promoting the happiness of others, and alleviating their misery; or the vice of knavery may be described as a disposition to violate promises or contracts when it is in one's personal advantage. Whether one has the quality of being benevolent or knavish, so described, is a non-moral matter of fact. These neutrally describable traits are, Cohon suggests, the "objective correlates" which Norton makes so central to his interpretation.[408] On the other hand, 'virtue' and 'vice' are "the most graceful-sounding name[s] for the property of being a virtue… the property *virtuousness*", or the property of being a vice, the property *viciousness*.[409] These are properties *of* our mental qualities, and they are not neutral, but essentially moral properties. We ascribe them when we say, for instance, that benevolence is virtuous, or that knavery is vicious. More or less equivalently, I have argued that the evidence offered by Norton fails to support his moral realist interpretation, as it only shows that the mental qualities to which we apply the concepts of virtue and vice are objectively existing qualities, which is not the same as showing that virtue and vice exist entirely independently of our moral sentiments, ideas or beliefs. Mental qualities are only 'virtues' or 'vices' insofar as they possess the property of being virtuous or being vicious, but

Despite agreeing with Cohon over the flaws in Norton's moral realist interpretation, I believe she still concedes too much to it, out of a desire to avoid ascribing an error-theory to Hume. In particular, she accepts, with Norton, that there is such a thing as moral truth, and moral matters of fact. In her view, when moral ideas or beliefs agree or disagree with these facts they are rendered true or false, respectively. Cohon attempts to square this "truth cognitivism" (as she calls it)

[407] Cohon (2008, p. 100).

[408] Cohon (2008, p. 101 n. 16).

[409] Cohon (2008, p. 101).

with a picture of Hume as, nevertheless, a moral anti-realist. It is to this that I turn in the next section.

### §5.3. *Cohon's Truth Cognitivist Interpretation*

Rachel Cohon raises a false dichotomy for interpreting Hume's moral theory:

> [D]oes Hume think moral judgments are mere expressions of emotion, or descriptions of the observer's sentiments?[410]

However, Cohon recognises that this is a false dichotomy.[411] According to her preferred interpretation, the "moral sensing view" (hereafter, 'MSV'), neither of these is correct. Instead, "[o]ur moral *reactions* are occurrent sentiments, but our moral *judgments* are beliefs", the latter being "capable of truth even though they arise from sentiment".[412] In other words, Cohon accepts that Hume is a sentimentalist—that he grounds morality in our sentiments—but also holds that Hume is a cognitivist, in that we can have moral ideas copied from our sentiments, which have cognitive content, and therefore are truth-apt. It might be thought that this would lead to a moral realist interpretation of Hume: "many readers", Cohon says, seem to think "that if Hume is not a noncognitivist… he is therefore some sort of moral realist."[413] But Cohon denies that this follows, arguing that it is possible to see Hume as a cognitivist, who thinks that moral ideas or beliefs can be true or false, but nevertheless as taking these moral truths or falsehoods, in an anti-realist way, to be "reaction-dependent":

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[410] Cohon (2008, p. 2).

[411] Unlike, it should be said, Norton's deployment of a false dichotomy between subjectivism and realism.

[412] Cohon (2008, p. 2).

[413] Cohon (2008, p. 96).

> Moral antirealism is in fact compatible with truth cognitivism. For one version of moral anti-realism holds that moral properties (vice and virtue, for example) exist but are reaction-dependent properties. For this sort of anti-realist, as for the other, our psychological responses to people's characters and actions are not warranted by any independently existing moral properties. For this sort of anti-realist, however, human characters and actions do have moral properties—though only in virtue of our experiencing the psychological reactions we do. Given this, we might sometimes have true opinions about those reaction-dependent properties. There is nothing paradoxical about this. It is perfectly consistent.[414]

What Cohon calls "truth cognitivism" consists of three connected theses: (i) that there are moral ideas and beliefs, distinct from our sentiments, which attribute moral properties to objects; (ii) that these moral ideas or beliefs are truth-apt (they can be true or false); and (iii) that these moral ideas of beliefs sometimes are true. Cohon takes (i) and (ii) to be definitive of *cognitivism*, but she points out that Mackie-style error-theory[415] is, on this definition, a form of cognitivism, it just holds that all our beliefs which attribute moral properties to objects are all false. She does not regard an error-theoretic interpretation of Hume as plausible, so she adds (iii), which is the distinctive thesis that constitutes *truth cognitivism*.

On the face of it, the interpretation which makes moral ideas or beliefs truth-apt is straightforwardly refuted by Hume's many claims that moral distinctions are not made by reason, which is the faculty that discovers truth and falsehood (I will label the passages for ease of reference):

> [A] 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. […] The standard of the one, being founded on

[414] Cohon (2008, p. 99).

[415] Briefly discussed in §1.2 of this thesis.

the nature of things, is eternal and inflexible, even by the will of the Supreme Being: The standard of the other, arising from the internal frame and constitution of animals, is ultimately derived from that Supreme Will, which bestowed on each being its peculiar nature, and arranged the several classes and orders of existence. (M App1.21, p. 294).

[B] There has been a controversy started of late, much better worth examination, concerning the general foundation of MORALS; whether they be derived from REASON, or from SENTIMENT; whether we attain the knowledge of them by a chain of argument and induction, or by an immediate feeling and finer internal sense; whether, like all sound judgment of truth and falsehood, they should be the same to every rational intelligent being; or whether, like the perception of beauty and deformity, they be founded entirely on the particular fabric and constitution of the human species. (M 1.3, p. 170).

[C] 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. (T 3.1.1.9, p. 458).

[D] That Faculty, by which we discern Truth and Falshood, and that by which we perceive Vice and Virtue had long been confounded with each other, and all Morality was suppos'd to be built on eternal and immutable Relations, which, to every intelligent Mind, were equally invariable as any Proposition concerning Quantity or Number. But a [Hume footnotes 'Mr. *Hutcheson*'] late Philosopher has taught us, by the most convincing Arguments, that Morality is nothing in the abstract Nature of Things, but is entirely relative to the Sentiment or mental Taste of each particular Being; in the same Manner as the distinctions of sweet and bitter, hot and cold, arise from the particular feeling of each Sense or Organ. Moral Perceptions, therefore, ought not to be clas'd with the Operations of the Understanding, but with the Tastes or Sentiments.[416]

[416] This passage featured in the 1748 and 1750 editions of the first *Enquiry*. Cited in editorial appendix of Beauchamp's (2000) critical edition (p. 232).

Now, Cohon admits that Hume nowhere says that moral judgements are truth-apt, or that some are in fact true.[417] She mentions Hume's theory of the correction of morals in this connection, but seems to acknowledge that this is insufficient, as it is: Hume's theory of correction only shows that there is a standard by which we can determine some moral beliefs to be correct, and others not, but there is no reason to think that the only standard by which we may correct our beliefs is that of truth and falsity. Indeed, showing that we may fix a standard for aesthetic judgements other than that of truth and falsity seems to be the burden of Hume's famous essay 'Of the Standard of Taste.' In the moral *Enquiry*, he states that there may be distinct standards associated with distinct faculties: in his discussion of the "distinct boundaries and offices" of reason and taste (see passage A), Hume says that the "standard of the one" (reason) is "founded on the nature of things", whereas the "standard of the other" (taste) arises "from the internal frame and constitution of animals", including ourselves. The standard of the faculty of reason is based on the nature of things, measured against which our factual beliefs may constitute "knowledge of truth and falsehood"; the standard of the faculty of taste stems from our internal frame and constitution, against which our moral judgements may be measured (in some unspecified way, at least as far as passage A goes).

Cohon may reply that, although the standards are derived from different sources, they are nevertheless all standards of truth and falsity of some kind or other. There is only one text I can think of to support this response, namely, a 1751 letter to Gilbert Elliot, in which Hume says:

> Your Notion of correcting Subtility of Sentiment is certainly very just with regard to Morals, which depend upon Sentiment; & in Politics & natural Philosophy, whatever Conclusion is contrary to certain Matter of Fact must certainly be wrong, and there must some Error lie somewhere in the

[417] Cohon (2008, p. 108).

> Argument, whether we be able to show it or not. But in Metaphysics or Theology, I cannot see how either of these plain & obvious Standards of Truth can have place. Nothing there can correct bad Reasoning but good Reasoning: and Sophistry must be oppos'd by Syllogism. (HL, vol. 1, pp. 150-151).

Norton makes much of this letter in supporting his moral realist interpretation of Hume.[418] However, as Annette Baier has noted, in her review of Norton's book, "it is surely too informal a vehicle of expression on which to hang a new interpretation."[419] To counteract the very strong impression given by passages such as A – D (that the faculty of taste does not and cannot discern truth and falsity), it must be shown that Hume's official theory of truth does entail that moral ideas or beliefs truth-apt (or, at least, that it does not entail that they cannot be truth-apt). Cohon maintains, and I concur, that the "agreement theory of truth" outlined in passage C represents Hume's philosophically considered (what he sometimes calls a "strict") conception of truth: that is, "[t]ruth 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…".[420] Notice immediately that this is not consistent with the "standards" referred to in the letter to Elliot: only one of the "standards" mentioned overlaps with Hume's agreement theory, *viz.*, agreement or disagreement with matter of fact. The others mentioned are not, therefore, standards of "truth," in the sense of Hume's strict, philosophical conception of truth.

At any rate, this is not how Cohon argues for the truth cognitivist component of the MSV. Rather, she argues that there *are* moral matters of fact, with which our

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[418] He cites or refers to the letter at least 9 times: see Norton (1982, pp. 13, 52, 94, 133-134, 141, 147, 210, 305, 309).

[419] Baier (1983, p. 127).

[420] Cohon (2008, pp. 107-111). This is supported by the fact that it features in the context of displaying the consequences of (what Hume calls) his "strict and philosophical sense" of reason for the origin of moral distinctions (T 3.1.1.12, p. 459), and by Hume's other invocations of the theory (T 2.3.10.2, p. 448; T 2.3.3.5, p. 415; implicitly in P 5.1, p. 24).

moral ideas and beliefs can agree or disagree, making them true or false, respectively. This immediately comes up against the problem that Hume consistently characterises matters of fact as "objects of human reason," one of two kinds of epistemic 'objects'[421] that the faculty of reason discovers, or discerns, or of which it judges (E 4.1-2, pp. 25-26; cf. T 3.1.1.9, p. 458; P 5.1, p. 24; M App1.6, pp. 287-288). He nowhere, in any of his philosophical writings, explicitly refers to a *moral* matter of fact, any more than he explicitly refers to moral truths or falsehoods. The closest he comes, I believe, is when he says:

> Take any action allow'd to be vicious: Wilful 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. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflection into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. *Here is a matter of fact; but 'tis the object of feeling, not of reason.* It lies in yourself, not in the object. (T 3.1.1.26, pp. 468-469; my italics).

However, it is difficult to take this as supporting the idea of moral matters of fact.[422] The matter of fact that he describes as "the object of feeling" is "a sentiment of disapprobation" which "lies in yourself, not in the object". But on Cohon's MSV, our sentiments are not themselves supposed to be moral facts; rather, they are the means by which we sense moral facts.[423] Perhaps this is why Cohon says that Hume's language here is "difficult to parse"[424] (I would say it is just sloppy). She attempts to

[421] The other, of course, being relations of ideas.

[422] Nevertheless, Cohon appeals to this passage in a few places to support the idea that there are moral matters of fact (2008, pp. 93, 103-104, 114).

[423] As Cohon (2008) says, Hume's appeal to sentiment is "best read as an epistemology of value: an account of how we become aware of moral properties" (p. 101). According to her, "it is by means of these impressions [the moral sentiments] that we discern virtuousness and viciousness"; thus, "our capacity for moral sentiment" is "a sense", analogous to more familiar forms of sense perception (p. 103).

[424] Cohon (2008, p. 114).

parse it by saying that Hume holds that the moral matter of fact (e.g., the viciousness of the murder) does not lie *in* the action, but it is still a property *of* the action—a relational property it has in virtue of bringing about a sentiment of disapprobation in a spectator. But the only grounds I can see for parsing it in this particular way[425] is a prior conviction that Hume believes in the existence of moral matters of fact, and so the availability of such a parsing is very weak evidence indeed, taken by itself.

*§5.4. Humean Reason: Faculty of Inference, or of Cognition?*

Another interpretative strategy of Cohon's will take us deeper into Hume's view of the relationship between morality and cognition. Cohon argues that a close examination of the passages that commentators have seen as rejecting moral matters of fact will show that Hume only rejects moral properties being matters of fact *inferred by reason*, not matters of fact *in toto*:

> He does, of course, deny that someone's being vicious is a matter of fact that can be *inferred by reason*, but that is a far narrower claim. Not all matters of fact are inferred by reason; with some we are acquainted non-inferentially, for example by sense impressions.[426]

Hume does use such locutions in some places:

> [M]orality… consists not in any *matter of fact*, which can be discover'd by the understanding. […] [V]ice and virtue are not matters of fact, whose existence we can infer by reason…. (T 3.1.1.26, p. 468).
>
> Crime, indeed, consists not in a particular *fact*, of whose reality we are assured by *reason*…. (M App1.7, p. 288).

[425] Rather than, say, a non-cognitivist reading, or (at least) a non-truth-cognitivist reading.

[426] Cohon (2008, p. 108).

Now, I agree with Cohon's claim that, for Hume, "moral awareness is (fundamentally) non-inferential,"[427] but this exhausts the content of Hume's anti-rationalist commitments regarding morals only if Hume believes that reason is the faculty of inference, and nothing else. This view has been defended in the literature by David Owen and Don Garrett, and Cohon broadly adopts their interpretation of Humean reason.[428] Indeed, Cohon's MSV is very similar to Garrett's more recent interpretation of Hume's theory of morals as resting on "sense-based concepts", a notion he also extends to Hume's theories of causation, probability, and aesthetics.[429] This combination of an inferentialist interpretation of Hume's conception of reason and a sense-based interpretation of his moral theory, has been most stridently criticised by Peter Millican, who defends instead an interpretation of reason as the "overall cognitive faculty", the faculty for "discovery, discernment, or judgement of truth and falsehood."[430] As Millican shows, this conception of reason, or 'the understanding' (Hume uses the terms more or less interchangeably[431]), as the cognitive faculty, i.e., the faculty that discovers truth and falsehood, was a common conception at the time, featuring in John Locke, David Hartley, and Richard Price, developed in perhaps most detail by Francis Hutcheson.[432] The faculty of finding out truth and falsehood is, evidently, broader than just the deliverances of demonstrative and probable reasoning (Hume's terms for the two forms of stepwise inference). It encompasses also (at least) the deliverances of the senses, memory, and intuition.

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[427] Cohon (2008, p. 102 n. 17).

[428] Owen (1999, Chs 5-8); Garrett (1997, Ch. 1); and Cohon (2008, pp. 66 n. 7).

[429] Garrett (2015, Ch. 4, esp. §§1-2).

[430] Garrett and Millican (2011, p. 11). See Millican (2009*a*) for Millican's initial case for this interpretation of Humean reason; (2012) for its application to the interpretation of Hume on induction (esp. §3.1 for more critique of Owen and Garrett); and (2014) for a critique of Garrett's recent (2015) book (esp. §§4-5 on Humean reason and morality as sense-based concept). See also Garrett (2014) for a reply to Millican's criticisms.

[431] Garrett and Millican agree about this, and present evidence for it (2011, pp. 13-15, 18-19). See also Millican (2009, §§2.1-3.4).

[432] Millican (2009, esp. §3.4 and Appendix).

Under pressure from Millican's arguments, Garrett has accepted that intuition is, for Hume, a function of the understanding.[433] However, Garrett argues that the senses and memory only serve as "input[s]" to probable reasoning: such reasoning "operates on the deliverances of the senses and memory", but the senses and memory do not require reason in order to constitute them as independent sources of true or false belief.[434]

I agree with Millican that the role of the senses and memory goes beyond 'inputs' in Hume's discussion of the foundation of probable reasoning in the first *Enquiry*. It is after he has established (in Section 4, Part 1) that reasoning concerning matters of fact beyond present and past experience (sense and memory) is "founded on the relation of cause and effect", and that our awareness of that relation must itself be founded on something in our experience, that he queries whether it is something of which we have direct sense perception that makes us aware of the causal relation, and therefore carries us beyond our senses and memory (E 4.14, p. 32). Thus, he says that "nature has kept us at a great distance from all her secrets", and that the senses convey awareness of only "superficial qualities", but not any "powers and principles" that would allow us to extrapolate beyond them: "there is no known connexion between the sensible qualities and the secret powers" which would explain why "this experience should be extended to future times" (E 4.16, p. 33). Furthermore, "past *Experience*… can be allowed to give *direct* and *certain* information of those precise objects only, and that precise period of time, which fell under its cognizance": even if we seem to have had experience of the powers of objects, "does it follow… that like sensible qualities must always be attended with like secret powers?" (E 4.16, pp. 33-34). In other words, the senses and memory do not extend to secret powers of objects, and even if they did, they do not provide any evidence that those powers will remain constant, i.e., that nature will remain

[433] Garrett and Millican (2011, pp. 18-19).

[434] Garrett and Millican (2011, pp. 20-21).

uniform. I cannot pretend to settle the matter here, but it would require a lot of interpretative work to shake the view that Hume is here examining and dismissing the senses and memory as legitimate grounds for our commitment to the Uniformity Principle.[435] And if he is doing so as part of his argument that our inductive beliefs about the world do not derive from "any argument or process of the understanding" (E 5.2, p. 41), then he must regard the senses and the memory as delivering their evidence to the understanding.

It is also unclear to me that the senses can constitute independent sources of the awareness of truth and falsehood. Thus, in Section 12 of the first *Enquiry*, he says:

> [T]he senses alone are not implicitly to be depended on; but that we must correct their evidence by reason, and by considerations, derived from the nature of the medium, the distance of the object, and the disposition of the organ, in order to render them, within their sphere, the proper *criteria* of truth and falsehood. (E 12.6, p. 151).

If reason is necessary to even constitute sense impressions as 'proper criteria' of truth and falsehood, that is further confirmation that there are not reason-independent sources of evidence for the truth or falsity of our beliefs, which itself supports Millican's interpretation of reason as the 'overall cognitive faculty'.

Turning back to Cohon, she attempts to interpret Hume's statements about reason being 'the discovery of truth and falsehood,' or that it 'judges truth and falsehood' (see passages A – D, above), as not meaning that reason is the faculty responsible for these things: "Hume really means that reason is the *discovery* of truth and falsehood—the process of discovering them. That is, *reasoning* is the *discovering* of truth and falsehood."[436] Similarly, reason is "*the judging* of truth and falsehood",

[435] See Millican (2012, esp. §§ 2.3, 2.4, 3.4) for more detailed analysis of Hume's induction argument in the first *Enquiry*, and its significance.

[436] Cohon (2008, p. 69).

i.e., "the process of judgment".[437] The thought is that the discovering or judging process consists in the two forms of reasoning—demonstrative and probable—and therefore other, more immediate apprehensions of truth or falsehood (via the senses, memory, or intuition) are not intended to be under the remit of reason. However, Cohon's interpretation here strains plausibility. Interpreting Hume's remarks as "not… about the faculty of reason",[438] is rather difficult in the light of passage D: "That Faculty, by which we discern Truth and Falshood, and that by which we perceive Vice and Virtue had long been confounded with each other…".[439]

Garrett tries a different tack. He suggests that by 'the discovery of truth and falsehood' it is "not obvious that [Hume] means anything more than that reason is *a* kind of discovery (uncovering, revealing) of truth and falsehood—which is all that his argument in *Treatise* Book 3 requires."[440] Presumably this interpretation must be extended to Hume's characterisations of reason as the faculty by which we *discern* truth and falsehood, or *judge of* truth and falsehood. But this is equally implausible: for instance, in passage C he says that the question of the foundation of morals in reason or sentiment is one of "whether, *like all sound judgment of truth and falsehood*, they should be the same to every rational intelligent being; or whether, like the perception of beauty and deformity, they be founded entirely on the particular fabric and constitution of the human species." (M 1.3, p. 170; my italics). 'All sound judgement' clearly precludes reading him as holding that reason is merely *a* means of judging truth and falsehood. Furthermore, in the course of his argument that the passions are not truth-apt in the *Treatise* 2.3.3, Hume says:

> [N]othing can be contrary to truth and reason, except what has a reference to it, and as *the judgments of our understanding only have this reference*, it

[437] Cohon (2008, p. 70).

[438] Cohon (2008, p. 69).

[439] Beauchamp (2000, p. 232).

[440] Garrett (2015, pp. 91-92).

> must follow, that passions can be contrary to reason only so far as they are *accompany'd* with some judgment or opinion. (T 2.3.3.6, pp. 415-416; my italics).

Here he is claiming not only that reason or the understanding is *a* means of determining of truth and falsehood, but that the judgements of the understanding are the *only* perceptions that can be truth-apt. If either our sense impressions, or ideas and beliefs based upon them, or our memories, are not judgements of the understanding, they cannot, therefore, be true or false. But, evidently, our sensory beliefs and memories, at the very least, can be true or false. So they must be included in the judgements of the understanding.

I conclude, then, that Cohon and Garrett fail plausibly to reinterpret the passages which seem to support the interpretation of Humean reason as the faculty of cognition, instead being concerned with rational inference only. This has some important implications. Firstly, if moral judgements are truth-apt, then they are judgements of the understanding; but (as all sides agree) they are not judgements of the understanding; so they cannot be truth-apt. Secondly, if truth and falsehood consist in an idea's agreeing or disagreeing with real relations of ideas or real existence and matter of fact, then moral ideas (not being truth-apt) cannot agree or disagree with real relations of ideas or real existence and matter of fact. Thirdly, given the last point, and the fact that there is little *direct* evidence to interpret Hume as believing in moral matters of fact, we have good reason to conclude that Hume did not believe in any such thing. And fourthly, if our sensory faculties are conceived to be sources of truth-apt ideas, then we have reason to think that the moral faculty, for Hume, is not a sensory faculty. In the next section, I will examine this last issue more directly, and show that (contrary to Cohon and Garrett) there are powerful reasons to think that Hume does not conceive the moral faculty on the model of a sensory faculty.

*§5.5. Moral Sense Theorist?*

Hume is sometimes described as a "moral sense theorist." If this is intended only as a contrast with moral rationalism, on the one hand, or hedonic egoism, on the other, then it is harmless enough. As Millican says:

> Certainly Hume is a *sentimentalist*, who sees our sentiments or feelings as playing a crucial role in moral thinking and judgment. If this is what Garrett means in calling him a "moral sense theorist," it is perhaps unexceptionable. But if the term is intended to ally him with predecessors such as Hutcheson, then that would be at least to some extent misleading.[441]

Indeed, we know that Hume wanted Book 3 to appeal to Hutcheson, seeking and receiving "Reflections on my Papers" (HL, vol. 1, p. 32), with which he improved the work. Lord Kames had sent Books 1 and 2 of the *Treatise* to Hutcheson, and received a letter inquiring as to the author in April 1739.[442] Soon after, Hutcheson was sent the manuscript of Book 3, and obligingly sent Hume some reflections, to which Hume replied by letter on 17th September 1739. We know from the following exchange that Hume made several alterations, especially to the Conclusion of Book 3.[443] James Harris has argued that the original manuscript sent to Hutcheson likely did not contain what became Part 1 of the book, *viz.*, the sections: 'Moral distinctions not deriv'd from reason' (T 3.1.1), and 'Moral distinctions deriv'd from a moral sense' (T 3.1.2).[444] This is important, as the latter section name is one of only two places in Hume's philosophical writings where the phrase "moral sense" appears. The other is a simple reference back to this section: "I am persuaded, that the foregoing explication of the moral sense ought still to be receiv'd, and that upon

[441] Millican (2014, p. 218). I follow, and elaborate on, Millican in his response to Garrett (2015).

[442] Ross (1966).

[443] See Hume's three letters to Hutcheson prior to the publication of *Treatise* Book 3 (HL, vol. 1, pp. 32-40).

[444] Harris (2015, pp. 121-139).

sufficient evidence" (T 3.3.1.25, p. 588). If Hume wrote these sections of the *Treatise* whilst engaged in revising his work with an eye to its being recommended by Hutcheson,[445] as seems likely, then that would explain sufficiently why he used Hutcheson's preferred term for the moral faculty, especially in the section title.

To be sure, Hume uses such phrases as a 'sense of morals,' 'sense of virtue,' 'sense of justice,' etc., more frequently, but these are plainly non-specific terms for the moral *faculty*. The most obvious indication of this comes in the Conclusion of Book 3, where Hume uses both the terms 'sense of morals' and 'sense of virtue' (apparently interchangeably) to refer to the *explanandum* of two competing theories of the moral faculty:

> It requires but very little knowledge of human affairs to perceive, that *a sense of morals* is a principle inherent in the soul, and one of the most powerful that enters into the composition. But *this 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. Those who resolve *the sense of morals* into original instincts of the human mind, may defend the cause of virtue with sufficient authority; but want the advantage, which those possess, who account for *that sense* by an extensive sympathy with mankind. According to the latter system, not only virtue must be approv'd of, but also *the sense of virtue*: And not only *that sense*, but also the principles, from whence it is deriv'd. So that nothing is presented on any side, but what is laudable and good. (T 3.3.6.3, p. 619; my emphases)

Hume contrasts theorists who "resolve the sense of morals into original instincts" with those who "account for that sense by an extensive sympathy with mankind". It follows directly from this that 'the sense of morals' is not indicative of a particular moral theory, but is something which moral theories aim to 'account for'; a phenomenon to be explained, rather than the explanation itself. The 'sense of virtue' is used equivalently later in the passage, and Hume extends the point in the very next

[445] He had already demonstrated his anxiety about his work not being recommended, in his correspondence with Kames: see NHL, p. 4.

paragraph to the sense of justice: "This observation may be extended to justice, and the other virtues of that kind. Tho' justice be artificial, *the sense of its morality* is natural." (T 3.3.6.4, p. 619; my emphasis). Thus, Hume's use of these terms lends no support to the moral sense interpretation, at least if that is supposed to imply that he views the moral faculty as a sensory faculty analogous to the external senses.

In fact, however, the problem is worse than this, at least if we stick to the *Treatise* theory of morals. The chief theorist who resolved the sense of morals into an original principle was Hutcheson.[446, 447] Unlike Hutcheson, Hume thought that the faculty of moral approval and disapproval had to be accounted for by more general principles than simply postulating an instinctive moral sense which directly generates pleasures and pains in response to awareness of benevolent actions and affections:

> It may now be ask'd *in general*, concerning this pain or pleasure, that distinguishes moral good and evil, *From what principles is it derived, and whence does it arise in the human mind?* To this I reply, *first*, that 'tis absurd to imagine, that in every particular instance, these sentiments are produc'd by an *original* quality and *primary* constitution. For as the number of our duties is, in a manner, infinite, 'tis impossible that our original instincts should extend to each of them, and from our very first infancy impress on the human mind all that multitude of precepts, which are contain'd in the compleatest system of ethics. Such a method of proceeding is not conformable to the usual maxims, by which nature is conducted, where a few principles produce all that variety we observe in the universe, and every thing is carry'd on in the easiest and most simple manner. 'Tis necessary, therefore, to abridge these primary impulses, and find some more general principles, upon which all our notions of morals are founded. (T 3.1.2.6, p. 473)

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[446] Hume's theory of original instincts, qualities, or principles, is primarily cashed out in terms of *explanatory priority*. Original principles are principles of the mind that are not explicable in terms of the operation of any other, more general principles (see, e.g., T 1.1.4.6, pp. 12-13; T 2.1.3.3, p. 280; T 2.1.3.6-7, p. 282; T 2.3.9.8, p. 439; T 3.3.1.27, pp. 589-590). Any principle that is not original, then, is somehow derivative from another principle (or set of principles), and an explanation must be given of this derivation.

[447] My arguments here largely follow the work on Hume's critical relation to Hutcheson contained in Moore (1994); Turco (2003, esp. pp. 136-146); and Wright (2009, Ch. 9, esp. §9).

Hume's point is that, if all our approval and disapproval of characters were to be derived from a single, brute, inexplicable principle or instinct, such as a moral sense, then there would be no good explanation for why it applied so widely, to a multitude of characters or dispositions. Of course, Hutcheson did not believe the moral sense did apply so widely: in his view, there was only one quality to which our moral sense was responsive, *viz.*, benevolence. However, Hume rejects this as rather implausible in his exchange of letters with Hutcheson: "Were Benevolence the only Virtue no Characters cou'd be mixt, but wou'd depend entirely on their Degrees of Benevolence" (HL, vol. 1, p. 34); adding in another letter, "I always thought you limited too much your Ideas of Virtue" (HL, vol. 1, p. 47). Hume is unabashedly a pluralist about the mental qualities and actions that are the objects of moral approval or disapproval.[448]

Returning to the passage from the Conclusion of *Treatise* Book 3, Hume there argues that those who account for the sense of morals through original principles may be able to explain why we approve of the particular virtues,[449] but they cannot support morality further by showing why we ought to approve of the sense of morals itself, or the "principles from whence it is deriv'd". By contrast, he argues, those who account for the sense of morals by extensive sympathy (as with his own system in the *Treatise*) can explain this. Now, I will not discuss the strength of Hume's argument here, but the implications for his conception of the moral faculty. For if Hume's account in terms of extensive sympathy is being contrasted with an account in terms of an original instinct or principle, this suggests that not only is 'the sense of morals' a theoretically noncommittal phrase, but that Hume's way of

[448] Fieser (1998, p. 295) counts "about 70 different virtues in [Hume's] moral theory", and that is not even taking into account the fact that the virtues—the artificial virtues in particular—are, for Hume, extremely varied in the way they manifest themselves, and in their general effects, in different societies, cultures, and subcultures: see Taylor (2015, p. 25), who argues that Hume's "ethical pluralism" tells against the moral sense interpretation.

[449] Although, as I say, he presents reasons in other places to be sceptical about even that.

accounting for the sense of morals is not in terms of a Hutchesonian moral sense. Furthermore, it is clear that this passage was inspired by Hutcheson's criticism that Book 3 "wants a certain Warmth in the Cause of Virtue" (HL, vol. 1, p. 32). As he says, the topic is the capacity of the two theories to "defend the cause of virtue" (T 3.3.6.3, p. 619). He introduces the argument by saying:

> Were it proper in such a subject to bribe the readers assent, or employ any thing but solid argument, we are here abundantly supplied with topics to engage the affections. All lovers of virtue (and such we all are in speculation, however we may degenerate in practice) must certainly be pleas'd to see moral distinctions deriv'd from so noble a source…. (T 3.3.6.3, p. 619)

Consistently with Hume's response to Hutcheson in his letter, then, he suggests that arguing that one's moral theory allows one to defend the "cause of virtue" is a "bribe", which departs from "solid argument". Ironically, however, he goes onto argue that his theory still has the advantage over Hutcheson's in defending the cause of virtue, presumably as it is based on a superior "Anatomy" of our moral faculty, and the "Anatomist… can give very good advice to a Painter" (HL, vol. 1, p. 32).[450]

As I argued in §2.8, Hutcheson believed that the moral sense reports to the understanding, which judges the truth or falsity of moral propositions. He was, in other words, what Cohon has called a truth cognitivist. However, as I have argued above, Hume does not believe that we detect moral facts or truths through our sentiments—he does not believe there are even any moral facts or truths to be detected. Thus, despite Hume's agreeing with Hutcheson in founding moral distinctions chiefly on sentiments, rather than reason or self-interest, it would be misleading at least to describe him as a moral sense theorist. I do not mean to claim that Hume *understood* Hutcheson to be a truth cognitivist. There is one passage that

[450] The 'anatomist' is one who gives an explanation of the internal workings of the moral faculty, and its relations to other mental faculties and operations; the 'painter' is the one who attempts to induce the love and approval of virtue. On the anatomist/painter analogy, see Immerwahr (1991) and, more recently, Abramson (2007).

perhaps implies that Hume thought Hutcheson not to be (passage D, from §5.3 above, where he rejects truth cognitivism whilst citing Hutcheson's authority). Nevertheless, the textual evidence that Hume accepted a fully-fledged sensory model of the moral faculty is extremely minimal, and the reasons for thinking that he rejected appeals to original faculty of moral perception are strong.

### *§5.6. Conclusion*

In this Chapter, I have argued that the case for interpreting Hume as a moral realist (in a robust sense) relies on false dichotomy and ambiguity, that, when cleared up, undermines the case completely. Furthermore, whilst interpretations of Hume as a truth cognitivist or moral sense theorist may initially seem to offer hope for explaining Hume's commitment to the reality of moral distinctions, on examination they turn out to have only a very weak basis in the texts. In the next Chapter, I will attempt to integrate Hume's scepticism about moral objectivity, truth, and fact, with what we have learnt from previous Chapters about Hume's opposition to destruction moral scepticism, at least in the moral *Enquiry*.

# 6

# Reconciling Hume's Commitments

*§6.1. Introduction*

In Chapter 1, I set out what I called the Reconciliation Problem, namely:

*How can Hume consistently proclaim the reality of moral distinctions, whilst also denying that moral qualities are a feature of reality?*

As we have seen, Hume simultaneously wants to deny that moral qualities are mind-independent existences, or matters of fact about characters or actions, but also to defend a "real distinction between vice and virtue" (E 8.35, p. 102). The natural answer to this apparent conflict in Hume's views is that, whilst he denies that moral qualities are 'real' in the sense of being properties of the world whose existence is *entirely* independent of the sentiments felt by spectators, he nevertheless holds that they are 'real' in some further sense. The question remains, however: for Hume, in what sense *are* moral distinctions 'real'? In what sense does the distinction between virtue and vice reflect a real distinction between agents? In this Chapter, I will draw on the reading of Hume established in previous Chapters, as well as deepening the reading through a comparison to his standard of taste in criticism, to supply an answer to this question.

The essence of the answer that I will argue for is that Hume's notions of *real*, *reality*, and so on, are defined by the contrast that Hume is drawing with them. In one sense, reality is a *spectator-independent* standard, in contrast to the *spectator-dependence* of the judgements of taste (in morals and criticism). In another sense, reality is what has a fixed standard in the sentiments of true judges. As Hume's chief

aim in developing this notion of reality or objectivity is defeating the relativist about morals or criticism, we can call it the *anti-relativist* notion. In this Chapter, I first precisify the sense in which Hume holds moral qualities to be spectator-dependent (§6.2). I then consider at length Hume's anti-relativist moves in both 'Of the Standard of Taste' and 'A Dialogue', in order to give substance to an anti-relativistic notion of moral reality (§§6.3-6.4). I then give a brief (and necessarily tentative) defence of the general consistency of Hume's commitments as described and brought together earlier in the Chapter (§6.5).

### *§6.2. Spectator-Independence*

In the previous chapter, I noted that the term 'mind-independence' is quite ambiguous, and there are several different notions which could fall under the term that feature in Hume's thought. One notion of mind-independence that does a lot of work in Hume's theory of body, or external objects (at least in the *Treatise*), is the concept of continued and distinct existences. It may be thought that when Hume denies that moral qualities are features of reality, he means to deny that they are continued and distinct existences. Continued and distinct existences are those that continue to exist when they are not present to the mind, and, consequently, whose existence is external to and independent of the perceptions of the mind. To be sure, Hume does think that virtue and vice are in some sense dependent on the perceptions of the mind. This might seem, then, to be a good candidate for explicating Hume's moral anti-realism. However, it is not the lack of a continued and distinct existence that Hume has in mind when he argues that moral qualities do not belong to the objects themselves, as they stand in reality.

To see this, consider the passages where Hume is most explicitly stating his anti-realist view:

> In the operation of reasoning, the mind does nothing but run over its objects, as they are supposed to stand in reality, without adding any thing to them, or

> diminishing any thing from them. […] To this operation of the mind, therefore, there seems to be always a real, though often an unknown standard, in the nature of things; nor is truth or falsehood variable by the various apprehensions of mankind. Though all human race should for ever conclude, that the sun moves, and the earth remains at rest, the sun stirs not an inch from his place for all these reasonings; and such conclusions are eternally false and erroneous.
>
> But the case is not the same with the qualities of *beautiful and deformed*, *desirable and odious*, as with truth and falsehood. In the former case, the mind is not content with merely surveying its objects, as they stand in themselves: It also feels a sentiment of delight or uneasiness, approbation or blame, consequent to that survey; and this sentiment determines it to affix the epithet *beautiful or deformed*, *desirable or odious*. (Sc 13-14, pp. 164-165)

In the above passages from 'The Sceptic,' Hume says that reason attempts to "run over its objects, as they stand in reality". This 'reality' is "often an unknown standard, in the nature of things", which has the nature it does independently of the "various apprehensions of mankind" or the "conclusions" of our reasoning. Making substantively the same point in 'Of the Standard of Taste,' Hume urges that reality is what it is, independently of "a thousand different opinions which different men may entertain" (ST 7, p. 230). Moral and aesthetic qualities are not the same: there is no moral or aesthetic quality in "the nature of things," i.e., independently of our sentiments regarding them.

We may capture this contrast between the qualities discerned by reason, and those discerned by taste, by defining a species of mind-independence that I shall call *spectator-independence*.[451] A quality is spectator-independent if and only if an

[451] I call it this partly to reflect Hume's own frequent references to the figure of a "spectator" (much more frequent in the moral *Enquiry* than in the *Treatise* Book 3, I should say). But also, it strikes me as better than one alternative, 'judgement-independence,' because Hume sometimes reserves the term 'judgement' for the operations of reason (e.g., ST 7, pp. 229-230; ST 22, p. 240; M App1.2, p. 286; M App1.11, p. 290), whereas I am interested in the independence of a quality from all our assessments or apprehensions of an object, whether cognitive or affective. Nevertheless, Hume sometimes uses the term 'judgement' to include our more considered or reflective sentimental assessments of objects (e.g., ST 16, p. 236; ST 18, p. 237; ST 19, p. 237; ST 21, p. 239; M 5.38, pp. 224-245; M 5.42, p. 229; M Dial.25, p. 333). Understood in this broader sense, I might have called this kind of mind-independence 'judgement-independence', though the definition would have to be formulated slightly differently.

object's having that quality does not depend on any spectator's ideas, beliefs, or sentiments regarding that object. Correspondingly, a quality is spectator-dependent if and only if an object's having that quality depends upon a spectator's ideas, beliefs, or sentiments regarding that object. For instance, the sun's being ninety-three million miles from the earth does not depend upon any spectator's ideas, beliefs, or sentiments regarding the sun (or the earth). Or, to take a less obvious example, a person's being tired does not depend on any spectator's ideas, beliefs, or sentiments regarding that person. This is true even when the spectator and the person are one and the same: it often occurs in young children, for example, that they do not recognise their own tiredness. Of course, it may well be true that the child must feel their tiredness, on some level at least, and, in this sense, it is necessary that some spectator must feel something, but this feeling is not an idea, belief, or sentiment *regarding their tiredness*. This latter example serves to distinguish the notion of spectator-independence from the kind of mind-independence that Hume characterises in his discussion of our belief in continued and distinct existences. Continued and distinct existences constitute a public world, which we regard as "real and durable, and as preserving its existence, even when it is no longer present to my perception." (T 1.4.2.20, p. 197). Our "internal impressions" are not part of this public world, they "have a mutual connexion with and dependence on each other; but on no occasion is it necessary to suppose, that they have existed and operated, when they were not perceiv'd" (T 1.4.2.20, p. 195). In this sense, then, our internal impressions are not mind-independent. However, as has been shown above, our internal impressions may well be spectator-independent. Tiredness is not a continued and distinct existence—it exists only in the mind, and cannot exist separately from it—but its existence does not require anyone to have any particular ideas, beliefs, or sentiments concerning the person who is tired.

Moral qualities, I submit, are not like tiredness: in order for a character trait to have the property of virtuousness, or (as we say) to be a virtue, it is necessary that at least some spectator, or spectators, have certain sentiments regarding the trait.

The evidence for this in the texts is clear. Indeed, it is part of the very definition of virtue or personal merit given by Hume in the moral *Enquiry*:

> The hypothesis which we embrace is plain. It maintains that morality is determined by sentiment. It defines virtue to be *whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation*; and vice the contrary. (M App1.10, p. 289)

> It is the nature, and, indeed, the definition of virtue, that it is *a quality of the mind agreeable to or approved of by every one, who considers or contemplates it*. (M 8.1, p. 261 n. 50)

> The preceding delineation or definition of PERSONAL MERIT must still retain its evidence and authority: It must still be allowed, that every quality of the mind, which is *useful* or *agreeable* to the *person himself* or to *others*, communicates a pleasure to the spectator, engages his esteem, and is admitted under the honourable denomination of virtue or merit. (M 9.21, p. 278)

If no spectator exists who has—or, at least, *can* have—the appropriate sentiments towards the character trait (or quality of mind), then the object does not (or cannot) possess the moral quality of virtuousness or viciousness. Explicitly analogising moral qualities to aesthetic qualities, as one of his arguments for adopting a sentimentalist view of the former, Hume says:

> 'Till such a spectator ['an intelligent mind, susceptible to those finer sensations'] appear, there is nothing but a figure of such particular dimensions and proportions: From his sentiments alone arise its elegance and beauty. (M App1.15, p. 292)

Thus, an object's having a moral quality, as with aesthetic qualities, depends upon at least some spectator(s) having, or potentially having, a sentiment regarding it. In other words, they are spectator-dependent qualities.

Hume, of course, never offers an explicit definition of mind-independence as (what I am calling) spectator-independence. The only notion of mind-independence that he considers in any explicit theoretical detail is the concept of the continued and distinct existence of body. Nevertheless, this notion captures Hume's distinction between the reality of the objects of reason, versus the lack of reality of the objects of taste. The distinction given above was stated in rather abstract terms, and much more might be said about it. One question that naturally arises is what kind of dependence/independence it is that features in the given definitions. Unfortunately, Hume is not so clear on this. He says that moral and aesthetic qualities are "of a relative nature, and consist in an agreeable sentiment" produced by our mental constitution (Sc 11, p. 163). If one varies "the structure of the mind or inward organs, the sentiment no longer follows, though the form remains the same" (Sc 14, p. 165), and given that the moral quality in some sense consists in sentiments, the moral quality would vary also. By denying that moral qualities are spectator-independent, then, Hume seems to open the door to relativism. This is, of course, the topic that he addresses with respect to aesthetic qualities in 'Of the Standard of Taste,' and to moral qualities in 'A Dialogue'. The structure of Hume's answer, in brief, is that whilst aesthetic or moral qualities *are* relative to the constitution of the mind, the constitution that they are relative to is a universal aspect of the human mind, which thus yields a standard of taste that is the same for all spectators. It is to this issue that I turn in the next section.

### *§6.3. A Right or a Wrong Taste*

Hume's attempted refutation of relativism in his theories of morals and of criticism is central to his refutation of moral scepticism in (what he considers to be) its objectionable forms. The refutation of relativism about critical judgements of works of art is well-known to be contained in his 'Of the Standard of Taste,' an essay which has attracted considerable commentary and analysis. Less well-known is his

refutation of relativism about moral judgements, contained in the essay appended to the moral *Enquiry*, 'A Dialogue.' In the context of refuting the relativist, Hume gives substance to his notion of the reality of moral distinctions.

In the *Treatise,* Hume does not address the issue of a standard of taste, and, in particular, shows no signs of regarding it to be important to refuting the relativist. There is, however, a relevant, but unfulfilled promissory note contained in a footnote:

> In what sense we can talk either of a *right* or a *wrong* taste in morals, eloquence, or beauty, shall be consider'd afterwards. In the mean time, it may be observ'd, that there is such an uniformity in the *general* sentiments of mankind, as to render such questions of but small importance. (T 3.2.8.8, p. 547 n. 80).

We know that Hume had also originally hoped to treat of "eloquence" and "beauty" (the study of critical aesthetic judgements which he labels "criticism") in the *Treatise* if the first volume had had "*the good fortune to meet with success*" (T Ad.1739, p. xii). As I have discussed in detail in Chapter 3 (§§3.1-3.2), Hume felt from quite early on that the *Treatise* had not met with such success, and this is plausibly why he did not go on to discuss the subject of "criticism", or to address the issue of a standard of taste in morals, later in the *Treatise.* At any rate, at this stage in the development of his thought, Hume holds that explicating a standard of taste in morals (or criticism) is not a pressing task. There are at least two major reasons why Hume believes erecting a standard of morals to be of small importance in the context of the *Treatise.* Firstly, as I have pointed out in §3.10, Hume is much more sanguine about the uniformity of moral responses in the *Treatise*; he believes that there is much less diversity in the sentiments of morals than he later came to perceive there to be.[452]

[452] Moritz Baumstark (forthcoming) argues that Hume's appreciation of the extent of cultural, social, and political diversity, and of the failure of his earlier moral and political theories to account for that diversity, was the result of reflections occasioned by his taking part in a diplomatic tour in Europe in 1748-49.

Thus, the relativist's case would be correspondingly weaker, and significantly less important, in Hume's eyes, to address. Secondly, if we examine the section of the *Treatise* to which the above is a footnote, we find the following:

> [I]t must be observ'd, that the opinions of men, in this case [moral obligation of submission to government], carry with them a peculiar authority, and are, in a great measure, infallible. The distinction of moral good and evil is founded on the pleasure or pain, which results from the view of any sentiment, or character; and as that pleasure or pain cannot be unknown to the person who feels it, it follows, that there is just so much vice or virtue in any character, as every one places in it, and that 'tis impossible in this particular we can ever be mistaken. (T 3.2.8.8, pp. 546-547)

Hume's reasoning in the above passage seems to be that, as moral distinctions are based on sentiment, and we are immediately aware of our own sentiments, we can never be mistaken in our moral judgements of characters.[453] We should qualify this by reference to the quoted footnote, where Hume says this infallibility applies to our "*general* sentiments": I take Hume to mean that as long as we are considering characters in general (i.e., excluding the distortions of partiality and variability of our individual perspective) our moral judgements will be infallible. Thus, not only does Hume, in the *Treatise*, assume there is relatively little diversity for the relativist to appeal to, he also believes that the large terrain of consensus will be one to which all spectators have immediate and error-free access.[454] The relativist cannot argue

[453] Don Garrett (2015, p. 127-128) points out that this passage implies a "resistance to global error" in our moral distinctions. This is true, but I think the passage goes further than that. The infallibility Hume describes also involves *immunity* to global error (it is not possible for all or nearly all spectators to be wrong in all or nearly all of their moral distinctions), which Garrett explicitly rules out, but is (I submit) plainly the implication of Hume's words.

[454] It could be argued that this creates an additional tension within Hume's system in the *Treatise*, given his characterisation of the general point of view as largely a linguistic construction (see §§3.5-3.7 above). Perhaps Hume could defend himself from this charge by arguing that, much as we have immediate access to our sentiments, we have immediate access to our *ideas* of the sentiments of others. Thus, as long as our idea of the sentiment we would feel were we to approach the character being judged is produced in the right way—i.e., from the general point of view—our judgements would possess the same sort of infallibility. I am unsure whether this defence is entirely persuasive, but for want of space I will not pursue the matter here.

from the diversity of moral opinions, because there is too great a uniformity; and they cannot argue that there is any error in these uniform judgements.

It will not come as a surprise, given the argument of Chapter 3, that I am inclined to think Hume changed his mind on these points: not only the extent of uniformity in our moral responses, but also on the general infallibility of the typical moral spectator. One way to approach this is through the contexts in which Hume invokes this kind of moral infallibility in the *Treatise*. After the passage quoted above, Hume goes on to appeal to this infallibility in his argument against (what he considers) an overly "philosophical" theory of our obligation of submission to government, *viz.*, that our obligation is based on an original contract. He also invokes the same notion of infallibility when defending the right of resistance to tyranny against the doctrine of passive obedience: "The general opinion of mankind has some authority in all cases; but in this of morals 'tis perfectly infallible." (T 3.2.9.4, p. 552).[455] In Hume's later essays where he discusses the same subjects ('Of the Original Contract' and 'Of Passive Obedience'), he does not appeal to the *infallibility* of our common sentiments, but the lack of any evidence of the authority of either doctrine in "the practice and opinion of all nations and ages." (OC 46, p. 486; cf. PO 2, pp. 489-490). It is true that he says that "in all questions with regard to morals, as well as criticism, there is really no other standard, by which any controversy can ever be decided." (OC 46, p. 486). But his view develops further away from the infallibilist approach in 'Of the Standard of Taste,'[456] which does not rely on the infallibility of the common sentiments of spectators, but does present agreement concerning principles across different nations and ages as strong *evidence*

[455] In these two sections, Hume is challenging two doctrines—the *original contract* and *passive obedience*—that he takes to be common among the Whigs and the Tories, respectively (OC 47, p. 487). For Hume's discussion of the divisions between the Whigs and Tories, see (PGB 7-12, pp. 69-72). The Whig doctrine has been identified as a kind of vulgarised version of Locke's theory of obligation; for discussion, see Sagar (2018, Ch. 3).

[456] Published in 1757, as against 1748 for both 'Of the Original Contract' and 'Of Passive Obedience.'

that these reflect natural principles governing our sentiments. These natural principles are only fully manifested in the judgements of those who possess all the virtues of Hume's "true judges", but amongst the kinds of evidence that can help us to identify a judge as a true judge is their approval of established "models and principles":

> Wherever you can ascertain a delicacy of taste, it is sure to meet with approbation; and the best way of ascertaining it is to appeal to those models and principles, which have been established by the uniform consent and experience of nations and ages. (ST 17, p. 237)

This brings us to the figure of the true judge, which is central to Hume's account of the standard of taste in his later work. I will consider the role of this figure in the next section.

*§6.4. Common Sentiments and True Judges*

As well as downgrading the approval of established models and principles to evidence for a person's being a true judge (rather than being directly constitutive of the standard of taste), Hume is clearer about the work done by the concept of the "common sentiments" of human nature in his mature theory of taste. One source of perplexity about Hume's mature theory of taste is the seemingly paradoxical nature of his attitude towards the commonality or universality of our sentiments.[457] A

[457] For example, Wieand (1984, p. 133) says, "paradoxically, our very demand for a standard indicates that people often come into contact with objects possessing properties specified in the rules *without* having what we take to be the appropriate feeling of pleasure." Shelley (1994, p. 437) identifies *two* standards of taste: rules of art that are "universally found to please", and "the joint verdict of critics who have five characteristics: they possess delicacy of taste, are practiced, have made comparisons, are unprejudiced, and possess strong sense." He then notes that "Hume's reader, meanwhile, is left with the task of somehow reconciling these two standards". However, both Wieand and Shelley make the tension in Hume out to be worse than it is by assuming the "rules of art" that we empirically derive from the "common sentiments" are identified as the standard of taste by Hume. They then suggest this definition conflicts with Hume's definition in terms of the sentiments of the true judges. But this is a misreading of Hume's essay. Hume nowhere identifies the rules of art or

forceful way of highlighting the seemingly paradoxical nature of Hume's later view would be to say he does not think the common sentiments are, in fact, all that common:

> [T]hough all the general rules of art are founded only on experience and on the observation of the common sentiments of human nature, we must not imagine, that, on every occasion, the feelings of men will be conformable to these rules. Those finer emotions of the mind are of a very tender and delicate nature, and require the concurrence of many favourable circumstances to make them play with facility and exactness, according to general and established principles. The least exterior hindrance to such small springs, or the least internal disorder, disturbs their motion, and confounds the operation of the whole machine. When we would make an experiment of this nature, and would try the force of any beauty or deformity, we must choose with care a proper time and place, and bring the fancy to a suitable situation and disposition. A perfect serenity of mind, a recollection of thought, a due attention to the object; if any of these circumstances be wanting, our experiment will be fallacious, and we shall be unable to judge of the catholic and universal beauty. (ST 10, pp. 232-233)

> [T]hough the principles of taste be universal, and nearly, if not entirely the same in all men; yet few are qualified to give judgment on any work of art, or establish their own sentiment as the standard of beauty. The organs of internal sensation are seldom so perfect as to allow the general principles their full play, and produce a feeling correspondent to those principles. They either labour under some defect, or are vitiated by some disorder; and by that means, excite a sentiment, which may be pronounced erroneous. […] Under some or other of these imperfections, the generality of men labour; and hence a true judge in the finer arts is observed, even during the most polished ages, to be so rare a character…. (ST 23, p. 241)

Hume's position, then, is that the "common sentiments of human nature" are those sentiments that would be produced by universal principles of taste (i.e., principles that are part of everyone's human nature), but in many contexts fail to operate properly so as to produce those sentiments, because of the "disturbance" of both

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composition as the standard of taste. See Merivale (2019, Ch. 11, §2, and Ch. 12, §§3-4) for more discussion.

external and internal impediments. There are few spectators in whom the principles operate so well as to "produce a feeling correspondent to those principles". The few spectators in whom they do so operate are to be entitled "true judges", and it is their sentiments that constitute the standard of taste:

> [A] true judge in the finer arts is… so rare a character: Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this valuable character; and the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty. (ST 23, p. 241)

The main characteristics of the true judge identified by Hume are strong sense; delicacy of taste (improved by comparison and practice); and freedom from prejudice. Strong sense is, as Hume is clear, a rational quality:

> It belongs to *good sense* to check [prejudice's] influence in both cases; and in this respect, as well as in many others, reason, if not an essential part of taste, is at least requisite to the operations of this latter faculty. In all the nobler productions of genius, there is a mutual relation and correspondence of parts; nor can either the beauties or blemishes be perceived by him, whose thought is not capacious enough to comprehend all those parts, and compare them with each other, in order to perceive the consistence and uniformity of the whole. Every work of art has also a certain end or purpose, for which it is calculated; and is to be deemed more or less perfect, as it is more or less fitted to attain this end. […] Besides, every kind of composition, even the most poetical, is nothing but a chain of propositions and reasonings…. The persons introduced in tragedy and epic poetry, must be represented as reasoning, and thinking, and concluding, and acting, suitably to their character and circumstances; and without judgment, as well as taste and invention, a poet can never hope to succeed in so delicate an undertaking. Not to mention, that the same excellence of faculties which contributes to the improvement of reason, the same clearness of conception, the same exactness of distinction, the same vivacity of apprehension, are essential to the operations of true taste, and are its infallible concomitants. It seldom, or never happens, that a man of sense, who has experience in any art, cannot judge of its beauty; and it is no less rare to meet with a man who has a just taste without a sound understanding. (ST 22, pp. 240-241)

It could be argued that the above passage also implies that freedom from prejudice is a rational achievement, but nothing much hangs on how we individuate the characteristics of the true judge for my purposes. What is clear is that the true judge has sound reason or understanding; a delicate taste; and is able to depart from prejudices that arise from our partial and peculiar perspectives.

This is very closely related to the virtues required for good moral judgement. I have discussed already (in §4.4) how in Hume's mature moral philosophy, "*reason* must enter for a considerable share in all decisions of this kind" (M App1.2, p. 285). Garrett has argued that Hume's language in the moral *Enquiry* "marks only a change of emphasis, not a change of doctrine" about the respective roles of reason and sentiment.[458] As will become clear when I discuss the standard of morals presented in Hume's 'A Dialogue', I am inclined to believe that the change was more substantive than this, but I will set aside the matter for now.

Delicacy of taste is much less prominent in the moral *Enquiry* than it is in 'Of the Standard of Taste.' Nevertheless, it is present:

> [T]he more we habituate ourselves to an accurate scrutiny of morals, the more delicate feeling do we acquire of the most minute distinctions between vice and virtue. (M 5.14, p. 217)

> [I]t is always found, that a warm concern for the interests of our species is attended with a delicate feeling of all moral distinctions…. In this particular, though a great superiority is observable of one man above another; yet none are so entirely indifferent to the interest of their fellow-creatures, as to perceive no distinctions of moral good and evil…. (M 5.39, p. 225)

The reason for the general absence of delicacy of sentiment from the moral *Enquiry* is not that Hume does not think it makes a moral judge superior. As he says in the

[458] Garrett (2014, p. 238). As he says in his recent book (2015, pp. 22-23), in his view this is part of Hume's generally more "conciliatory" tone in the *Enquiries*.

above quote, a delicate feeling of all moral distinctions marks a "great superiority" in a moral judge; he only avers that no one is entirely lacking in the capacity for making moral distinctions. Rather, the reason is that the delicate distinctions made by superior judges are "wide of our present purpose":

> All these various mixtures and compositions and appearances of sentiment form a very curious subject of speculation, but are wide of our present purpose. Throughout this enquiry, we always consider in general, what qualities are a subject of praise or of censure, without entering into all the minute differences of sentiment, which they excite. […] These sciences are but too apt to appear abstract to common readers, even with all the precautions which we can take to clear them from superfluous speculations, and bring them down to every capacity. (M App4.6, p. 317 n. 67)

The science of the passions is not his present topic; that is a topic he addresses in his *Four Dissertations* of 1757. All Hume needs for his purposes in the *Enquiry* is a general sense of which qualities we praise or condemn, which is sufficiently established by the moral terms we use themselves (M 1.10, p. 174). One way of putting Hume's point here is that the moral *Enquiry* is aimed at establishing the objective definition of morality (i.e., the nature of the qualities of which we morally approve or disapprove), not its subjective content (i.e., the nature of the various sentiments of moral approval or disapproval themselves). This provides additional support to the claim I argued for in Chapter 4 (§4.3), that the objective definition of 'virtue' established in the moral *Enquiry* plays an important role in the overall theoretical framework of the book. Establishing the foundational status of the principle of humanity (or general benevolence) is important in showing *that* our moral judgements have sentimental content, but the various "minute differences of sentiment" that may be discriminated by one with "a warm concern for the interests of our species" (i.e., one in whom the principle of humanity operates properly or with facility) are not necessary for this task.

Lastly, freedom from prejudice. In 'Of the Standard of Taste,' freedom from prejudice is understood as "a certain point of view", characterised by impartiality both from one's personal connections and from one's cultural perspective:

> [W]hen any work is addressed to the public, though I should have a friendship or enmity with the author, I must depart from this situation; and considering myself as a man in general, forget, if possible, my individual being and peculiar circumstances. […] If the work be addressed to persons of a different age or nation, he makes no allowance for their peculiar views and prejudices; but, full of the manners of his own age and country, rashly condemns what seemed admirable in the eyes of those for whom alone the discourse was calculated. (ST 21, p. 239)

The counterpart to this in Hume's moral theory is the common point of view, which is also characterised by impartiality from both private connections and cultural perspective. I have discussed in detail the impartiality from private connections, self-interest, and so on, in Chapter 3. I have not yet said much about impartiality of cultural perspective, but Hume does make a parallel point to the above in 'A Dialogue'. Responding to Palamedes' characterisation of the moral opinions and practices of the Ancients as incommensurable with those of the Moderns, the narrator argues as follows:

> Your representation of things is fallacious. You have no indulgence for the manners and customs of different ages. Would you try a GREEK or a ROMAN by the common law of ENGLAND? Hear him defend himself by his own maxims; and then pronounce.
>
> There are no manners so innocent or reasonable, but may be rendered odious or ridiculous, if measured by a standard, unknown to the persons; especially, if you employ a little art or eloquence, in aggravating some circumstances, and extenuating others, as best suits the purpose of your discourse. (M Dial.18-19, p. 330)

Hume allows, then, that sound moral judgement requires not judging people of a different age or nation according to one's own customs, manners, or laws. Of course, as I have already discussed (in §4.2), Palamedes' goal is not to judge the Ancients by

the cultural mores and institutions of the Moderns, it is rather the relativist goal of showing that "fashion, vogue, custom, and law, were the chief foundation of all moral determinations", and that, therefore, there can be no universal standard for moral judgements (M Dial.25, pp. 333). When, in response, the narrator attempts to formulate a universal standard consisting in agreeableness and utility, he does so by drawing on the points of agreement between the "first principles" of the Ancients and the Moderns, and endeavouring to "account for these differences from the most universal, established principles of morals." (M Dial.26-27, pp. 333-334). Cultural impartiality, therefore, is not a relativistic acceptance that a nation or age may only be judged in accordance with their own standards, but is consistent, as in Hume's theory of criticism, with universal principles that manifest themselves differently in rather different political, economic, geographical, etc., circumstances.

*§6.5. Degrees of Objectivity*

Having discussed some points of comparison between Hume's anti-relativist arguments in 'Of the Standard of Taste' and 'A Dialogue', I will argue that the kind of universal standard that Hume argues for in both provides content to his notion of the *reality* of moral distinctions.

A relatively superficial point to make is that the concept of reality Hume is appealing to is, in a sense, intersubjective. But as J. L. Mackie has argued: "Subjective agreement would give intersubjective values, but intersubjectivity is not objectivity."[459] However, given the extreme robustness of Mackie's concept of moral objectivity, perhaps there is room for us to lower the bar, without making it so that mere intersubjective agreement is sufficient to clear it. One way in which we can do so is to see that, although moral distinctions are spectator-independent in the sense outlined above, they nevertheless may often have an independence even from the

[459] Mackie (1977, p. 22).

sentiments of the preponderance of spectators, and sometimes be independent of the sentiments of all actual spectators. It may be that, in simple cases, any ordinarily competent spectator can judge rightly in moral matters. But there will be many cases where they lack the sound understanding, delicacy of taste, or sufficient freedom from prejudice to judge correctly.

Indeed, Hume's anti-relativist position is sufficiently robust that he can argue that all the actual sentiments of spectators about a particular object are erroneous. Consider his *Don Quixote* example from 'Of the Standard of Taste'. In Hume's story, where Sancho's kinsmen detect the slightly unpleasant metallic and leathery tastes in the hogshead of wine, are laughed at, but then vindicated when upon emptying it "there was found at the bottom, an old key with a leathern thong tied to it." (ST 16, p. 235). Assume now that not only had the hogshead not been drained, but Sancho's kinsmen had never tasted it. It would still be the case that there are objectively identifiable qualities in the wine which are fitted, according to universal principles of taste, to produce a slightly unpleasant sensation. This remains true even if all actual spectators failed to notice these qualities, due to their lack of sufficient delicacy of taste. Of course, the existence of these objective qualities is insufficient in itself, independently of at least the *potential* sentiments of true judges, to correctly describe the wine as having a slight unpleasantness. The standard of taste is *not* spectator-independent. But it is consistent with its spectator-dependence that no actual spectator has the right sentiment regarding it.

For this (and other) reasons, it has been thought that Hume's true judge in criticism might best be thought of as an ideal spectator, rather than a real one.[460] Perhaps, given the parallel between his aesthetic and moral standards I have defended above, his true moral judge should similarly be viewed as ideal. I do not have the space to settle this interpretative issue here. However, I do not believe

[460] See, e.g., Firth (1952); Glossop (1967); Rawls (1971, pp. 184ff); Harman (2000, pp. 182ff.). For trenchant criticism of the line of interpretation, see Sayre-McCord (1994).

Hume's establishment of an objective definition of 'virtue'—which is based on the sentiments of actual spectators, even if it may be correctly applied beyond such cases—is a reason for concluding that his mature moral theory contains any objectionable degree of idealisation. The standard of morals still consists in the sentiments of actual spectators, *viz.*, the true judges; even if such spectators are rare, Hume shows no sign of concluding, either in his moral theory or his aesthetic theory, that they do not exist. It is true that it would be highly implausible to believe that true judges are correct in every circumstance and every judgement. But this only implies that the virtues they possess may not always be efficacious. This is undoubtedly true of people of any level of cognitive or affective competency; we all fall short of our best selves on occasion. But we, and others, can recognise when we are falling short, and when we are successfully exhibiting our full competency. What Hume says of disagreement about possession of the virtues of the true judges may, with equal justification, be said of any disagreement about the operation of these virtues in particular acts of judgement:

> [I]f we consider the matter aright, these are questions of fact, not of sentiment. Whether any particular person be endowed with good sense and a delicate imagination, free from prejudice, may often be the subject of dispute, and be liable to great discussion and enquiry…. Where these doubts occur, men can do no more than in other disputable questions, which are submitted to the understanding: They must produce the best arguments, that their invention suggests to them; they must acknowledge a true and decisive standard to exist somewhere, to wit, real existence and matter of fact; and they must have indulgence to such as differ from them in their appeals to this standard. (ST 25, p. 242)

Whilst the standard of morals is not spectator-independent, then, it is in a sense independent of the actual sentiments of many spectators, perhaps on occasion even all spectators. All that is required is that a character trait or mental quality does in fact fall under the objective definition of virtue, namely, that it is useful or agreeable

to the person themself, or to others. It may be objected to this characterisation of Hume's mature standard of morals that it falls foul of exactly the same problems I have raised against the *Treatise*'s account of the general point of view. Recall that these problems were twofold: firstly, I argued that it reneged on Hume's sentimentalist anti-rationalism; and secondly, I argued that it introduced an unacceptable degree of artifice (by Hume's own commitments) into his moral theory. However, I do not believe either of these objections holds against Hume's mature theory of the standard of morals. It is perfectly consistent that the only way to recognise the virtue or vice of a character trait or mental quality is by experiencing the appropriate sentiment with respect to it. It is true that, on the theory I have outlined, the correct moral sentiment may be one the true judge would feel, were they to consider or contemplate the mental quality. However, the problem with the *Treatise* theory was not that it offered a theory of correct moral judgement that included a counterfactual element; it was that it argued that a spectator may deliver a correct moral judgement by reasoning to the belief that they would feel a certain way, were they brought nearer to the character in question. On Hume's mature moral theory, the only way to deliver a correct moral judgement is by feeling the correct moral sentiment; either by being a true judge whose judgement is guided by the appropriate virtues, or by being persuaded by such a judge, a process that Hume describes vividly:

> [W]hen we show him [the bad critic] an avowed principle of art; when we illustrate this principle by examples, whose operation, from his own particular taste, he acknowledges to be conformable to the principle; when we prove, that the same principle may be applied to the present case, where he did not perceive or feel its influence: He must conclude, upon the whole, that the fault lies in himself, and that he wants the delicacy, which is requisite to make him sensible of every beauty and every blemish, in any composition or discourse. (ST 16, 236)

In response to the second objection, there is no need for artifice in constructing the point of view of the true judge; it is a point of view attainable by at least some spectators most of the time, and, perhaps, most spectators some of the time. The universality of the principle of humanity establishes this, in Hume's view. As I argued above, some spectators (those with a warm concern for the interests of our species, i.e., in whom the principle of humanity causes them keenly to feel even the most delicate sentiments) may have a great superiority in making moral distinctions (assuming, that is, they also possess sound understanding and freedom from prejudice), but all spectators feel the sentiments of humanity in the clearest and simplest cases.

# 7
# Conclusion

In this thesis, I have considered the complicated and disputed issue of Hume's relation to the tradition of moral scepticism. Many problems arise in this connection, but I have focussed on the problem of Hume's conception of objectivity in morals. This surfaces in apparently contradictory statements about the 'reality' of moral distinctions, which cannot be resolved by some of the major interpretative traditions in commentary on Hume (Chapter 1). In order to ground my discussion of Hume's relation to moral scepticism historically, I examined the hundred-year debate in Britain on the topic, and found that it wove itself through and into a bewildering array of major philosophical disputes in epistemology, metaphysics, psychology, and more (Chapter 2). By focussing on how his relation to this tradition became more important to Hume in his mature moral thought, I was able to examine the major areas of his engagement with it. I identified three issues that may have motivated some substantive changes in the foundations of moral theory: the extent to which morality was based on self-love or benevolence; whether moral principles and distinctions are artificial, in the sense of human conventions; and the issue of the relativity or universality of moral distinctions (Chapter 3). I then considered other aspects of Hume's more anti-sceptical view in his moral *Enquiry*, touching on some of his shifts in emphasis and principle. In particular, I identified an objective definition of 'virtue' playing an important role in his thought (Chapter 4). However, despite Hume's anti-sceptical intentions in his mature moral thought, he did not abandon his anti-realist metaethical views, or his rejection of cognitivism in ethics. I argue against two approaches that suggest that Hume was, firstly, a moral realist, and secondly, a truth-cognitivist, in order to bring into sharp relief the strength and

nature of his moral anti-realism (Chapter 5). Finally, I have brought these strands together, by articulating an interpretation of Hume's metaethics that allows a limited form of objectivity in his ethical theory, whilst still remaining true to his anti-realist commitments (Chapter 6).

I should say that the argument of the last Chapter should be regarded as rather tentative, both because a full articulation and (especially) defence of Hume's views would require much more space and consideration. I am content if I have merely given persuasive reasons for thinking there is a problem in Hume's thought that many of the traditional interpretations have been unable to solve, or even clearly to identify; and offered a solution that at least does not seem entirely wrongheaded.

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### A Note on Quotations

In quotations, I have everywhere used the orthography found in the quoted text, with no attempt to modernise spelling, capitalisation, punctuation, and so on. The only exception is that certain early modern orthographical features—e.g., the long "s" ("ſ ") and ligatures such as "fi"—have been replaced with their modern equivalents, e.g., a small "s" and separate letters for "fi". The only combinations I have preserved are "æ" and "œ".

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