

HUME'S THEORY OF MORAL JUDGMENTS

IN THE TREATISE

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INTRODUCTION

Hume opens Book III of the Treatise,¹ the volume in which he first presents his moral philosophy as a whole, by presenting and arguing for what we would now call a theory of moral judgments. After the opening two sections he proceeds to other tasks, but throughout the book he reverts to this theory from time to time in order to elaborate and offer further arguments for it.

Exactly what does this theory which he is presenting and arguing for in Book III affirm or deny about moral judgments? There has never been a consensus among students and expositors of Hume who have tried to say exactly what it affirms or denies. Their discussions have not in the main been complex, but Hume's pronouncements and arguments for his theory, apparently so forceful, have, nevertheless, proved elusive. The aim of the present work is to look again at these pronouncements and arguments, some of which are very well known, and (1) interpret them in the light of those parts of his theory of knowledge and theory of the passions contained in the first two books of the Treatise on which he

¹David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, (ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (London: Oxford University Press, 1888). Books I and II were first published in 1739 and Book III in 1740.

indicates these pronouncements and arguments of his theory of moral judgments depend, and (2) take all of these pronouncements and arguments into account to determine the theory (or theories) which in the greatest probability Hume intends to be presenting, if not at all points explicitly, then at least by implication. To anticipate the results of this study: I will try to show that Hume is presenting a single, coherent view about moral judgments, and that he does not contradict himself in presenting and arguing for it, as has sometimes been suggested;² and I shall also try to show that this view or theory cannot in strict accuracy be classified under any of the current labels for describing and classifying theories of moral judgments.

By the term 'moral judgments' in the present work we shall wish to refer to judgments appraising the moral value of character traits and conduct, but not to judgments of moral obligations. For Hume holds that judgments of moral obligation are not logically fundamental; he allows that they may occasionally be of practical importance, but he thinks they are always derivative from judgments of moral value. That is, on his view, judgments of what I ought to do are derivative from judgments of what sort of action or character trait it would be morally good for me to perform or to possess.

²Henry D. Aiken, Hume's Moral and Political Philosophy (New York: Hafner Publishing Co., 1948). Brand Blanshard, Reason and Goodness (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1961). Arthur N. Prior, Logic and the Basis of Ethics (London: Oxford University Press, 1949).

But tho' on some occasions, a person may perform an action merely out of regard to its moral obligation, yet still this supposes in human nature some distinct principles, which are capable of producing the action,³ and whose moral beauty renders the action meritorious.

Without citing the arguments on which previous expositors of Hume's theory have relied for their interpretations, a brief summary of the more notable of these interpretations will indicate the range of their disagreement. They fall into two main groups: On the one hand, some expositors have ascribed to Hume forms of what are now called ethical naturalism, that is, theories according to which the predicate terms for expressing moral judgments are definable wholly in terms of non-moral predicate expressions, and hence moral judgments themselves are wholly analyzable into non-moral ones. On the other hand, some expositors have ascribed to Hume forms of what are now called emotivism, according to which the predicate terms for expressing moral judgments do not as such have a descriptive meaning at all, definable or indefinable, but rather have only expressive or emotive meaning, as possessed, for example, by 'Hurray!' and 'Boo!'.⁴

The expositors who take Hume to be proposing a form of ethical naturalism do not agree as to just what form this is; that is, they do not agree as to just what kind of definition or analysis he is proposing. In an editor's introduction to the Treatise, T. H. Green interprets him as

³David Hume, op. cit., p. 479.

⁴See below, pp. 108-113.

holding jauntily that "a man's vice is someone else's displeasure."⁵ This might be called a form of observer-reaction theory, for on such a theory moral judgments would be wholly analyzable into judgments of the pleasure or displeasure of some observer.

Sidgwick interprets Hume in much the same way (unless, as is not clear, he means to suggest that Hume is an emotivist); but he mitigates the paradox on which Green capitalizes, by emphasizing that Hume does not suppose moral judgments refer to just any pleasures or displeasures of any observer whatever, but to the feelings of esteem or approbation and disapprobation of a mature and qualified observer.

...what happens is that from the contemplation of the circumstances and relations already known, the mind feels a sentiment of esteem or contempt, approbation or blame; just as natural beauty, though it depends on proportion, relation, and position of parts, 'is not in any of the parts or members' of the beautiful object, but 'results from the whole' when presented to an intelligent mind, gifted with the requisite refined sensibility.⁶

More recently, in discussing a crucial passage in the Treatise,⁷ Rachal Kydd offers a similar interpretation, stressing, however, that according to Hume the observer must be an actual observer, and that his feelings must be actual feelings.

⁵ David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, and Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, ed. T. H. Green (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1874), p. 70.

⁶ Henry Sidgwick, Outlines of the History of Ethics, 6th ed.; (London: MacMillan and Company, 1931), p. 207.

⁷ David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (London: Oxford University Press, 1888), p. 469.

Hume is here concerned to show that when we speak of acts as morally right or wrong, virtuous or vicious, we attribute to them a characteristic which they possess only in relation to the attitude or feelings of an observer...

An important version of observer-reaction theory results when the observer is identified with the person judging. This might be called the ego-reaction theory. In a very recent book, Blanshard ascribes this theory to Hume, adding parenthetically that he thinks Hume contradicts himself and sometimes also holds to a very different view.

If Hume is correct, when I judge 'that act is right', I am not reporting a character of the act, but a feeling of my own. (He also held that I am reporting the feeling which prevails in my society, shifting from the one view to the other as suited his argument, without seeing, apparently, how different they were.)⁹

The second sub-type of theory, the one which Blanshard's parenthesis attributes to Hume, might be called the statistical or group-reaction theory. The group which Blanshard thinks Hume has in mind is the majority of the society of the person judging.

For a clearly emotivist interpretation, one may turn to MacNabb in a 1951 book, David Hume:

Hume does not say that 'the action x is virtuous' means 'the action x causes pleasure by the thought of it to all or most men'. He says that 'the action x is virtuous' simply expresses the sentiment of approval which the speaker feels when he thinks of x in a certain manner.¹⁰

⁸Rachal M. Kydd, Reason and Conduct in Hume's Treatise (London: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 49-50.

⁹Blanshard, op. cit., p. 92-93.

¹⁰D. G. C. MacNabb, David Hume. His Theory of Knowledge and Morality (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1951), p. 172.

A. N. Prior,¹¹ too, attributes an emotivist theory to Hume, but on the basis of a different sentence from the one MacNabb cites.¹² And in considering the sentence to which MacNabb refers, Prior holds that Hume, inconsistently, states a form of the ego-reaction theory.

At least two interpreters, D. D. Raphael¹³ and, more recently, Bernard Mayo¹⁴ are of interest for suggesting more complex interpretations combining some of the parts of different interpretations already mentioned. Raphael thinks that according to Hume moral sentences are equivocal and sometimes express emotions (as on pure emotivism) but sometimes refer to those which are or would be felt by members of some group (as on a pure form of the group-reaction theory). Mayo emphasizes the analogy which holds between moral judgments and judgments of physical objects, and the importance Hume deduces for fixing on "general points of view"¹⁵ in making both.¹⁶

¹¹Prior, op. cit.

¹²MacNabb's begins "We do not infer..."; Prior's begins "To have the sense..." [David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (London: Oxford University Press, 1888), p. 471.]

¹³D. D. Raphael, The Moral Sense (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 76, 80-81.

¹⁴Bernard Mayo, Ethics and the Moral Life (London: MacMillan and Co., Ltd., 1958), p. 83-89.

¹⁵David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (London: Oxford University Press, 1888), p. 581-82.

¹⁶Aiken (op. cit., p. xxxii-xxxiii) holds that Hume literally states both the ego-reaction and emotivist theories

With so much diversity in the interpretations of Hume how can we best begin our search for what he really had in mind? It will be best, I believe, to start by examining the question which he raises at the very beginning of Section I. Hume develops his whole theory as an answer to this question, but he does not make as clear as we could wish exactly what it amounts to. Nor have those who have previously interpreted Hume devoted much attention to clarifying his statements of it. And once we have treated this fundamental question, in Chapter I, we must then also examine, in Chapter II, the arguments he uses to establish his answer to it. The risk of becoming tedious on these preliminaries is, I believe, outweighed by the risk of begging questions if such preliminaries are dispatched too quickly.

in their simplest and crudest forms, but unlike Prior, he thinks Hume has fallen into stating the first as well as the second inadvertantly and that his more considered opinion is probably reflected instead in the stress on "general points of view."

CHAPTER I

THE FUNDAMENTAL QUESTION

Introduction to the Question

In introducing his question, Hume indicates that he has been led to it by the central propositions of his philosophy of mind, which he elaborated early in Book I.

It has been observ'd, that nothing is ever present to the mind but its perceptions; and that all the actions of seeing, hearing, judging, loving, hating, and thinking, fall under this denomination. The mind can never exert itself in any action, which we may not comprehend under the term of perception; and consequently that term is no less applicable to those judgments by which we distinguish moral good and evil, than to every other operation of the mind.

Now as perceptions resolve themselves into kinds, viz. impressions and ideas, this distinction gives rise to a question concerning morals,....¹

Let us call the view Hume is explicitly summarizing here his theory of impressions and ideas. And before we turn to the question itself, let us review in brief what this theory comes to.

As he notes in the introductory passage above, this theory affirms to begin with that all the contents of

¹David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (London: Oxford University Press, 1888), p. 456. References henceforth to this work will be abbreviated, using the letter "T" followed by the page number.

consciousness or the mind and also all acts of the mind² are simply so many "perceptions";³ and "perceptions" in turn are all either "impressions" or "ideas".⁴ Impressions, we must recall from Book I, are "sensations, passions and emotions as they make their first appearance in the soul."⁵ And ideas are "the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning; such as, for instance, are all the perceptions excited by the present discourse."⁶ Strictly speaking, all perceptions are particular occurrences, but it is usually convenient and permissible to use 'impression' to mean an exact but repeatable kind of impression, and 'idea' to mean an exact but repeatable kind of idea (at least Hume regularly does extend the terms in this way). A further key fact about impressions and ideas is that some are unanalyzable, that is "simple" (the taste of salt would presumably be simple), while the rest are analyzable or "complex" (the image of a rabbit or the sound of a tune would presumably be complex).⁷

The cause of most impressions is unknown.⁸ Simple impressions themselves, however, can be seen to cause "either mediately or immediately"⁹ virtually all simple ideas (the

²Hume does not allow that mental acts differ fundamentally from mental contents.

³T 1. According to his theory of personal identity, the mind itself is "...nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions..." [*T 252]; but whether or not he holds to this extreme view in the present context, will not affect the outcome of the present discussion.

⁴T 1. ⁵T 1. "Soul" here means the same as "mind".

⁶T 1. ⁷T 2. ⁸T 7, 84. ⁹T 7.

taste of salt causes our idea of the taste of salt); and these ideas are always fainter copies or images of the impressions which cause them. Complex impressions cause many but not all of our complex ideas; thus, to use Hume's example, we have no complex impression corresponding to our complex idea of New Jerusalem.¹⁰

Our ideas of pleasures and pains (as well as our impressions of them) are able, in conjunction with various other ideas, to cause a few simple impressions, namely the "impressions of reflexion," which is to say, "the passions, desires, and emotions."¹¹

This will perhaps suffice to recall without attempt at clarification or criticism the main features of Hume's theory of impressions and ideas. But we can hardly keep in mind its full significance for Hume unless we recall at least three other theories which are intimately connected with it, and which he also states early in Book I.

The first of these is his own theory of the association of ideas. Ideas, he holds, tend to evoke other ideas with which they are then often effectively united to form more complex ideas (doubtless along with ideas of the relations between them). This uniting or associating of ideas in the mind is not always or entirely haphazard. In all men, one idea tends to call up or evoke another when the two ideas are sufficiently similar, or are images of objects (impressions) experienced as close or contiguous in space or time, or as causally connected. Thus we commonly

¹⁰T 3. ¹¹T 8.

form many of the same or similar complex ideas, even when we have had no corresponding complex impressions.¹²

The second intimately connected theory is the nominalist hypothesis which Hume borrows from Berkeley: So-called general or abstract ideas (the idea of horse in general) are always really particular ideas (the idea of Dobbin), but they are used in a general way. They are "annexed to a certain term, which gives them a more extensive signification, and makes them recall upon occasion other individuals which are similar to them."¹³ These "other individuals" need to be similar to the original one only in certain "respects."¹⁴

Finally, the third theory we must recall is Hume's unique view of the nature of belief: An idea constitutes a belief if it is sufficiently "lively," intense, or "vivid," approaching in strength the force of an impression.¹⁵

In addition to recalling these theories from Book I, let us finally try to recall how, broadly speaking, Hume has employed them in Books I and II, and to note what this would lead us to expect concerning his plans for them in Book III.

Hume's main concern in Book I is, of course, to offer an account "Of the Understanding."¹⁶ His four theories just mentioned (along with his related views about memory

¹²Book I, Part I, Sec. IV. Hume also allows that if two ideas are associated, an impression similar to one will evoke the other.

¹³T 17. ¹⁴T 20. ¹⁵T 96. ¹⁶T 1.

and the imagination) form a major part of this account, but we can fairly say, I believe, that another major part of it consists of explications of the fundamental, general concepts we inevitably use to try to understand the world and get about in it. Hume seeks to explicate our abstract concepts of space and time, probability, distinct and continued existence (independent of the mind), and personal identity, to name the most crucial. He asks, for example,

...What is our idea of necessity, when we say that two objects are necessarily connected together.¹⁷

And for the explications he provides to answer such questions and to form the rest of his account of the understanding, Hume's four theories just mentioned jointly provide him with his main method of procedure. In every explication he treats general concepts as ideas in his sense, and hence not really general except in the way they are used, and he traces their origin back to the main sorts of particular beliefs and impressions which he thinks must ultimately ("mediately or immediately"¹⁸) cause them. In the case of complex ideas, he attempts to cite the simpler ones out of which they have been formed by association and also the manner of this association.

In Book II Hume goes on to offer his account "Of the Passions,"¹⁹ searching into their causes and effects. But in doing this he is largely once again explicating what he considers widely-shared, general concepts; this time it is our general concepts of pride, humility, love, hatred,

¹⁷T 155. ¹⁸T 7. ¹⁹T 275.

and the will. And again his method of explication remains that of tracing ideas back to their origin in particular impressions, simple or complex, in the manner suggested jointly by his four theories.

If, as far as it goes, this correctly summarizes much of what Hume is doing throughout Books I and II, what are we to expect of him when he begins Book III, his discussion "Of Morals,"²⁰ and especially when he begins it by referring to his theory of impressions and ideas? We will naturally, I think, expect him in part to be setting about to try to explicate whatever in particular he regards as our fundamental concepts "Of Morals." And we will expect him to prepare to do this in the same way he tried to explicate the fundamental concepts of the understanding in Book I and the concepts of the passions in Book II. That is, we will expect him to treat our moral concepts as ideas, and plan to trace their origin back to the ideas or impressions from which he thinks they are derived. We will expect him eventually to reveal whether they are themselves simple or complex, and if simple, to discover the simple impressions from which they arise, while if complex, to reveal the simpler ideas from which they are formed by association. And that this kind of explication of our fundamental concepts of morals is just what he does in a large part intend to offer is, I believe, confirmed, though it is by no means conclusively proved, by the descriptive

²⁰T 455.

titles he assigns to the parts and sections of Book III. He entitles Part I "Of virtue and vice in general," Part II, "Of justice and injustice," and Part III, "Of the other virtues and vices."²¹ Early sections of Parts II and III deal with "the origin of justice..." and "the origin of the natural virtues and vices."²² Hume's two sections composing Part I, "Of virtue and vice in general," are to show that "Moral distinctions [are] not deriv'd from reason" (section I) and that "Moral distinctions [are] deriv'd from a moral sense" (section II).²³

The Question and Its Interpretations

Let us now go on to look at Hume's question. He poses it in two different ways, the first in words immediately following (and continuous with) the passage referring to his theory of impressions and ideas which was quoted above. Let us begin by considering only his first way of posing his questions.

Whether 'tis by means of our ideas or impressions we distinguish betwixt vice and virtue, and pronounce an action blameable or praise-worthy?²⁴

If one came upon this passage without the perspective in which his aims and methods in Books I and II, and his titles to the various parts and sections of Book III place it, one would naturally interpret it, I believe, as asking directly about judgments of moral virtue and vice as such, and presumably about all of these.

²¹T xvi. ²²T xvi. ²³T xvi. ²⁴T 456.

Since such judgments of moral virtue and vice include perceptions of subjects, which is to say perceptions of agents, actions, and traits of character, one would not go so far as to presume that he is asking whether these judgments in their entirety are ideas or impressions. The interpretation one would naturally take is simply that his question is instead roughly this: Do our perceptions of virtue and vice, when we make moral judgments, consist of ideas or do they consist of impressions? The main reason one would interpret his question as directly concerned with what we do whenever we make moral judgments is that his phrase in his introductory remarks "to approve of one character, to condemn another..."²⁵ certainly means to make moral judgments (of characters), and "to pronounce an action blameable or praise-worthy"²⁶ certainly means to express a moral judgment.

But when one views this passage in the light of the aims, methods, and descriptive titles cited above, one could just as naturally, I believe, construe it as asking not directly about all our perceptions of moral virtuousness and viciousness in moral judgments, but rather about those perceptions (which may or may not occur in moral judgments) which are of the kind by which we form our ideas of moral vice and virtue in the first place, or, as Hume says, "distinguish betwixt vice and virtue."²⁷ On this second line of interpretation, his question is more nearly this: Are these sorts of perceptions ideas, or are they impressions?

²⁵T 456. ²⁶T 456. ²⁷T 456.

On either of these two lines of interpretation Hume is allowing that there are two possible answers to his question. And we may presume that he takes these possibilities to be exhaustive (one alternative must be true) and exclusive (the other must be false). Let us now consider Hume's next remarks, in which he goes on explicitly to identify one of the alternative answers as a proposition to which he thinks any rationalist moral philosopher is necessarily committed.

Those who affirm that virtue is nothing but a conformity to reason, and that there are eternal fitnesses and unfitnesses of things, which are the same to every rational being that considers them; that the immutable measures of rights and wrong impose an obligation, not only on human creatures, but also on the Deity himself: All these systems concur in the opinion, that morality, like truth, is discern'd merely by ideas, and by their juxta-position and comparison.²⁸

What is of interest here is not simply that Hume identifies the ideas alternative posed by his question as the one to which he thinks rationalists are committed. More important at this point is just that he shows us that the alternatives are not, in brief, between 'ideas' on the one hand and 'impressions' on the other. The alternatives are rather whether our perceptions are merely ideas on the one hand, or whether we have either instead or in addition an impression or impressions.

If we pursue the first interpretation, then, we will want to say that Hume is asking: Do our perceptions of goodness or evil when we make moral judgments consist merely of ideas, or do they consist at least partly of

impressions? Similarly, if we pursue the second line of interpretation we will want to say he is asking: Do the perceptions by which we form our ideas of ("distinguish")²⁹ moral good and evil, virtue and vice in general consist merely of ideas, or do perceptions of this kind consist at least partly of impressions?

An important point on which Hume is not explicit is as to whether or not the two exclusive and exhaustive answers which he allows are possible are both universal in scope, and if they are not, which one is to be regarded as limited in scope. If he is presuming that both are universal, then on the first line of interpretation his question becomes more specifically: Do our perceptions of moral good and evil, virtue and vice, when we judge actions and characters virtuous and vicious, morally good and evil always consist merely of ideas, or do they always consist at least partly of impressions? But if, as is quite likely, he is not presuming this, then, we should consider as two further possibilities that he may be asking whether these perceptions sometimes consist merely of ideas, or, what is surely a separate question, whether they sometimes consist partly of impressions. And similar possibilities must be considered with respect to the second line of interpretation, so that in effect we must consider not simply two but six different questions as possible candidates for identifying what Hume has in mind in posing his question.

²⁹T 456.

For convenience, let us list as follows five different expressions which will suffice, when we pair them off correctly, to state all these six different questions:

- | | |
|---|---|
| J. Do our perceptions of moral virtue and vice (moral good and evil) when we <u>judge</u> actions and characters virtuous or vicious (good or evil) consist | F. Do our perceptions of the kind by which we <u>form</u> our ideas of moral virtue and vice (moral good and evil) in the first place consist |
|---|---|

a-a. always merely of ideas, or
always at least partly of impressions?

s-a. sometimes merely of ideas, or
always at least partly of impressions?

a-s. always merely of ideas, or
sometimes at least partly of impressions?

When we wish to refer to one of the six questions, we can now refer to it by one of the appropriate sets of letters; for example, J. a-a, J. s-a, J. a-s, F. a-a, F. s-a, F. a-s.

These questions, I believe, afford the only possibilities for interpreting Hume's question (at least on the ideas - impressions version of it) which we need to take seriously. We can, therefore, turn our attention next to trying to determine which of them, if any, is to be preferred.

The Preferred Interpretations of the Question

Of all the six possible interpretations of Hume's question represented above, treating it as equivalent to question J. a-a has the heaviest liabilities, and is the least to be preferred. Hume's views plainly allow that we do in fact ascribe most if not all non-moral characteristics

sometimes on the basis of impressions and sometimes on the basis solely of ideas. Sometimes I ascribe weight to an object by hefting it, sometimes I do so by noting its appearance to sight and inferring its weight. In both cases, on Hume's view, I have a perception of its weight, but in the case of hefting, this perception (of weight, resistance, or whatever) is an impression, whereas in the case of inferring its weight from its appearance to sight, my perception is only an idea, albeit a lively one. For inferring a characteristic, property, or object can never give us an impression of it, but only an idea.

A CAUSE is an object precedent and contiguous to another, and so united with it, that the idea of the one determines the mind to form the idea of the other, and the impression of the one to form a more lively idea of the other.³⁰

This idea of Rome I place in a certain situation on the idea of an object, which I call the globe. I join to it the conception of a particular government, and religion, and manners. I look backward and consider its first foundation; its several revolutions, successes, and misfortunes. All this, and every thing else, which I believe, are nothing but ideas; tho' by their force and settled order, arising from custom and the relation of cause and effect, they distinguish themselves from other ideas, which are merely the offspring of the imagination.³¹

Thus, contrary to what would be presumed in asking question J. a-a, Hume's views plainly allow that we do in fact ascribe most non-moral characteristics sometimes on the basis of impressions and sometimes on the basis solely of ideas, and it is therefore highly doubtful that he would

³⁰T 170. ³¹T 108.

be presuming that this is impossible in the case of moral characteristics. It is even more doubtful that he would be presuming this at the very outset of his inquiry into morals without making any attempt to justify doing so, and when he does not yet claim to have shown that the perceptions he is asking about are either impressions or ideas.

Treating Hume's question as equivalent to J. s-a rather than J. a-a has the advantage that the alternatives posed in J. s-a are genuine contradictories rather than contraries. There could be no reason for presuming at the start that either of the alternatives allowed by J. a-a are true. But we must surely admit, if we have followed Hume only this far, that our perceptions of moral good and evil when we judge actions and characters, are sometimes merely ideas or they are always at least partly impressions.

There is, however, a heavy objection of another sort against treating Hume's question as equivalent to J. s-a. When we read further we find that Hume identifies the rationalist alternative as universal in scope. For in his second formulation of the question Hume asks "whether it be possible, from reason alone, to distinguish betwixt moral good and evil, or whether there must concur some other principles to enable us to make that distinction."³² This identifies explicitly the 'ideas' alternative as equivalent to an alternative about reason, and when Hume prepares to

³²T 457.

reject this alternative, he remarks "if thought and understanding were alone capable of fixing the boundaries of right and wrong, the character of virtuous and vicious must lie in some relation of objects, or must be a matter of fact, which is discovered by our reasoning."³³

Hume states that the rationalist alternative is that "thought and understanding [is]...alone capable of fixing the boundaries of right and wrong."³⁴ This is to say that the rationalist alternative, according to Hume, affirms that our perceptions of moral good and evil are always merely by ideas. In question J. s-a the 'ideas' alternative is not universal, so we can eliminate J. s-a as a question equivalent to Hume's question.

None of the objections I have been posing against the first two interpretations hold against treating J. a-s as equivalent to Hume's question. And any further objections against treating J. a-s as equivalent to his question are likely to hold equally against treating it as equivalent to J. a-a and J. s-a. So we must conclude that J. a-s affords the interpretation most to be preferred among the first group.

Turning to the second group of questions, it must be confessed that F. s-a and F. a-s are of little interest; the kind of objection raised against identifying Hume's question with that expressed by J. a-a have little or no force against identifying it with that expressed by F. a-a.

³³T 463. ³⁴T 463.

This is surely because of the specific subject matter with which Hume is here concerned. (Had he been concerned with perceptions of tables, chairs, or snowstorms then the differences of the kind which obtain between F. a-a and F. s-a and F. a-s would have been significant. Hume would have to say that lifelong residents of the Sahara form their ideas of snowstorms by combining simpler ideas in the imagination, while Eskimos form theirs from complex impressions.) With respect to such concepts as moral good and evil it would seem fair to presume that they are all formed initially in all minds as a result merely of ideas or that they are all formed initially in all minds as a result merely of impressions. That is, it would be implausible to suppose that we form them now one way and now another.

The main objection against treating F. a-a as equivalent to Hume's question is that it does not square with the main reasons cited at the beginning of the preceding section for treating the question as about the perceptions of moral good and evil in moral judgments of actions and characters. "To approve of one character, to condemn another"³⁵ is to make moral judgments, whereas "to pronounce an action blameable or praise-worthy"³⁶ is to express one.

But it may be replied against this objection that what follows from it is only that Hume is presuming part of his own theory. For on his view those perceptions of moral

³⁵T 456. ³⁶T 456.

good and evil which we make when we make certain kinds of moral judgments, those I shall be describing in Chapter III, as "non-rational moral judgments," are in fact the perceptions by which we form our ideas of moral good and evil in the first place.

It is quite likely that Hume is presuming this. For one thing, it fits very well with two views he has advanced in Book I; his nominalism, which I mentioned earlier, the view that general ideas are all particular ones "annexed to a certain term,"³⁷ and his view that judgment is a species of conception.³⁸ Indeed, it can, I think be shown to follow from these taken with only one added view, namely the view that moral concepts or ideas are simple rather than complex. Granting these three views, our idea of moral virtue in general must, it would seem, be the idea of some particular man or action, "annexed to a certain term,"³⁹ and our act of forming or arriving at this idea must be one with a judgment or awareness of his (or its) moral virtuousness.

The rationalist would never, of course, subscribe to Hume's nominalism, and would be reluctant to agree that judgment is a species of conception. But Hume has argued these issues previously and has a right to be presuming them in Book III. Further, a rationalist might well agree that moral ideas are fundamentally unanalyzable and simple,

³⁷T 17. ³⁸T 96-97. ³⁹T 17.

and even that acts of the sort by which we come to apprehend them in the first place are always judgments of actions or characters.

This is doubtless insufficient to counter the main objection against treating Hume's question as equivalent to F. a-a. But we must now consider some objections weighing against treating his question as equivalent to any of the J. forms and in favor of identifying it with F. a-a. These considerations are difficult to state briefly and difficult to assess at this point, but they must, I believe, be accorded some weight.

"To approve of one character, to condemn another"⁴⁰ clearly enough, as noted, refers to moral judgments of characters. And "pronounce an action blameable or praiseworthy"⁴¹ clearly refers to the expression of a moral judgment of an action. They are appropriate for this, I believe, simply because (now, as in the 18th century), the verbs "approve," "condemn," and "pronounce"⁴² are as characteristic as any in English for expressing moral judgments. (In the 18th century in particular, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Smith, and Reid, all of whom use 'approve,' and Butler who also uses 'condemn' use these words only to refer to acts of moral judging.)

But most of Hume's phrases for what he is asking about in the passage under examination are very abstract, one might say philosophical, and no one uses them or parts

⁴⁰T 456. ⁴¹T 456. ⁴²All from T 456.

from them, to express moral judgments of actions and characters as such. This is true whether one considers judgments of individual or types of actions and characters. Chief among these are his phrases with the words "distinguish" or "distinction":⁴³ "judgments by which we distinguish moral good and evil,"⁴⁴ "distinguish betwixt vice and virtue,"⁴⁵ "to distinguish betwixt moral good and evil,"⁴⁶ and "that distinction."⁴⁷ And to these may, of course, be added the phrases "Moral Distinctions"⁴⁸ in his titles to Sections I (now under examination) and II: "Moral Distinctions not deriv'd from reason"⁴⁹ and "Moral Distinctions deriv'd from a moral sense."⁵⁰ (The phrase 'discern morality' is also present, by implication at least; but the problems it presents are so similar to those presented by the phrases with 'distinguish' or 'distinction,' that I shall not have to allude to it in what follows.)

It must be admitted that according to Johnson⁵¹ one sense of 'distinguish' is "To discern critically, to judge"; one sense of 'distinction' is "the act of discerning one as preferable to the other." Nevertheless, while other philosophers (including Hume's contemporaries) use Hume's words 'approve,' 'condemn' and 'judgment,' and many others

⁴³T 456. ⁴⁴T 456. ⁴⁵T 456. ⁴⁶T 457. ⁴⁷T 457.

⁴⁸T 455. ⁴⁹T 455. ⁵⁰T 470.

⁵¹Samuel Johnson, A Dictionary of the English Language (8th ed.; London: Printed for J. Johnson, et. al., 1799).

besides to refer to moral judgments of actions and characters, they do not refer to them by phrases like these abstract ones Hume uses here with 'distinguish' and 'distinction.' Those other philosophers who do use similar sorts of phrases are in fact Hume's philosophical antagonists, and these antagonists mean by the phrases not a class of judgments but an abstract difference, or the constituting of such a difference. Samuel Clarke, for example, writes of "the eternal distinction of Right and Wrong"⁵² as though it were one and the same thing as the "natural difference between good and evil."⁵³ And Wollaston opens a work, doubtless familiar to Hume, declaring:

The foundation of religion lies in that difference between the acts of men, which distinguishes them into good, evil and indifferent.⁵⁴

Nor is this usage peculiar to philosophers. Boswell reports to Johnson that "an impudent fellow from Scotland [not Hume] maintained that there is no distinction between virtue and vice,"⁵⁵ prompting the great lexicographer to comment:

But if he does really think that there is no distinction between virtue and vice, why, Sir, when he leaves our houses, let us count our spoons.⁵⁶

⁵²Discourse on Natural Religion, reprinted in L. A. Selby-Bigge, British Moralists (London: Oxford University Press, 1897), II, p. 21.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴William Wollaston, The Religion of Nature Delineated, reprinted in L. A. Selby-Bigge, British Moralists (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897), Sec. I, p. 361.

⁵⁵James Boswell, The Life of Samuel Johnson L.L.D. (New York: The Modern Library), follows Malone's 6th ed., p. 262.

⁵⁶Ibid.

Certainly neither Boswell nor Johnson supposed "this impudent fellow"⁵⁷ to have held there to be no moral judgments of virtue and vice; they supposed him rather to have held there to be no real difference between the general nature of virtue and vice.

Hume, of course, is asking about mental acts or 'perceptions.' But the foregoing would suggest, I believe, that he is asking not about perceptions of instances of moral virtuousness or viciousness, as such, but about those of the sort by which we form or arrive at our concepts of moral virtue and vice in general in the first place, as on F. a-a.

Additional features of Hume's phrases with 'distinguish' and 'distinction' lend increased weight to this interpretation.

First, these words conspicuously refer to judgments in such a way as to allow that they (the judgments) may be doubtful or contrary to each other. 'Distinguish' functions like 'see' and 'hear'; if a person really does "distinguish moral good"⁵⁸ at all, he cannot, for all the difficulties involved, be in error; or at any rate, another person cannot 'distinguish moral evil' in a contrary way. On the face of it, this is quite unlike what obtains with moral judgments of character and conduct, or the rules for using 'approve,' 'condemn,' 'pronounce,' and 'judge.'

⁵⁷ Ibid. ⁵⁸ T 456.

'Distinguish' used with 'between' or 'betwixt' (as in "distinguish betwixt moral good and evil")⁵⁹ is regularly classed as intransitive [OED], which means, I believe, that according to lexicographers and grammarians what gets distinguished in these cases is at most thought or concepts, not the objects of thought or concepts. This naturally enough fits with the way that Hume completes his phrases beginning with "distinguish"⁶⁰ and "distinguish betwixt"⁶¹ with the abstract nouns "virtue," "vice," "moral good," and "evil."⁶² Had he wished to indicate that he was asking as such simply about judgments ascribing moral characteristics, he could have done so unequivocally by completing his phrases with 'the virtuousness and viciousness of actions and characters.'

Hume's phrases beginning with 'distinguish' would in any case seldom be appropriate to refer to judgments of any one trait of character or any one instance of conduct, if these were taken separately as such. In pronouncing 'Jones is vicious,' for example, would a person be claiming to distinguish Jones' vice from the virtue he is alleging Jones does not have? He might if he conceived of vice as simply the absence of virtue. Otherwise, it would seem a cumbersome and faulty way of stating what he had in mind.

If 'distinguish' in Hume's phrases were taken as a transitive verb, presumably it would have to be in one of three relevant senses [OED]: To classify; to confer a mark

⁵⁹T 456. ⁶⁰T 456. ⁶¹T 456. ⁶²All T 456.

of distinction or differentiation; to make out, descry, or discern ("one as preferable to the other" [Johnson]).

Either of the first two senses might be shown appropriate for referring to moral judgments as such, given certain special theories of moral judgment, but they can hardly be taken as appropriate as they stand, at the beginning of an inquiry into morals. On the other hand, the word 'distinguish' used in the sense of 'make out,' 'detect,' or 'discern' tends to suggest a judgment made with some effort requiring insight, penetrating to something new or difficult to grasp. One does not, for example, 'distinguish' the shore from only a mile at sea on a clear day. While on this account the word is appropriate in this third sense for our acts of arriving at moral concepts, it surely is not so for many typical cases in which we use these concepts. It does not require insight or effort to judge as vicious actions obviously performed only to inflict pain.

Finally, in Book II Hume has referred in the singular to "the distinction betwixt vice and virtue,"⁶³ which surely cannot in any direct way mean moral judgments as such.

The most probable hypothesis, which has been advanced to explain the distinction betwixt vice and virtue, and the origin of moral rights and obligations, is, that from a primary constitution of nature certain characters and passions, by the very view and contemplation, produce a pain, and others in a like manner excite a pleasure.⁶⁴

⁶³T 296. ⁶⁴T 296.

And he will, to anticipate, use the definite, singular form again later in posing his answer in Book III:

The distinction of moral good and evil is founded on the pleasure or pain, which results from the view of any sentiment or character;...⁶⁵

There is little reason to suppose, therefore, that his phrase "that distinction"⁶⁶ in the passage under discussion from the first section in Book III, means that kind of distinction, which it would have to mean to signify moral judgments as such.

It might be argued that by such phrases as "the distinction betwixt vice and virtue"⁶⁷ and "Moral Distinctions"⁶⁸ Hume does not mean our concepts of moral good and evil, but means just what Clarke and Wollaston mean, the actual difference between moral good and evil. And further, it might be argued that he is presuming a theory according to which these differences are constituted (or conferred on characters and actions) by all our moral judgments, from the totality of which judgments they are hence "deriv'd."⁶⁹ If this were so, then in asking about the origin of "Moral Distinctions,"⁷⁰ which 'distinctions' are admittedly not themselves judgments, Hume is expecting his readers to know that he is asking about the origin or causes of moral judgments.

But this would seem to be expecting a good deal. Also, he would be presuming at the outset the truth of a

⁶⁵T 546. ⁶⁶T 456. ⁶⁷T 456. ⁶⁸T 455.

⁶⁹T 456. ⁷⁰T 455.

theory which on his own account is contrary to rationalistic theories. Rationalistic theories do not allow that our moral judgments produce moral differences; they rather, as he says, "affirm that...there are eternal fitnesses and unfitnesses of things."⁷¹

As a result of the entire discussion so far we may conclude tentatively that question F. a-a probably comes the closest of any of the six possibilities to expressing unambiguously the central meaning of Hume's fundamental question. The possibility of treating Hume's question as equivalent to J. a-s, however, is also plausible. Nor can I claim at this point to have conclusively disposed of the possibilities that his question is equivalent to either J. s-a or J. a-a.

The Formulation in Terms of 'Reason'
and 'Other Principles'

Hume's second formulation of his question is:

Whether it be possible, from reason alone, to distinguish betwixt moral good and evil, or whether there must concur some other principles to enable us to make that distinction.⁷²

Hume makes quite clear that by 'reason' in the present context he means the faculty of both "demonstrable"⁷³ and "probable"⁷⁴ reasoning, that is, the faculty of noting the relations between ideas (as in logic and mathematics), and also the faculty of inferring causes and effects.⁷⁵

⁷¹T 456. ⁷²T 457. ⁷³T 464. ⁷⁴T 103.

⁷⁵T 458.

Does this formulation, then, really pose precisely the same question as the formulation in terms of ideas and impressions?

I think it is clear that it does not. This is not because causal inference typically proceeds from "a present impression,"⁷⁶ and requires past experiences of constantly conjoined impressions.⁷⁷ For probable reason does not itself furnish these impressions or any others plausibly identifiable with perceptions of "moral good and evil."⁷⁸ The ground for saying Hume's two formulations are not strictly equivalent is that complex ideas are surely compounded and evoked regularly by "the imagination,"⁷⁹ as well as by reason.

But Hume's arguments to settle his question will, I believe, be unaffected by this truth, since, as we shall see, he will try to draw his conclusion against rationalism mainly on the basis of what reason cannot but impressions alone can do.

Let us then add to our catalog of questions, which we may wish to treat as equivalent to what Hume intends to be asking, the following, which correspond for all his purposes to J. a-a and F. a-a:

J. a-s': Is it possible that our perceptions of moral good and evil in our judgments of actions and characters should always be perceptions of reason alone, or must they sometimes be in part perceptions of some other faculty?

⁷⁶T 98. ⁷⁷Book I, Part III. ⁷⁸T 456.

⁷⁹T 225.

F. a-a': Is it possible that our perceptions of the kind by which we form our ideas of moral good and evil in the first place should always be perceptions of reason alone, or must they always be in part perceptions of some other faculty?

CHAPTER II

REJECTION OF THE RATIONALIST ANSWER

The Three Arguments

Hume proceeds at once to answer his own question by rejecting the rationalist answer to it. He does so on the basis of three noted arguments which we can label and refer to as (1) the argument from practical influence, (2) the epistemological argument, and (3) the argument from the inconceivability of deriving an 'ought' from an 'is.' These arguments will now be discussed with a view to trying to decide what Hume is trying to prove by them. The aim will be to see if he is rejecting the rationalist alternative to questions J. a-s and J. a-s' or to F. a-a or F. a-a' or to both these pairs of questions.

The Argument from Practical Influence

The argument from practical influence is the first argument which Hume states and is the one upon which he places the greatest reliance. He states it briefly, and I believe elliptically, six different times in Section I. Preferring no special order of steps, he places what appears to be his minor (or subject term) premise first in the first two versions that follow:

1. Morals...have an influence on the actions and affections...reason alone...can never have any such influence...morals...cannot be deriv'd from reason.¹
2. Morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions. Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular. The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason.²
3. Reason can never immediately prevent or produce any action by contradicting or approving it... moral good and evil...are found to have that influence...reason...cannot be the source of moral good and evil.³
4. The merit and demerit of actions frequently contradict, and sometimes controul our natural propensities. But reason has no such influence. Moral distinctions, therefore, are not the offspring of reason.⁴
5. Reason is wholly inactive...conscience, or a sense of morals [is] so active a principle. Reason...can never be the source of... conscience or a sense of morals.⁵
6. 'Tis impossible, that the distinction between moral good and evil, can be made by reason; since that distinction has an influence upon our actions, of which reason alone is incapable.⁶

Looking at the argument as a whole, in each of these different forms, it may seem at first clear that Hume intends to be presenting only a single syllogism. But for reasons which will be indicated in the discussion to follow and throughout the discussion of the argument as a whole, I believe he is not presenting simply a single syllogism. His argument is, I believe, instead an enthymeme with an unstated intermediate conclusion and an unstated third premise. That is, the premise which Hume states in each of the above

¹T 457. ²T 457. ³T 458. ⁴T 458.

⁵T 458. ⁶T 462.

versions of his argument (except perhaps in the sixth) do not, on the interpretation I will be offering entail the conclusion he states, but rather a proposition which, when taken with another do entail this conclusion.

The Terms of the Argument and
Hume's Conclusion

Let us begin by trying to get clear on the terms Hume is employing in this argument. When Hume says that "Morals...have an influence on the actions and affections,"⁷ he must mean by "morals,"⁸ at the very least (following the suggestion made in Chapter I), our perceptions of moral goodness and evil when we judge actions and characters morally good and evil.⁹ And this must also be the meaning of "the merit and demerit of actions"¹⁰ and "conscience, or a sense of morals."¹¹ By "reason"¹² in turn Hume must mean our perceptions of reason. As a third term in his argument he is, then, presumably intending to refer to perceptions which can influence actions (or conduct) and affections.

If the argument were a single syllogism, Hume would be left with these three terms and no more. However, we can see that so far as his wording goes, he consistently departs

⁷T 457. ⁸T 457.

⁹Again, he might have in mind moral judgments in their entirety, but we are safe in taking the minimal interpretation.

¹⁰T 458. ¹¹T 458. ¹²T 457-58, 462.

from indicating that he is limiting himself to three terms. With the exception of his sixth statement, which does not so clearly contain a reference to perceptions of virtue and vice in judgments of actions and characters, he introduces into each of his statements of his argument phrases for what is ostensibly a fourth term. And he always introduces these phrases for a fourth term as phrases for the subject of his conclusion. In his first statement of his argument he introduces the words "deriv'd from,"¹³ in the second the words "conclusions of,"¹⁴ in both the third and fifth the words "source of,"¹⁵ and in the fourth the words "offspring of."¹⁶

What I am suggesting, of course, is that the subject of Hume's final and stated conclusion in this argument is those of our perceptions of moral good and evil of the type by which we form our ideas of moral good and evil in the first place. That is, the alternative which he is explicitly rejecting in this argument from practical influence is an alternative posed only if his question is construed as equivalent to the questions I referred to in Chapter I as questions F. a-a and F. a-a'.

But leaving this suggestion aside for the moment, if the terms of Hume's stated premises are the three I indicated, then what immediately follows from them is either that some or that all of our perceptions of moral good and

¹³T 457. ¹⁴T 457. ¹⁵T 458. ¹⁶T 458.

evil when we judge actions and characters morally good and evil are quite other than perceptions of our reason. That is, Hume's stated premises immediately entail an answer either to the questions J. a-s and J. a-s', or possibly to the questions J. a-a and J. a-a' or J. s-a and J. s-a'.

What I would like to do first, therefore, is to confirm our results of Chapter I by showing that he is not attempting to prove an answer to J. a-a and J. a-a' or to J. s-a and J. s-a', but rather to J. a-s and J. a-s'. To show this would be to show that the conclusion of this argument from practical influence is not the universal denial that our perceptions of moral good and evil when we make moral judgments are ever perceptions of our reason, but is rather only the denial that some of these moral perceptions are perceptions of our reason.

It will suffice to show this if it can be shown that Hume's minor (or subject term) premise is not intended to affirm that all, but only that some, of our perceptions of moral good and evil when we make moral judgments are perceptions which influence actions and affections. But before even turning to this premise, it will be desirable to consider Hume's major (or predicate term) premise. This is his premise which denies that our perceptions of reason are perceptions which influence actions and affections, or at any rate, denies that they are the kind which do so "alone."¹⁷ For if we can get clear on the exact mode of

influence over actions and affections which Hume is denying is possessed by perceptions of reason, we will thereby be clear on the mode of influence he is ascribing to our perceptions of moral good and evil. Getting clear on this will take a prodigious amount of inquiry and examination, which will, however, I believe, repay our efforts.

The Denial That Perceptions of Reason
Can Influence Actions and Affections

Let us requote Hume's words for his major premise in his first two statements of his argument:

Reason alone . . . can never have any such influence
...on the actions and affections.¹⁸

Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular [to] . . . excite the passions and produce or prevent actions.¹⁹

There is little doubt that he intends this denial to be universal in scope. The words "never"²⁰ and "utterly"²¹ make this plain. Furthermore, his argument from practical influence as a whole could prove nothing if this premise were not universal; it would be an instance of the fallacy of illicit process of the major term.²²

¹⁸T 457.

¹⁹T 457. Note that the order of the clauses has been inverted.

²⁰T 457. ²¹T 457.

²²The conclusion must be negative, and hence the predicate term, perceptions of reason, must be distributed in the conclusion; but it would be undistributed in the major premise if this premise were particular.

But what does Hume mean to be denying universally when he denies that our perceptions of reason, or in short reason "alone"²³ or "of itself"²⁴ ever influences the actions or affections? In other passages Hume seems prepared to go so far as to deny that reason has any influence on the passions or conduct at all: "reason is perfectly inert, and can never either prevent or produce any action or affection."²⁵ "Reason is wholly inactive,"²⁶ as he says in his fifth statement of the argument. These extreme statements are not to be dismissed out of hand. There must be some sense in which Hume really means what he says here. The point to start with, however, is the "alone"²⁷ and "of itself"²⁸ (in the versions of the premise requoted above); for there is a sense, too, and a quite straightforward one, in which Hume is willing to allow that perceptions of reason can influence.

It is worth noting that Hume commits himself, as I have indicated before, to using "reason"²⁹ here very broadly, perhaps even more broadly sometimes than even he realizes. He thinks of it basically as two-fold:

The understanding exerts itself after two different ways, as it judges from demonstration or probability.³⁰

The operations of human understanding divide themselves into two kinds, the comparing of ideas, and the inferring of matters of fact.³¹

²³T 457. ²⁴T 457. ²⁵Top T 458. ²⁶T 458.

²⁷T 457. ²⁸T 457. ²⁹T 458. ³⁰T 413.

³¹T 463.

Now I think it is evident that Hume is intending to include here under judgments of "probability"³² and "inferring matters of fact"³³ more than what would ordinarily be called causal inferences. He would doubtless wish to include memory judgments and judgments of distinct and continued existence in this category, though he himself has denied that the latter are in the strictest sense causal judgments. This seems a legitimate extension and fits with his broad definition of reason as "the discovery of truth of falsehood."³⁴ Certainly he could even claim that in a broader sense these are causal judgments.

Hume's first specific claim about the influence of reason which he advances first in Book II, is that a "demonstrative"³⁵ judgment influences only to the extent that "it directs our judgment concerning causes and effects."³⁶ And in the example he gives to try to persuade his readers of the truth of this claim, the famous example of the merchant and his debt,³⁷ he seems to take his own dictum more narrowly than he needs to do. The merchant's arithmetical judgment (demonstrative) directs his judgment of what single sum will settle his several debts. Hume therefore feels bound to treat the merchant's judgment that a certain sum will settle his debts as a causal judgment in the strict sense that it is actually a judgment about what

³²T 413. ³³T 463. ³⁴T 458. ³⁵T 414.

³⁶T 414. ³⁷T 414.

different causes will produce a given effect. Given his broad use of "reason"³⁸ and "the understanding,"³⁹ however, there is no reason why he need hold himself to this. He need not insist, for example, that the judgment that one has a legal debt of a sum of money is essentially a judgment of the effect which would be produced by paying it, or even by not paying it. What he probably wishes to insist on is that demonstrative judgments influence conduct only so far as they 'direct' factual judgments of some sort, not that these factual judgments must be causal judgments in the strictest sense. In any case, it is what he holds concerning the influence of factual reason in general that must in the final analysis tell us what is really at the core of his denial that reason can influence "alone"⁴⁰ or "of itself."⁴¹

But Hume does not say in a few words exactly what he means by holding that factual reason alone cannot influence. We are reduced to drawing this out of the various accounts he gives of the various ways he thinks factual reason can influence. This should warn us that Hume may not have been entirely clear as to what his major premise really amounts to. Being left to our own devices, we may (and I think will) detect different meanings. What we should look for in particular is the view which we can have the best grounds for saying Hume would ultimately wish to defend.⁴²

³⁸T 458. ³⁹T 413. ⁴⁰T 457. ⁴¹T 457.

⁴²If there are other views to be found, these may be borne in mind as alternatives, but should be of less interest in interpreting other parts of Hume's theory.

The passages one naturally looks to first are those in which Hume catalogues abstractly all the ways in which he thinks factual reason can influence. In fact, I think these passages are misleading as to the scope and force of his denial, but as it will be desirable to give evidence of this, I shall start with them anyway. There are two such passages. In Book III he claims that reason can influence only in two ways:

Either when it excites a passion by informing us of the existence of something which is a proper object of it [the passion]; or when it discovers the connexion of causes and effects so as to afford us the means of exerting any passion.⁴³

But in Book II he has already allowed by implication that it can operate in the opposite ways, by correcting false beliefs which occur.

First, When a passion, such as hope or fear, grief or joy, despair or security, is founded on the supposition of the existence of objects which really do not exist. Secondly, When in exerting any passion in action we chuse means insufficient for the design'd end, and deceive ourselves in our judgments of causes and effects.⁴⁴

Hume does not seem to think of these as different ways of influencing, and perhaps fundamentally they are not; but it does seem necessary to keep both passages in mind as complementing each other, if one is going to have a complete inventory of ways of influencing.

In insisting that these are the only ways factual reason can influence, Hume would seem to be making at least three distinguishable claims: First that for a judgment of

⁴³T 459. ⁴⁴T 416.

factual (or probable) reason to influence, it must act upon an independently existing disposition to feel a "passion."⁴⁵ This would seem to be the significance of the phrase "proper object of it"⁴⁶ (of a passion, that is) in the passage quoted first. If something is not already "proper object"⁴⁷ of a passion, reason is powerless to influence conduct. Second, and more specifically, Hume is claiming that for a judgment of factual reason to influence it must act on the disposition in such a way as to excite an actual, felt passion, or to calm an actual passion, or to 'direct' an actual passion. Third, he is claiming that only certain specific types of factual judgments can excite passions, only certain others calm them, and only certain others direct them.

Now we have to ask whether any of these claims reveal essentially what he means by denying that reason "of itself"⁴⁸ or "alone"⁴⁹ can influence?

As emphatically as he expresses his third, highly specific claim about the types of factual judgments which he thinks are the only types which can excite, calm or direct passions, there is no reason to suppose that this claim is an essential part of what he means by denying that reason can influence alone. Hume would probably allow that one could consistently accept this claim while rejecting his major premise, or reject this claim while accepting his major premise. This claim, taken with his others, tells us

⁴⁵T 459. ⁴⁶T 459. ⁴⁷T 459. ⁴⁸T 457.

⁴⁹T 457.

what sorts of judgments he thinks can influence, but not, after all, how they influence, whether alone or with something else.

It is not easy to see whether or not the second claim contributes anything essential to Hume's thesis. Suppose one affirmed that judgments of reason can act on dispositions to feel passions in other ways than by exciting, calming or directing felt passions, and can influence every time it so acts. Would this amount to affirming that reason alone, in Hume's sense, can influence? I suspect that this depends on what the action turned out to be; so long as it did not amount to altering or removing the disposition itself, it would probably not contradict Hume's claim, but if either of these things were involved, it would. If a judgment that tobacco smoke is carcinogenic caused one not only to cease buying tobacco, but to cease desiring it (or even to cease desiring it as much as one had before), perhaps Hume would allow that reason alone had after all an influence. Doubt on this point arises chiefly because those who read Hume sympathetically and feel that he has enunciated the truth on these subjects are quick to claim that cases of this kind, so far as they exist, are always cases of exciting an additional and incompatible passion, and that it is then this additional passion, not reason alone, which alters or removes the original one.

But then, if any of Hume's three claims reveal an essential part of what he means by his promise denying that reason alone can influence, it is surely the first one, that for a judgment of factual reason to influence, it must act on at least one independently existing disposition to feel a passion. This is to say that for reason to influence, there must be at least one independently existing disposition to feel a passion on which it acts.

If this is what Hume's view amounts to, then we may anticipate that the difference between all judgments (or perceptions) of reason and at least some perceptions of moral good and evil in moral judgments on his view will be that the latter are able to excite passions toward things, which passions, or changes in them, can then influence conduct even when there is no disposition to feel such passions toward these things to start with.

Hume would, I think, be in a stronger position, if his first claim, as I have been referring to it, were all that he wished to defend or introduce into his denial that reason alone can influence. For in fact, his more specific claims, especially those which I have called his third claims, are mostly very doubtful, as I shall indicate later. But how could he prove his denial even in this comparatively lean form deriving just from his first claim? How does one go about determining that there really is (let alone must be) an independent disposition to feel a passion for every

judgment of reason that influences? How does one show that there need not be such a disposition in the case of influential moral judgments? Is external, independent evidence of such dispositions required? This would seem easy to acquire in some cases, but virtually impossible in others.

Hume proposes as a corollary of his view, that if we are not disposed to be influenced by either of two objects in themselves, then the judgment of reason that they are causally connected not only does not but cannot influence us or arouse any passion.

Where the objects themselves do not affect us, their connexion can never give them any influence; and 'tis plain, that as reason is nothing but the discovery of this connexion, it cannot be by its means that the objects are able to affect us.⁵⁰

Now this seems to be false. People (notably scientists) do seem to take an interest in causal connections even when they are not, to start with at least, interested directly in any of the things connected, taken by themselves. Hume does not acknowledge or account for this, even when he discusses "curiosity, or the love of truth"⁵¹ (in the concluding section of Book II), and there is no reason to suppose it ever occurred to him as such. He does allow, however, that judgments of reason may themselves, though only in what he regards as trivial circumstances, produce a certain pleasure or displeasure:

⁵⁰T 414. ⁵¹T 448.

Reason...except in the more sublime disquisitions of philosophy, or in the frivolous subtilities of the schools, scarce ever conveys any pleasure or uneasiness.⁵²

"Scarce ever"⁵³ is not the same as never. This should show that reason alone is not always perfectly inert. Why is it not evidence against the view that a separate disposition to feel a passion is required? What other sort of evidence is needed?

I suspect that producing counter-instances of this sort would never get Hume to allow that reason alone can or might influence. But if not, why not? Would it be because even in cases like these which we would not ordinarily be tempted to describe or explain by saying there was an independently existing disposition to feel a passion, Hume could invoke and manipulate the notion of a "proper object"⁵⁴ of a passion and claim that there really was one anyway? It is true, he could alter his view in the minor respect to allow that for a scientist causal connections themselves, or nice chains of reasoning, are such "proper objects" of passions. The fact that the scientist is led to feel as he does, Hume could maintain, is itself good evidence that he has a disposition to feel that way. But then what further would be meant by either positing or denying such a disposition?

To speculate quite freely for a moment, I think it is quite easy to imagine that Hume, while remaining as thoroughly convinced as ever that reason simply cannot

⁵²T 417. ⁵³T 417. ⁵⁴T 459.

influence alone, would, however, begin to feel quite perturbed about the need to make such ad hoc modifications in his views. For there could be little supporting, external evidence for or against such modifications, and hence little empirical meaning to them. The suspicion should therefore be, I think, that we may not after all have arrived at what is fundamental to Hume's denial that reason alone can influence. Hume's catalog of ways in which he thinks reason can influence has not given us what is essential to this denial. The suspicion should further be, I think, that while Hume has expressed this denial as though it were an empirical one about what causes are in fact necessary to produce certain effects, what he more fundamentally has in mind is an a priori (and hence analytic) claim about the nature of judgments of reason and influence on conduct. But before pursuing this, I should like to pose one more apparent negative or disconfirming instance of the premise about reason as it has presented itself up to this point.

Suppose it is granted that the very fact that a judgment of reason influences conduct or the passions is enough to show it must have acted upon or evoked a fixed disposition (gratuitous as this assumption may appear). How would Hume dispose of the possibility that this disposition might not be to feel a passion, but simply to act in a certain way? He spends a good deal of time in Book II discussing the effect of habit or "custom"⁵⁵ on the passions. Should he not allow that this can have a direct effect on

⁵⁵T 422.

actions too? Perhaps he would hold that the formation of a habit is always the result of a passion (I tell the truth because I used to think I would be punished for lying); but this would not dispose of the direct effect of habits once formed. Perhaps he would hold that the continued operation of a habit is dependent on a passion (the one behind the formation of it or some other). This, however, would have to be shown. Perhaps he would hold (implausibly) that habits influence only mere behavior, not actions or conduct. It seems likely that he would hold this, for he does not treat mere habits as amenable to moral praise or blame. His catalog of virtues and vices includes only dispositions to feel passions (as with benevolence) or abilities (as with wit) which he does not think of as essentially automatic or fixed like habits. The question remains, however, does his major premise rest on the assumption that judgments of reason cannot evoke habits alone to modify conduct?

It should be recalled that Hume holds as his major premise not simply that reason does not in fact influence alone, but quite emphatically that it cannot. If he means by "alone"⁵⁶ without acting on a previously existing disposition to feel a passion, where, to repeat, are his arguments to show that this disposition must be present?

Hume does not argue formally for this. Instead, he presents and to some extent illustrates what I have called his more specific claim. This claim would certainly entail

⁵⁶T 457.

the claim that a disposition is always required, but it seems even more doubtful than this. Nor do Hume's illustrations help make it (or his apparently more fundamental claim) any less doubtful. These illustrations are not appeals to hard cases, accompanied by explanations of them, but only illustrations drawn from instances in which there need be little doubt that reason does act upon a disposition to feel a passion, just as Hume thinks it does. He would seem, indeed, throughout all this, to be appealing to the inspection of his readers. Seeing how reason influences in a few cases, we can induce intuitively that it will influence in essentially the same way in all cases; or so Hume seems to be suggesting.

A fruit, for instance, that is really disagreeable, appears to me at a distance, and thro' mistake I fancy it to be pleasant and delicious. Here is one error [which can influence]. I choose certain means of reaching this fruit, which are not proper for my end. Here is a second error; nor is there any third one which can ever possibly enter into our reasonings concerning [or influencing] actions.⁵⁷

One wonders: Would Hume think his illustration supported his claim with his reader, if the fruit were mentioned as a species he had never before tasted, but from its popularity had inferred to be delicious?

Hume is willing to allow, as I indicated above, that a judgment can, in a sense, 'direct' a passion toward an object, even when we are not disposed to feel a passion toward that object to start with, provided we do already feel a passion (specifically either a desire or an aversion)

toward an effect or a cause of that object. Evidently, however, this is not a case of what we would ordinarily think of as transferring an emotion or attitude from one object to another. If a causal judgment that a ladder will help us reach a piece of fruit leads us to desire a ladder, it is only in the sense that it leads us to seek one. For Hume makes plain that reason cannot prompt us to desire a ladder or anything else for its own sake (though fancy or caprice may do this). If a further judgment shows the ladder unserviceable, the desire which reason directed to it at once vanishes.

The moment we perceive the falshood of any supposition, or the insufficiency of any means, our passions yield to our reason without any opposition.⁵⁸

Hume implies that if we are disposed to feel a passion toward two objects, and judge that only one is attainable, the judgment that one rather than the other will satisfy a greater passion will often (though not infallibly) direct us to seek that greater object.⁵⁹ But again, this is not to say that reason prompts the passion for either object.

This leads us quite naturally to ask, what does prompt and not merely direct a passion?

A partial answer to this question appears in Book I:

There is implanted in the human mind a perception of pain and pleasure, as the chief spring and moving principle of all its actions.⁶⁰

⁵⁸T 416. ⁵⁹T 535. ⁶⁰T 118.

Hume adds that this "perception of pain or pleasure"⁶¹ is sometimes in the form of impressions, sometimes in the form of ideas.

But pain and pleasure have two ways of making their appearance in the mind; of which the one has effects very different from the other. They may either appear in impression to the actual feeling, or only in idea, as at present when I mention them.⁶²

This is not to say, however, that ideas of pain or pleasure are always powerless as compared with impressions. Some of these ideas do influence both the passions and conduct. All impressions influence the passions, but even they do not all influence conduct; and some ideas are influential.

Did impressions alone influence the will, we should every moment of our lives be subject to the greatest calamities.⁶³

The ideas of pleasure and pain which in particular Hume considers can be influential are those in which we believe; they are the ones which, as contrasted with idle fictions which have "no efficacy,"⁶⁴ we take to represent something truly, as it is. Such beliefs are often, Hume allows, the product of irrational causes, but often, too, the product of reason.

We may infer from this that reason can influence so far as it can produce belief in a pain or pleasure. Producing belief, it should be recalled, is on Hume's theory a case of "making an idea approach an impression in force and vivacity."⁶⁵

⁶¹T 118. ⁶²T 118. ⁶³T 119. ⁶⁴T 119.

⁶⁵T 119.

Hume develops this line of thought about pain and pleasure further in Book II. Early in Book II we are told that some passions are prompted by impressions specifically of bodily pains and pleasures, others are prompted by ideas specifically of such pains and pleasures.

Bodily pains and pleasures are the source of many passions, both when felt and consider'd by the mind.⁶⁶

The important qualification is added later that not all pains and pleasures are bodily; there are also those of the "soul,"⁶⁷ which it seems can also influence, presumably both in the form of impressions and lively ideas (beliefs).

Beauty is such an order and construction of parts, as either by the primary constitution of our nature, by custom, or by caprice, is fitted to give a pleasure and satisfaction to the soul.⁶⁸

All this prepares us for the view that reason can influence if and only if it produces a vivid idea of pleasure or pain, one which is a belief, or increases the vivacity of an idea of pleasure or pain so that it becomes a belief. And this seems the view Hume is holding in the later parts of Book II (from which I cited the passages already examined) where he discusses reason. It is clearest, perhaps, immediately following his description of the ways reason can influence by directing passions.

But 'tis evident in this case that the impulse arises not from reason, but is only directed by it. 'Tis from the prospect of pain or pleasure that the aversion or propensity arises toward any object.⁶⁹

⁶⁶T 276. ⁶⁷T 299. ⁶⁸T 299. ⁶⁹T 414.

Plausible as this view may seem at first, two questions present themselves as to just how Hume can give any very satisfactory proof for it. First of all, he is allowing that some lively ideas (those of pleasure and pain in the future) can directly cause (prompt) the direct passions of desire and aversion, and thus influence conduct; but if he is allowing that some lively ideas can prompt passions, that an "impulse"⁷⁰ can arise from them, what are his grounds for holding that others cannot also do so? Secondly, why should we suppose that while a disposition to feel a passion is required for judgments of fruit and the like to influence, no such disposition is required for lively ideas of pleasure and pain to influence?

I shall try to answer the second question first. Reverting to Book II, we find Hume suggesting that really a disposition is required even with ideas of pleasure and pain. It is a disposition which we apparently all possess, and which merits a special title, "original instinct":⁷¹

The mind by an original instinct tends to unite itself with the good [pleasure in this case], and to avoid evil [pain], tho' they be conceiv'd merely in idea, and be consider'd as to exist in any future period of time.⁷²

But if a disposition, albeit one which is widely shared, is necessary for lively ideas of pleasure and pain to influence, then one should conclude that they too cannot influence "alone"⁷³ or of themselves, and that they too are unable really to prompt passions. Hume does not, however,

⁷⁰T 414. ⁷¹T 438. ⁷²T 438. ⁷³T 457.

draw this conclusion. Instead he says that,

DESIRE [propensity] arises from good [pleasure] consider'd simply, and AVERSION is deriv'd from evil [pain].⁷⁴

There is, then, something very special (though Hume does not make clear what) about this "original instinct"⁷⁵ which sets it apart from ordinary dispositions to feel passions.

When we look for an answer to the first question, briefly, why other lively ideas besides those of pleasure and pain cannot influence, we find that surprisingly enough, and in apparent contradiction to what he said earlier, Hume allows that they can.

Besides good and evil, or in other words, pain and pleasure, the direct passions [which include desire and aversion] frequently arise from a natural impulse or instinct, which is perfectly unaccountable. Of this kind is the desire of punishment to our enemies, and of happiness to our friends; hunger, lust, and a few other bodily appetites. These, properly speaking, produce good and evil, and proceed not from them, like the other affections.⁷⁶

Hume also speaks of "certain calm desires"⁷⁷ which he says are of two kinds: "either certain instincts originally implanted in our natures, such as benevolence and resentment, the love of life, and kindness to children; or the general appetite to good, and aversion to evil, consider'd merely as such."⁷⁸ Both these passages flatly contradict Hume's earlier pronouncement that,

'Tis from the prospect of pain or pleasure that the aversion or propensity arises toward any object.⁷⁹

⁷⁴T 439. ⁷⁵T 438. ⁷⁶T 439. ⁷⁷T 417.

⁷⁸T 417. ⁷⁹T 414.

Furthermore, looking back to a still earlier point in Book II, we can find the view that every idea produces some emotion or passion,

I believe it may safely be establish'd for a general maxim, that no object is presented to the senses, nor image form'd in the fancy, but what ~~isn't~~ accompany'd with some emotion or movement of spirits proportion'd to it.⁸⁰

And with all ideas producing a "movement of spirits,"⁸¹ how can one be sure desire and aversion will result only from ideas of pleasure and pain? Why not from a lively idea of the fittingness or unfittingness of actions?

One way to interpret Hume at this point is to say that he is citing causal connections between quite distinct sorts of things. Prospects of pain are lively ideas which cause felt aversions; prospects of pleasure are ideas which cause felt desires. The desires and aversions are "impressions of reflection,"⁸² which is to say they are caused by ideas; and in particular they happen to be caused by these sorts of ideas. Other ideas may in fact be followed by passions of one sort or another, even the direct passions of desire and aversion. But a cause must constantly and without exception precede its effect, and it is only prospects of pain which regularly and always precede felt aversions, and prospects of pleasure which regularly and always precede felt aversions.

⁸⁰T 373. ⁸¹T 373.

⁸²T 165. See also T 7 and T 329.

The chief objection to this interpretation is that it fails to account for Hume's allowing that desires and aversions are not always preceded by prospects of pleasure or pain. Sometimes ideas about children, one's friends or enemies do this. Sometimes ideas of bodily appetites are the preceding ideas; sometimes ideas of objects relating to bodily appetites are effective.

An alternative interpretation, however, presents itself. Hume, as I noted above, seems to be appealing to inspection on the part of the reader. Perhaps what he chiefly means is that in the actual experience of every human being (masochists excepted), the prospect of pain, if near enough at hand, is often (or on very little reflection becomes) itself painful, and further that one kind of aversion is nothing else but such a painful prospect of pain, while one kind of propensity is nothing else but a pleasurable prospect of pleasure. It is quite natural to expect that when an idea of pain, say, is increased in force and vivacity to the level of an impression of pain, that it will naturally produce a felt pain as an "impression of reflection." But this is not to deny that other ideas besides those of pleasure and pain can produce such secondary pains and also pleasures. It suggests, however, that whether they do or not, all felt aversions are essentially painful prospects, whereas all felt desires are essentially pleasurable ones. I desire ice cream when I have an idea of ice cream and this idea is pleasurable.

Now this view cannot be simply read off from any passage in Hume. Nevertheless, I think it is probably the better one to ascribe to him, since it takes account of his apparently contradictory pronouncements. Furthermore, if this is what Hume means, his whole view about what can prompt passions and influence conduct, and what cannot, would be on a much stronger footing. It would rest on the discovery of an identity rather than on a causal connection. The identity would be between the painfulness or pleasurable-ness of an idea, and both the fact and direction of its influence.

What does this specifically suggest for Hume's major premise, his denial that reason alone can influence? It suggests, as I anticipated earlier, that he may have mistakenly put it as though it were a causal proposition, whereas it is really a logical one. Or it might be better to say that it suggests that what he has most fundamentally in mind is a logical proposition, but he has been led to express it in terms which do not bring this out clearly but make it appear rather to be a causal one. His main point would be not that there must already be a disposition to feel a certain kind of passion with which a judgment of reason must interact to modify conduct (though he might hold this too, whatever it would mean). It would be just that there is no absolutely necessary connection between a judgment of reason and any sort of felt propensity or aversion. And this is for the reason that the only such

necessary connection possible would be an identity, and no judgment of reason is itself identical with either a felt propensity or a felt aversion. Another way to put this would be to say simply that it is not a priori and hence not analytic that a judgment of reason has an influence, and a fortiori it is not a priori or analytic that the influence of any judgment of reason is in one direction rather than another. For Hume's purposes a fuller and more useful statement of the position would perhaps be this: No description of a judgment of reason, however complete, would enable one to deduce the direction of the effect of that judgment on the conduct of any individual or even that it would have an effect. This position would not deny that one might successfully predict by causal inference that a given judgment of reason would have effects, and even what these effects would be, given a knowledge of the person judging or of human nature in general; Hume stresses that we all do make reliable predictions of this kind.⁸³ It would only deny that one could deduce such consequences, least of all from the judgment alone.

Quite apparently Hume thinks this position would be enough to put him at odds with the rationalists whose views he is disputing, for he says later:

To prove, that the measures of right and wrong are eternal laws, obligatory on every rational mind, 'tis not sufficient to show the relations

⁸³T 404.

upon which they are founded: We must also point out the connexion betwixt the relation and the will; and must prove that this connexion is so necessary, that in every well-disposed mind, it must take place and have its influence; tho' the difference betwixt these minds be in other respects immense and infinite.⁸⁴

Now I think it is not at once self-evident that judgments of reason never are identical with felt propensities or aversions. Nevertheless Hume's arguments for his major premise all suggest at very least that he thinks it is self-evident; and all the alternative interpretations of what his denial that reason alone can influence comes to would commit him to holding this. And if he does hold it, there need be no doubt as to how he would argue. We would expect him to define terms so far as possible, and also appeal to inspection to show that two things really are two. And if anyone should then wonder why being two, there is still not some necessary connection between them, Hume can add, as he does,

It has been shewn, in treating of the understanding that there is no connexion of cause and effect, such as this is supposed to be [the connection presumed by the rationalist], which is discoverable otherwise than by experience.⁸⁵

In further accord with this interpretation, Hume does define reason at the very outset, before he appeals to cases.

"Reason is the discovery of truth or falshood."⁸⁶ As for the passions (including propensities and aversions), he does not attempt to define them, for this cannot be done, and anyway is needless (though one can to some extent analyze

⁸⁴T 465. ⁸⁵T 466. ⁸⁶T 458.

them as he has done in Book II). He identifies them along with the volitions⁸⁷ and actions as "original facts and realities, compleat in themselves,...implying no reference to other passions, volitions and actions."⁸⁸ Interestingly enough, Hume immediately concluded at this point, from his definition of reason and this identification, that,

'Tis impossible, therefore, they can be pronounced either true or false, and be either contrary or conformable to reason.⁸⁹

On the interpretation I have been suggesting, this may be construed as an argument to prove simply that the direction of the effect of a judgment of reason on the passions, volitions and actions cannot be deduced from any description of it however complete. The direction of influence on beliefs may be deduced. A judgment that an idea is true, so far as it has an influence itself on the person judging will necessarily influence him toward belief in the idea (it will enliven it, in the language of Hume's theory).

⁸⁷Hume identifies the act of volition or will as "nothing but the internal impression we feel and are conscious of when we knowingly give rise to any new motion of our body or new perceptions of our mind...." [T 399] We thus expect him to hold that a sufficiently strong or dominant propensity or aversion, together with a judgment that a given possible action will serve to achieve or avoid the object of the propensity or aversion, will cause an act of will. And this is what Hume later says: "The WILL exerts itself, when either the good [pleasure] or the absence of evil may be attain'd by any action of the mind or body." [T 439] I have not, therefore, introduced the notion of volition into the present discussion, considering that it would not substantially affect the main points at issue.

⁸⁸T 458. ⁸⁹T 458.

Similarly, from the fact that a judgment finds an idea false, one can deduce that the direction of its influence is toward weakening or removing belief in the idea. But this possibility of deducing the direction of the influence of judgments of reason on beliefs should not, Hume seems to be pointing out, confuse one into supposing that one can deduce such direction for its effects on conduct. Where this seems possible there is really at most only a well established causal connection. As he has remarked in Book II;

'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger.

'Tis not contrary to reason for me to chuse my total ruin, to prevent the least uneasiness of an Indian or person wholly unknown to me.⁹⁰

This impossibility of deducing a direction is clearly important, as moral judgments do seem to have a direction.

In this connection, it will be recalled that in his third statement of his argument from practical influence, which is, I believe, more illuminating than either of the first two, or even those which follow them, Hume states his major premise in the form:

Reason can never immediately prevent or produce any action by contradicting or approving it.⁹¹

If what I have been suggesting is correct, this states his premise more amply in that it, too, makes the point that

⁹⁰T 416.

⁹¹T 458.

the direction of the influence of a given judgment of reason as well as the fact of that influence are always matters of fact, and incapable of demonstration.

This interpretation at which we have arrived has on the whole much to recommend it. For one thing, it shows how Hume can both claim that reason is "perfectly inert" and yet go on to try to catalog the cases in which it does in fact have an influence. Judgments of reason are "perfectly inert"⁹² just in the sense that they are not themselves either propensities or aversions. It would also place Hume in a position to meet the objections I raised earlier concerning the direct effect on the passions of what I called nice chains of reasoning, and of habits activated by judgments. These effects are not counter instances, since they are not deducible consequences. The main point about the "pleasure or uneasiness"⁹³ which reason can produce directly by nice chains of reasoning ("sublime disquisitions of philosophy")⁹⁴ is not simply that they are trivial and weak passions, and hence unable to influence conduct; the main point is that neither the occurrence nor the direction of such effects are necessary consequences of such reasoning. The reply with respect to habits is not quite so simple. Given the premise that I have a fixed habit of slowing my car whenever I judge I am approaching a traffic signal about to turn red, and the further premise that I judge I am

⁹²T 458. ⁹³T 417. ⁹⁴T 417.

approaching a traffic signal, it does necessarily follow that I will slow my car. Does this mean that Hume's claim is or should be treated as narrower than I have stated it? Should it be treated as the claim that no effects can be deduced from a judgment of reason alone, although they might be deduced given this and a fixed habit? The answer is no, that his view can be wider than that and still meet the objection; it can affirm that no influences can be deduced from a judgment of reason, given any other facts one pleases (except the very consequences themselves). If one insists that a fixed habit is a regular disposition which not only has always operated in the past, but must of necessity continue to operate, the reply is that no actual habit can answer to this description, and no such premise can be affirmed.

The present interpretation will also show that it was unnecessary for Hume to make the claim that it cannot concern us to know that two separate things are causally connected if we are not already concerned about at least one of them separately. Such concerns would be purely contingent facts. But after all, it will be objected, Hume does explicitly make this claim. This is quite true. And he makes, as we have seen, many other specific claims. Thus the interpretation I have been elaborating cannot be thought to present the only view Hume has in mind as the meaning of his major premise. But again, it does pose an essential part of what he has in mind, and furthermore, I

am prepared to conclude the only really essential part for his purposes. It is the only proposition, implicit in what he says which will have the implications he attributes to it (as against the rationalists), and which is yet defensible on his own principles.

But if Hume's specific claims are not fundamental to his main line of thought, why does he advance them? Before resting content with the interpretation I have posed, which tends to ignore them, I shall try to answer this question.

On page 43 I quoted the passages from Books II and III in which Hume advances his detailed claims about the ways reason can influence. Now it is a fundamental part of these claims that only certain specific sorts of judgments of reason can influence. (By omission Hume implies they cannot be false, but we need not hold him to this.) They must be about things or "bbjects."⁹⁵ More particularly they must be of one or another of the following sorts. Judgments that:

1. an object exists or does not exist (where the object is of a kind toward which one is disposed to feel a passion),
2. a given existent object is or is not of a certain kind (where one is disposed to feel a passion toward objects of that kind),
3. a given existent object will or will not serve to achieve or avoid another object (where the other is of a kind toward which one is disposed to feel a passion).

⁹⁵T 416.

Or,

4. demonstrative judgments serving to 'direct' one of the foregoing judgments.

What sorts of judgments of reason does this list exclude as non-influential? This depends partly on how one is to construe the notion of an "object"⁹⁶ concerning the "existence,"⁹⁷ character and causal connections of which reason can "inform"⁹⁸ (to use Hume's words). If this is to be construed to mean simply physical objects, then the list would exclude a great many types of judgments of reason. Among others, it would exclude judgments of people, their minds and their non-physical characteristics, notably their moral characteristics.

Now the words "object," "existence," "cause" together with Hume's repeated example in both Book II and III⁹⁹ of the fruit "of an excellent relish"¹⁰⁰ all conspire to suggest, in the absence of any word to the contrary, that we really should construe the notion of an object as that of a physical object. It does not even occur to us at first to construe it any other way. And it is to be suspected that this effect is not merely accidental on Hume's part, but quite intentional, even if not clearly thought out. Anyone can see that judgments that physical objects do or do not exist, are or are not of certain kinds, do or do not stand in various causal relations are all in a class quite

⁹⁶T 416. ⁹⁷T 459. ⁹⁸T 459. ⁹⁹T 417 and 460.

¹⁰⁰T 417.

distinct from judgments of the moral virtue and vice of people and conduct. It should be apparent at once, then, that since such moral judgments do influence, they must be distinct from judgments of reason, since the only judgments of reason which are able to influence, belong to the above-mentioned limited class.

It is, as I say, to be suspected that this way of arguing gets hold of Hume to some extent at this point. Still it cannot be considered fundamental with him. For to begin with, if he has not already established that moral judgments (or those of them which influence) are not judgments of reason, he can hardly claim to know that reason influences only by non-moral judgments (such as that things exist, do not exist and so on). And of course it is to prove this that he is constructing his argument from practical influence, of which this premise forms a part.

Furthermore, if "objects"¹⁰¹ are simply physical objects, Hume's list is hopelessly inadequate, on almost anyone's view. Perhaps he is not really using the term this narrowly. Perhaps he would be willing to allow that a judgment that an object in the future will or would exist or be of a certain kind may also be influential (one thinks of judgments concerning plans and ideals). Perhaps he would be willing to include under the category of "objects"¹⁰² also activities (as per the suggestion of Rachel Kydd),¹⁰³

¹⁰¹T 416. ¹⁰²T 416.

¹⁰³Rachel M. Kydd, Reason and Conduct in Hume's Treatise (London: Oxford University Press, 1945), p. 109.

processes, relations, states of affairs and so on. Perhaps he would also be willing to include psychological characteristics of oneself and others. It can be shown, I think, that he would have to include in this category all these things and more. He would have to consider as an "object"¹⁰⁴ anything toward which one can feel a passion, if his list is to allow for all the sorts of judgments of reason which on his own principles do in fact influence. And if he does this, it is hard to see how he can draw any line at moral characteristics. They, too, must be "objects,"¹⁰⁵ and judgments about them must be judgments that objects 'exist,' do not 'exist,' and so on. In order to exclude this possibility Hume would have to pose independent arguments at this point, which he does not do.

In conclusion then, I think we are justified in taking the fundamental meaning of Hume's major premise to be simply that judgments of reason are not themselves identical with felt propensities or felt aversions. Or, to put it more abstractly: Propositions affirming that judgments of reason have effects, or that these effects are in one direction rather than another are never necessary. Or again, no description of a judgment of reason, however, complete, would enable one to deduce the direction of the effect of that judgment on the conduct of any individual or even that it would have an effect.

¹⁰⁴T 416. ¹⁰⁵T 416.

It is noteworthy that Hume's arguments support this premise with respect to all judgments of reason in the broadest sense. He began by being concerned about judgments of reason which employ essentially ideas derived from reason, such as truth, causal connection, contradiction, and so on. But this premise applied equally to judgments about the other side of the moon, or what one had for breakfast last Thursday.

The Premise That Morals Influence

We can now consider Hume's minor premise in his argument from practical influence:

Morals...have an influence on the actions and affections.¹⁰⁶

Morals excite passions and produce and prevent actions.¹⁰⁷

I shall continue to presume that by "morals"¹⁰⁸ here Hume has chiefly in mind our perceptions of moral good and evil when we judge actions and character traits. However, let us refer to these from now on simply as moral judgments.

If what I have said concerning Hume's major premise is correct, this premise, too, must be essentially not about a causal relation, as it seems, but about a logical one. That is, it must, if Hume is going to prove anything like his conclusion from his argument as a whole. If this premise were really, as it seems at first, simply the proposition that moral judgments as causes produce actions and affections as effects, it would then share no term with the

¹⁰⁶T 457. ¹⁰⁷T 457. ¹⁰⁸T 457.

previous premise (so far as Hume was able to give any good grounds for the previous one), and no conclusion of anything like the sort he wishes to prove would follow.

Pursuing a sympathetic interpretation, then, what this second premise must amount to can be put this way: From a sufficiently complete description of given moral judgments, it necessarily follows that they influence the passions and conduct, and furthermore, that their influence in each case is necessarily in one direction rather than another; and it also follows necessarily in each case what that direction is. On Hume's theory all this is equivalent in the final analysis to claiming not simply that moral judgments have an influence, but that they are in part really identical with such an influence, specifically in the form of felt desires and aversions. That is, once again Hume's words do not always express adequately what his position really comes to.

Hume has not, up to this point excluded the possibility that, supposing rationalism false, some moral judgments may nevertheless be judgments of reason. But if his minor premise is that moral judgments are in part identical with desires and aversions, is he not thereby excluding this possibility?

No reply to this key question can be satisfactory, I think, which does not take account of Hume's sub-arguments to prove his minor premise. For he does have such arguments; and unless he intends these to prove that all moral judgments

whatsoever necessarily influence the passions and conduct (that they are all identical with either desires or aversions), he cannot be said to have irrevocably committed himself to the view that no moral judgments are judgments of reason.

It may appear perverse to insist that Hume does not construct his sub-arguments to prove that all moral judgments necessarily influence, for, as we shall see, they do at first seem open to this interpretation, and 'morals' does very naturally suggest all moral judgments. There are, however, very strong reasons for not interpreting them this way. I shall try now to expound the arguments in such a way as to make these reasons evident.

Hume states his sub-arguments together in a single passage. They seem at first to form, however, at least three distinct lines of reasoning, and I shall, therefore, begin by treating them separately.

He does not state his conclusion until he has presented all three, and is prepared to use the conclusion for further reasoning. When he does state it, it is his minor premise as quoted above: "morals, therefore, have an influence on the actions and affections."¹⁰⁹

He words his first argument (omitting the conclusion) as follows:

¹⁰⁹_T 457.

If morality had naturally no influence on human passions and actions, 'twere in vain to take such pains to inculcate it; and nothing wou'd be more fruitless than that multitude of rules and precepts, with which all moralists abound.¹¹⁰

It may be that this argument should itself really be treated as two: one referring to the presuppositions of parents and the like concerning the value of trying to "inculcate it [morality],"¹¹¹ and the other referring to the presuppositions of moralists concerning their "rules and precepts."¹¹² If the presuppositions are in every case about moral judgments, however, it will be safe enough, for the purposes of the present discussion, to treat the argument as essentially a single one.

Taking it as a single argument, one way to interpret it is as follows: If every moral judgment whatsoever did not have at least some influence on the passions and/or actions, then it would be completely useless for the purposes of influencing people ("nothing wou'd be more fruitless")¹¹³ ever to try to get them to make or accept any moral judgments. Parents and moralists do wish to influence people, and they do not think it entirely useless to do this by getting people to make or accept moral judgments (this is apparently obvious enough not to need stating). Parents and moralists are correct in this estimation (also obvious). Therefore, every moral judgment must have some influence on the passions and actions.

¹¹⁰T 457. ¹¹¹T 457. ¹¹²T 457. ¹¹³T 457.

Interpreted this way, the argument is certainly not a very good one. Because some moral judgments have no influence, it would certainly not follow that no moral judgments have any influence, or even that no moral judgments have an influence sufficient to determine conduct. Nor is there any reason to think that parents and moralists would suppose this. The argument could be put in terms of desires and aversions instead of the apparent or quasi-causal notion of having an influence, and equivalent objections would apply.

Another way to interpret the argument is as follows: If moral judgments never had any influence of their own by themselves, that is without external sanctions ("naturally"),¹¹⁴ it would be completely useless to try to influence the passions and actions of people by trying to get them to make or accept any moral judgments. One could exert no influence by getting them to make or accept moral judgments, unless one could back up the moral judgments by other considerations (external sanctions), in which case one might better just cite or impose directly the other considerations or sanctions in the first place. Parents and moralists know this, yet they believe they can influence people simply by getting them to make or accept moral judgments. Parents and moralists are correct in this, and therefore it must be false that moral judgments never have any influence of their own.

¹¹⁴T 457.

Interpreted in this way (or as the equivalent in terms of desires and aversions) the argument, whatever its weaknesses is surely very much better. The conclusion, however, is not that all moral judgments have some influence by themselves, but that at least some do.

There do not seem to be any further interpretations of this first sub-argument which are at all likely. We can conclude, then, that Hume offers it to prove that at least some moral judgments have a direct influence "alone"¹¹⁵ (at least some moral judgments are desires or aversions), not that all moral judgments influence. Or rather, we can conclude this in the absence of good reasons for ascribing to him the poorer argument suggested by the first interpretation.

Hume's second sub-argument for his minor premise is roughly as follows: People who reflect on the matter, he says, commonly consider that moral judgments are practical rather than speculative, and this shows that they take morals to influence the passions and conduct in a way in which speculative judgments do not. His conclusion, though again he does not state it until he has stated all three of what I am calling his sub-arguments, is that morals do influence the passions and actions. He states the argument in this way:

Philosophy is commonly divided into speculative and practical; and as morality is always comprehended under the latter division, 'tis supposed

¹¹⁵T 457.

to influence our passions and actions, and to go beyond the calm and indolent judgments of the understanding....morals, therefore, have an influence on the actions and affections.¹¹⁶

Just what this second argument ad judicium really amounts to is not as clear as could be wished. For one thing, Hume's reference in it to the understanding seem not wholly in place, if it is really to constitute any sort of sub-argument for his minor premise.

That philosophy is, or was, commonly divided into speculative and practical branches, and that where such a division is made, substantive moral philosophy has always been classed as practical, is all quite reasonable to claim (and true). But if Hume means the same by "the understanding"¹¹⁷ as he does throughout his argument from practical influence as a whole by "reason,"¹¹⁸ then it is plainly not open to him to draw from this that the influence of moral judgments is, in any explicit manner, "supposed to ... go beyond"¹¹⁹ all "judgments of the understanding."¹²⁰ Similarly, if he is using "calm and indolent"¹²¹ to describe all "judgments of the understanding,"¹²² rather than to delimit a special class of them, then while on his own view this description is correct, it does not strictly belong in this sub-argument. For this sub-argument is, after all, simply one of a group of sub-arguments, reasons and considerations (some of which, as we have seen, have to do with reason alone), which he himself sees are required

¹¹⁶T 457. ¹¹⁷T 457. ¹¹⁸T 457. ¹¹⁹T 457.

¹²⁰T 457. ¹²¹T 457. ¹²²T 457.

to prove that moral judgments really do have just this influence which goes beyond that of reason or the understanding. And these sub-arguments, reasons and considerations are directed, as he makes plain, to numerous people who suppose quite an opposite view. In Book II he observed:

Nothing is more usual in philosophy and even in common life than to talk of the combat of passion and reason, and to give the preference to reason, and assert that men are only so far virtuous as they conform themselves to its dictates.¹²³

Keeping in mind that Hume's reference to "the understanding"¹²⁴ needs qualifying, exactly how further are we to construe his argument?

Those who would interpret it as intended to prove that all moral judgments influence, will presumably wish to construe it as an a priori argument appealing to something like the ordinary notion of morals and also the ordinary notion of what it is for a judgment to be practical. The argument would then be essentially of the following sort: By common consent concerning the definitions or natures of the terms involved, no judgment is a "moral"¹²⁵ one, if it is not also "practical."¹²⁶ And no judgment is "practical,"¹²⁷ if it does not influence the passions and actions. Therefore, necessarily, no judgment is a "moral"¹²⁸ judgment if it does not influence the passions and actions.

Interpreted in this way, this argument too, is not very convincing, though it is not as blatantly defective as

¹²³T 413. ¹²⁴T 457. ¹²⁵T 457. ¹²⁶T 457.

¹²⁷T 457. ¹²⁸T 457.

the first argument would have been on the first interpretation of it. The chief objection to this argument interpreted this way is that the second premise seems quite false. It is not part of the one commonly accepted notion or definition of what it is for a judgment to be "practical" that it must have influence on the passions and actions. Indeed, probably to most people who apply the terms "practical"¹²⁹ and "speculative"¹³⁰ (and also "theoretical")¹³¹ to judgments, statements and propositions, being "practical"¹³² rather than "speculative"¹³³ or theoretical means no more than informing about what to do rather than what to believe. In this sense statements in instruction manuals (e.g., 'To install widgeit, push firmly with both hands') are "practical,"¹³⁴ and would generally be so regarded. One might, of course, hold that it is impossible to judge what to do without supposing that under appropriate circumstances one would feel moved to do it. Even the common acceptance of some such view (if it were commonly accepted) would not, however, vindicate the second premise. According to the second premise, as this must be construed to lead to the conclusion being attributed to Hume, the view commonly accepted is this: It is impossible to judge what to do (to make any "practical"¹³⁵ judgment) without actually feeling moved then and there toward doing it, or at least feeling a "passion"¹³⁶ toward someone else's doing it. And again.

129_T 457. 130_T 457. 131_T 457. 132_T 457.
133_T 457. 134_T 457. 135_T 457. 136_T 413.

the premise that this is the one commonly accepted view, involved in the very notion of what it is for a judgment to be "practical" is plainly false. Not everyone would refuse to call a judgment "practical"¹³⁷ solely because it failed then and there actually to arouse any inclination or passion.

Another interpretation of Hume's second sub-argument would treat it as not essentially separate from his first one; it would be pursuing the same general empirical line of thought, merely supplementing it in one significant respect. On this interpretation the argument would go roughly as follows: On the commonly accepted notion of morals, moral judgments are "practical"¹³⁸ rather than "speculative."¹³⁹ This being so, no one would be likely, as a deliberate and regular practice, to express or "inculcate"¹⁴⁰ moral judgments, unless he believed that getting people to make or accept them would sometimes at least have "practical"¹⁴¹ consequences. That is, he would have to be convinced that moral judgments or perceptions could in themselves, "alone"¹⁴² or "naturally,"¹⁴³ influence the passions and actions of people and not merely influence their beliefs, (as do the purely speculative judgments of the understanding). For, as noted above, to say that a judgment is "practical"¹⁴⁴ entails that it is

¹³⁷T 457. ¹³⁸T 457. ¹³⁹T 457. ¹⁴⁰T 457.

¹⁴¹T 457. ¹⁴²T 457. ¹⁴³T 457. ¹⁴⁴T 457.

about what to do (or be) rather than simply what to believe. All this clarifies (from a philosophical point of view) what was said in the "first" sub-argument. That is, the efforts of parents and the like "to inculcate it [morality]"¹⁴⁵ as well as the "rules and precepts, with which all moralists abound"¹⁴⁶ would not serve the purpose for which they are intended, "If morality had naturally no influence on human passions and actions...."¹⁴⁷

On this second interpretation Hume is again appealing to common belief; and again, in the final analysis it is the belief of parents, moralists and all those who regularly seek to get their moral judgments accepted by others, that moral judgments do in fact influence alone. And again, whatever the weakness of this type of argument, it is considerably more convincing than the one suggested by the first interpretation. There being no plausible third interpretation, nor external reason to ascribe to Hume the weaker argument, we can, therefore, fairly conclude that he is still not arguing that all moral judgments influence the passions and actions, but that at least some do.

On the interpretation suggested of the first two arguments (or rather the first two considerations, as they should now be called), the third can be seen to be a natural sequence.

And this is confirm'd by common experience, which informs us, that men are often govern'd by their

¹⁴⁵T 457.

¹⁴⁶T 457.

¹⁴⁷T 457.

duties, and are deter'd from some actions by the opinion of injustice, and impell'd to others by that of obligation.
...morals, therefore, have an influence on the actions and affections.¹⁴⁸

Here, there is no need to interpret. The appeal is explicitly to an alleged empirical matter of fact. It should be pointed out, however, that this appeal would be wholly irrelevant, if Hume's second sub-argument, as I began by calling it, were a priori. If a judgment would not be a moral judgment unless it had some influence on the passions and actions, it should be quite unnecessary to claim that "men are often govern'd by their duties."¹⁴⁹

Related to this, there is another and still more fundamental objection to ascribing to Hume the a priori version of his second sub-argument, which should now be mentioned.

If, as according to the a priori argument, a judgment would not be called "moral"¹⁵⁰ unless it had an influence, then, to be sure, it could be concluded that of necessity all moral judgments have an influence. But since the necessity of their having an influence would then follow simply from the way in which they would be selected from judgments in general to be called moral ones, rather than from any intrinsic properties of them, this could hardly differentiate them from judgments of reason, or the understanding. Judgments correctly selected as "moral" on this basis might

¹⁴⁸T 457. ¹⁴⁹T 457. ¹⁵⁰T 457

all simply turn out in the end to fall into a subclass of judgments of reason. They would be among those which happened to influence. This is to say, the a priori argument could not provide Hume with the minor premise he needs for his argument from practical influence. It would do nothing to show that "...morals...cannot be deriv'd from reason,"¹⁵¹ or that "The rules of morality...are not conclusions of our reason,"¹⁵² or that, "...reason...can never be the source of moral good and evil...."¹⁵³ What he requires is the premise that moral judgments influence "alone,"¹⁵⁴ of themselves or 'naturally.' That is, he needs a premise about the intrinsic nature of moral judgments, based on an inspection of what they are like in given instances. And this appears to be what he intends his three empirical sub-arguments or considerations to provide. But then, to repeat, his conclusion from them can only be that it is false that "morality"¹⁵⁵ has "naturally no influence on human passions and actions."¹⁵⁶ And this is equivalent to concluding that at least some moral judgments necessarily influence the passions and actions, not that all do so.

The Argument as a Whole

We have now completed our examination of Hume's two stated premises in his argument from practical influence, and can return to consider the argument as a whole.

¹⁵⁰T 457. ¹⁵¹T 457. ¹⁵²T 457. ¹⁵³T 457.

¹⁵⁵T 457. ¹⁵⁶T 457.

Since Hume's minor (or subject term) premise has now been shown to be that at least some of our perceptions of moral good and evil in our judgments of the morality of actions and characters (or, in brief, some of our moral judgments) are perceptions which alone and of necessity influence actions and affections (are desires or aversions), but not that all are such necessarily influential perceptions, his immediate conclusion can only be that at least some of these perceptions of moral good and evil (moral judgments), are not perceptions (or judgments) of reason, not that none are. Thus, Hume's immediate conclusion cannot be an answer to question J. a-a or J. s-a (or J. a-a' or J. s-a'), but only to questions J. a-s and J. a-s'.

But in first discussing the argument as a whole I noted that in at least five of Hume's six statements of his conclusion he uses phrases (namely the phrases "deriv'd from,"¹⁵⁷ "conclusions of,"¹⁵⁸ "source of,"¹⁵⁹ which he uses twice, and "offspring of,"¹⁶⁰ which ostensibly express a fourth term. And I suggested that these phrases really do serve to express a fourth term, namely our perceptions of the kind by which we form our ideas of moral good and evil in the first place, so that Hume's stated conclusion is not an answer to any of the questions of the J. form at all, that is to any question directly about moral judgments as such, but it is rather an answer to question F. a-a, about these originating perceptions.

¹⁵⁷T 457. ¹⁵⁸T 457. ¹⁵⁹T 458. ¹⁶⁰T 458.

If this is correct, as I believe it is, we must then consider that Hume does not state what immediately follows from his premises, but leaves us to see that this justifies the conclusion he does state. But clearly enough, on this interpretation, his immediate conclusion does not alone entail the conclusion he states, so that, as I also suggested earlier, we must consider his argument as an enthymeme, having an additional, unstated premise which Hume takes to be obviously true, or at any rate not at issue between himself and the rationalists.

What, then, on this interpretation, is Hume's third premise which he is leaving unstated? It must be this: If our ideas of moral good and evil were to originate from perceptions of reason, then all our perceptions of moral good and evil when we judge the morality of actions and characters would themselves have to be perceptions of reason. That is, for example, if my idea of moral goodness is formed from a rational perception of something like truth, congruity, or fittingness, then every perception of the moral goodness of an action or character trait must itself be a rational perception of such a characteristic. The grounds for this, is that if the reason had to furnish me with the idea to start with, it cannot be the sort of characteristic

instances of which I can detect without using reason. Of course, I may in a sense have to employ other faculties too; I may have to use my eyes or ears to know that a certain action has taken place. But if I know that it has taken place, then my perception of moral goodness which I take to be a perception of its moral goodness is essentially an act or perception of reason.

Whether Hume is justified in assuming this premise can be disputed, but I believe that he does assume it, even if it is not clearly in his mind as he proposes his arguments. And in any case, this extra premise is not one he is likely to regard as a possible issue between himself and the rationalists.

It need only be added that in his sixth statement of his argument Hume is mentioning our originating perceptions of moral good and evil in his premises.

The Epistemological Argument

Hume presents this argument against the rationalist alternative to his question in the form of a challenge: With the idea of what relation or relation apprehended solely by reason could one identify the notion of the specific vice or immorality involved in parricide? Consider the action of a child killing its parent. Suppose a sapling were found to have grown over and killed the tree which produced its seed. The discovery of these actions "is not

in both cases attended with the notion of immorality."¹⁶¹
It is attended with this notion (or perception) only in the case of the child.¹⁶² Yet there would seem no relation one can cite, the idea of which is derived from reason, and which would characterize the act of the child but not that of the sapling. Hume considers three possibilities: First, the child has a will which causes its action. But the idea of the will does not originate with reason. Second, there is the idea of causal connection. This originates with reason, but as a mere relation it is exemplified alike in both cases: Both parents cause their offspring, both offspring cause the death of their parents. Finally, there is the idea of reason itself; this is surely derived from reason; and only the child is a rational agent. But the only possible difference in this case between a rational being as such and a sapling is that the rational agent could know beforehand that his action would be criminal or immoral. But then the concept, notion or idea of the crime must be derived from something other than the idea of the rationality of the agent.

For before reason can perceive this turpitude, the turpitude must exist; and consequently is independent of the decisions of our reason, and is their object more properly than their effect.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹T 467.

¹⁶²We would not ordinarily say that the sapling had committed parricide at all, but if we did say this, we would not consider parricide in this case to be vicious. Hume does not make this clear.

¹⁶³T 467.

In this argument Hume is not concerned to deny that vice, crime or immorality may in actual instances be the "object"¹⁶⁴ which "reason can perceive";¹⁶⁵ he may hold that it is not, but this would be a separate point. As it turns out, what he is arguing here is roughly that the idea of a specific vice cannot be defined in terms of ideas furnished by reason alone.¹⁶⁶

This, I think, confirms that Hume is concerned in section I with the origin of moral ideas, even if not exclusively concerned with this. Further, evidence of this concern is provided by another version of the above argument which he uses later to prove his position with respect to the artificial virtues. Up to this point I have avoided citing arguments from later parts of Book III to arrive at interpretations of earlier ones, since I wish to be able to use these interpretations when I come to the later parts. I shall not, however, be discussing Hume's view about justice as such, so it cannot vitiate what I say later to draw upon this view here.

In his account of justice, Hume concerns himself with what he actually calls "The idea of justice."¹⁶⁷ And here his concern is not simply with false accounts, but with

¹⁶⁴T 467. ¹⁶⁵T 467.

¹⁶⁶D. D. Raphael, The Moral Sense (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 110-11. Cf. Broad, 5-types. For this reason, I think the discussions of this argument by Broad and Raphael, while interesting in themselves, are irrelevant to Hume's purposes.

¹⁶⁷T 488.

what he takes to be the true origin of the idea. He has been pointing out that in a state of nature (the Hobbesian, Lockean fiction), men would lack sufficient breadth of affection and interest to guarantee the stability of private property and such other conditions as he thinks are required to reduce the scarcity of goods. Furthermore, the remedy for this insufficiency simply does not exist in the state of nature, "in uncultivated nature,"¹⁶⁸ itself. The idea of justice cannot be invoked, for men do not as yet have the idea of justice in the natural state.

The idea of justice can never serve this purpose, or be taken for a natural principle, capable of inspiring men with an equitable conduct towards each other. That virtue, as it is now understood, would never have been dream'd of among rude and savage men. For the notion of injury or injustice implies an immorality or vice committed against some other person.¹⁶⁹

Nor is this simply because savages are irrational:

The sense of justice is not founded on reason, or on the discovery of certain connexions and relations of ideas which are eternal, and immutable, and universally obligatory.¹⁷⁰

It is rather because, briefly, instances of justice depend on men actually being moved to develop certain conventions, to which, however arbitrary or accidental they are moved to continue conforming; and as this happens, they are no longer, by definition, in the state of nature. The idea of justice, however, simply does not obtain independently of conventions and the motives for them; as an idea, it is not

¹⁶⁸T 488. ¹⁶⁹T 488. ¹⁷⁰T 496.

an independent object of men's reason. Hume summarizes his argument against the rationalist alternative in this way:

'Twas...a concern for our own, and the public interest, which made us establish the laws of justice;

...it is not any relation of ideas, which gives us this concern....

The sense of justice, therefore, is not founded on our ideas, but on our impressions.¹⁷¹

Here Hume is arguing in much the same fashion as in his argument from practical influence. I do not say it is the same argument, but in broad outline it is very similar. Yet it is doubtful, I think, that he is arguing that every judgment of justice is based on a specific kind of impression. He may, of course, hold that it is, but again this would be a separate point. Instead what he seems to be concluding, and what his premises support by a causal argument, though they do not by themselves logically entail, is that our notion of justice does not come to us originally simply by associating ideas, or apprehending ideas by reason; it is rather the result of a specific kind of impression in special sorts of circumstances. The existence of both justice and injustice themselves are logically dependent on the fact that men often in these circumstances do have this kind of impression.

These two versions of the epistemological argument which Hume offers concerning the ideas of vice (with respect to parricide) and justice, confirm the interpretation

¹⁷¹T 496.

I offered for Hume's argument from practical influence. That is, Hume is rejecting the rationalist answer to question J. a-s' (and hence also to J. a-s) as his intermediate (and unstated) conclusion in that argument, and his final (and stated) conclusion is to deny the rationalist answer to question F. a-a'. If Hume fails to make this completely clear, it should be recalled that on the view he is attempting to establish, the type of perceptions by which we form our ideas of moral good and evil very likely are in fact perceptions of moral good and evil in judgments of the morality of actions and character traits identical with some moral judgments.

The Argument from the Inconceivability of
Deriving an 'Ought' from an 'Is'

Hume presents this argument or challenge in a passage often cited in contemporary discussions.¹⁷²

In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remark'd that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surpriz'd to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, is, and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not. This change is impreceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this ought, or ought not, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it shou'd be observ'd and explain'd; and at the same time that a reason should be give, for what seems altogether

¹⁷²D. D. Raphael, The Moral Sense (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 65. Arthur N. Prior, Logic and The Basis of Ethics (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 32-33.

inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it.¹⁷³

Now this argument (if argument it is) does not, I think completely or formally exclude the possibility that one may be able to define moral predicate expressions such as "ought"¹⁷⁴ and "ought not"¹⁷⁵ in terms of non-moral ones. This would, after all, be a case of observing and explaining the change that Hume finds in the presentation of "every system of morality."¹⁷⁶ It is clear enough however, that Hume really does not think that any such explanation, even as a definition, can be adequate. What is even clearer is his view that it is "inconceivable,"¹⁷⁷ that a moral judgment can be deduced from premises none of which themselves are or express moral judgments.

Two propositions can accordingly be added to the non-rationalist answers to questions J. a-s' (and J. a-s) and F. a-a' (and F. a-a) to form the complete list of propositions to which Hume's arguments against his opponents commit him with respect to his own theory:

(1) At least some perceptions of moral good and evil made in the course of moral judgments are identical with felt desires and aversions (the answer to J. a-s' and by implication to J. a-s).

¹⁷³T 469. ¹⁷⁴T 469. ¹⁷⁵T 469. ¹⁷⁶T 469.

¹⁷⁷T 469.

(2) In all likelihood it is not possible to define moral ideas in terms of non-moral ones.

(3) No moral judgment can be deduced from premises none of which are or express moral judgments.

CHAPTER III

MORAL JUDGMENTS WHICH ARE NOT JUDGMENTS OF REASON

Introduction

We have now determined the chief propositions about moral judgments to which Hume commits himself in rejecting the rationalist answer to his initial question. These propositions, however, are too general and negative in character to carry us very far in explicating anything we can call Hume's theory of moral judgments. Indeed, determining them was undertaken chiefly to show this and so to remove some possible preconceptions about this theory. To see what it amounts to in more detail will accordingly be the aim of this and the next chapter.

Provisional Account of Non-Rational Moral Judgments

In this chapter I shall be concerned only with what Hume holds in more detail about the kind of moral judgments which he has argued are not judgments of reason. That is, I shall be concerned only with those of our judgments of the morality of actions and character traits in which our perceptions of moral good and evil are not perceptions of

reason, or mere ideas, but rather impressions, and, more specifically desires and aversions. It will be convenient to refer to these judgments throughout the discussion simply as non-rational moral judgments.

Hume presents his first account of these non-rational moral judgments in Book II, doing so in such a way as to indicate, I believe, that he is positing them as the source either of moral differences or of our moral ideas or of both these things at once.

The most probable hypothesis, which has been advanc'd to explain the distinction betwixt vice and virtue, and the origin of moral rights and obligations, is that from a primary constitution of nature certain characters and passions, by the very view and contemplation, produce a pain, and others in a like manner excite a pleasure.¹

Again, I wish to suggest that by "the distinction betwixt vice and virtue"² Hume does not mean moral judgments as such, but rather the kind of perception (or perceptions) by (or in) which we form our ideas of the natures of moral vice and virtue. What he is saying here is, then, first of all that these perceptions are the impressions of pleasure and pain which we have when we make or experience what I have been calling 'non-rational moral judgments' with respect to character traits and passions. Second, he is also saying that we have the actual moral obligations we do as a result of having these impressions (and hence that our idea of moral obligation is derivative from our idea of moral virtue and/or our idea of moral vice).³ And finally, in the

¹T 296. ²T 296. ³See page 2, above.

latter part of the passage, beginning with the words "from a primary constitution of nature"⁴ on, he is describing what it is to make or experience non-rational moral judgments.

It is, then, this latter part of the above passage I wish to consider in the present chapter. The view that Hume is here suggesting with respect to non-rational moral judgments is this: When we make these moral judgments we do not need to have any moral ideas to start with. We do not need, as part of our mental equipment, any ideas of moral vice and virtue, good and evil, right and wrong, or moral obligation. For our perceptions of moral good and evil in such cases (Hume does not himself use the word 'judgment' in this context) does not consist in our deliberately or self-consciously applying moral ideas to the action or character which is our subject. A fortiori it does not consist in our noting relations between ideas. Rather (and here we get to the part of his view he states more explicitly), we simply and involuntarily experience the kind of impressions of which our ideas of moral good and evil are copies, as a natural effect of contemplating the action or character we would call our subject. That our impressions are of pains and pleasures, and that we feel these pains and pleasures as observers rather than as agents or patients does not matter; they are the kind of impressions of which our ideas of virtue and vice are essentially copies and

⁴T 296.

hence impressions of what is essential to virtue and vice.⁵

The uneasiness and satisfaction are not only inseparable from vice and virtue, but constitute their very nature and essence.⁶

From all this Hume thinks we may conclude that our direct, intuitive, which is to say our non-rational moral judgments (which may be the only kind we make) are cases of quite involuntarily having special sorts of feelings caused by appearances of actions or characters.

To approve of a character is to feel an original delight upon its appearance. To disapprove of it is to be sensible of an uneasiness.⁷

The Main Account in Book III of Non-Rational Moral Judgments

This account in Book II is not only provisional (Hume advances it here only hypothetically, for the sake of an argument about pride and humility) it is very sketchy.

⁵As we have seen in connection with the argument from the inconceivability of deriving an 'ought' from an 'is' Hume does not think that moral ideas can be defined or analyzed wholly in terms of non-moral ones.

⁶T 296. Hume's incidental substitution of "satisfaction" here for "pleasure" has inelegant theoretical consequences. We have seen in the previous chapter that he is committed to the view that some perceptions of moral good and evil are identical with desires and aversions. That is, the essence of vice and virtue, or duty or obligation are in part pains and pleasures which in some cases at least are identical with desires and aversions. Now it is plausible to hold that desires and aversions can be classed as quite special sorts of pleasures and pains (see above, p. 58); but it cannot be argued that a desire or aversion can be classed as a special sort of satisfaction.

⁷T 296.

It carries us little beyond the propositions at which we arrived in the previous chapter. It claims, in brief, that when we make a non-rational moral judgment, an appearance causes a pleasure or pain. But, we may ask, what sort of pleasure or pain does it cause? Also, need we be aware of the causal connection between the appearance and the pleasure or pain? If we need not be aware of it, how else then do we properly identify the appearance as that of the subject of our judgment? If we do need to be aware of it, then is not the "essence" of virtue and vice not, as Hume states, simply a certain pleasure or pain, but the causal activity of producing this pleasure or pain. Does he mean to imply that a proper analysis of a non-rational moral judgment which we could express as 'x is morally virtuous' would be 'x is causing me here and now to feel a certain pleasure,' or 'x is causing an appearance which is causing me here and now to feel a certain pleasure?'⁸

These questions can best be answered by turning to the more ample passage on non-rational moral judgments which Hume offers toward the end of the first section of Book III. Hume offers this passage after all his arguments against rationalism which I discussed in the preceding chapter, except the argument from the inconceivability of deriving an 'ought' from an 'is.' The key part of this passage begins,

⁸T 300 c.f.

When you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it.⁹

Taken by itself this would suggest that Hume is holding to the kind of analysis I just mentioned, namely that the non-rational moral judgment 'x is vicious' is either equivalent to, or means, 'x is causing an appearance which is causing me here and now to feel a pain.' He is holding further that the pain is of the sort provoked by things we blame. Though he uses only the language of cause and effect, not that of reference, he must be thinking of this pain (the sentiment of blame) as felt toward the action or character. Words of blame, after all, are always directed toward something or someone. Thus the passage so far is strongly reminiscent of Hobbes' passage,

But whatsoever is the object of any man's 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.¹⁰

Indeed it must appear curious how Hume can consider that he is offering a new, or less sceptical analysis than this one of Hobbes. Nevertheless, he goes on at once to conclude that his view is "...a discovery in morals like that other in physics":¹¹

⁹T 469.

¹⁰Thomas Hobbes, Hobbes's Leviathan (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), chap. vi, p. 41.

¹¹T 469.

Vice and virtue, therefore, may be compar'd to sounds, colours, heat and cold, which, according to modern philosophy, are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind: And this discovery in morals, like that other in physics, is to be regarded as a considerable advancement of the speculative sciences; tho', like that too, it has little or no influence on practice.¹²

What Hume is saying here merits, I believe, quite careful scrutiny (far more than students of Hume usually give to it). Perhaps he does not suppose that he has advanced beyond Hobbes; but if we consider what he holds concerning the "discovery" in "physics,"¹³ we do arrive at a view which goes beyond what is explicit in Hobbes, and one which is in any case quite extraordinary.

Hume nowhere suggests that when one pronounces a table or chair brown, one intends or has in mind that from the constitution of his nature he has a feeling or sensation of brown-ness from looking at it. Contrary to first appearances, then, he cannot here be answering the question we would naturally have taken him to be answering, namely as to what people ordinarily intend by, or, as we say, have in mind when they express moral judgments. And that this is not his purpose absolves him from the kind of charges to which, on the face of it at least, Hobbes is liable. Hume cannot be said to be advancing an egoistic analysis of moral judgments which reveals him as cynical or sceptical about human intentions, (our intentions in making moral judgments). Hume is not being a sceptic about conscious human intentions,

¹²T 469. ¹³T 469.

nor about unconscious ones either. No amount of probing or depth psychology is, after all, relevant for showing that when one pronounces a table brown that one means only that one is currently having a sensation of brown from looking at it, or even that one means this at all.

But what would show this? Behavior studies perhaps? If Hume is not concerned here with what people intend when they express moral judgments, we might suppose that he is concerned only with the expressions themselves, that is, with the kind of natural meaning moral assertions might have for an observer who is interested only in their causes and effects. If this were his concern, however, it is unlikely he would state his account using the second person, saying, "all you mean is..."¹⁴ We would expect him rather to say something like, 'pronouncements of the form "x is vicious" are caused by feelings of blame toward whatever is denoted by "x"' (comparable to saying that the waggings of dogs' tails are caused by feelings of doggish glee). And however he would have chosen to word such an account of moral judgments it is unlikely that he would have considered it a speculative or theoretical advance in morals comparable to "that other in physics."¹⁵ For he seems to take the advance in "physics"¹⁶ or "modern philosophy"¹⁷ to be established not simply as a matter of fact, from repeated observation, but of necessity, from the very relations of the ideas

¹⁴T 469. ¹⁵T 469. ¹⁶T 469. ¹⁷T 469.

involved. No psychological view about causally related behavior or mental states, as Hume is surely aware, could be established in this way.

The result of this is that the question Hume is answering in this key passage (which I have quoted in two parts) must be, if we take seriously the analogy he draws to sense qualities, the question as to what we would intend or have in mind, were we not subject to a kind of stubborn illusion in our perceptions. In our visual perceptions we judge objects to be colored, but it has been established, says Hume, that colors are really perceptions in us. Now Hume does not deny that colors appear to be in objects; that is why we rejected the possibility that he was considering what we ordinarily intend. In Book I he observed concerning "sounds, colours, heat and cold":¹⁸

So strong is the prejudice for the distinct continu'd existence of the former qualities, that when the contrary opinion is advanc'd by modern philosophers, people imagine they can almost refute it from their feeling and experience, and that their very senses contradict this philosophy.¹⁹

The view implied, then, is that in our non-rational moral judgments we experience certain of our own pleasures and pains (those which give us our ideas of virtue and vice) not as effects of the character or conduct we are judging, but as immediately experienced qualities of them. Our own pleasure directly qualifies (or seems to) the conduct or character we call virtuous. Indeed, in our judgments this pleasure is its virtuousness.

¹⁸

T 469.

¹⁹

T 192.

This interpretation gains plausibility, I think, when we find that in the next section Hume goes on to emphasize that there are very many different kinds of pleasures.

A good composition of music and a bottle of good wine equally produce pleasure; and what is more, their goodness is determin'd merely by the pleasure. But shall we say upon that account, that the wine is harmonious, or the music of a good flavour?²⁰

Aside from allowing Hume to differentiate moral pleasures from non-moral ones, as being uniquely disinterested (about which I shall wish to say more in the next chapter), this passage suggests that our impressions of a pleasure or a pain is often an inseparable part of our perception of the object producing it. That is, it suggests that one cannot have an impression of pleasure or pain pure and simple; an impression of pleasure, for example, is always a pleasurable impression of some other quality or object.

Furthermore, Hume has already observed in his inquiry into the relation between causes and effects that,

The mind has a great propensity to spread itself on external objects, and to conjoin with them any internal impressions, which they occasion, and which always make their appearance at the same time that these objects discover themselves to the senses. Thus as certain sounds and smells are always found to attend certain visible objects, we naturally imagine a conjunction, even in place, betwixt the objects and qualities, tho' the qualities be of such a nature as to admit of no such conjunction, and really exist no where.

...The same propensity is the reason, why we suppose necessity and power to lie in the objects we consider, not in our mind, that considers them; notwithstanding it is not possible for us to form the most distant idea of that quality, when it is not taken for the determination of the mind, to pass from the idea of an object to that of its usual attendant.²¹

²⁰T 472. ²¹T 167.

And here, too, he observes that while this is "the only reasonable account we can give,"²² nevertheless, "the contrary notion is so rivited in the mind from the principles above-mentioned."²³

Later in Book I, in his criticism of ancient philosophy, he makes a similar observation:

There is a very remarkable inclination in human nature, to bestow on external objects the same emotions, which it observes in itself; and to find every where those ideas, which are most present to it.²⁴

Here, however, he attributes this inclination only to "children, poets, and the antient philosophers,"²⁵ and considers that it "is suppress'd by a little reflection..."²⁶

Supporting this interpretation still further, Hume observes in Book II that,

Impressions and passions are susceptible of an entire union; and like colours, may be blended so perfectly together, that each of them may lose itself, and contribute only to vary that uniform impression, which arises from the whole. Some of the most curious phaenomena of the human mind are deriv'd from this property of the passions.²⁷

He also observes in Book II, as I noted in the preceding chapter,

It may safely be establish'd for a general maxim, that no object is presented to the senses, nor image form'd in the fancy, but what is accompany'd with some emotion or movement of spirits proportion'd to

²²T 167. ²³T 167. ²⁴T 224. ²⁵T 224.

²⁶T 224. A point to which I shall wish to return later.

²⁷T 366.

it; and however custom may make us insensible of this sensation, and cause us to confound it with the object or idea, 'twill be easy, by careful and exact experiments, to separate and distinguish them.²⁸

And again late in Book III (after the key passage being interpreted here), he observes,

Many of our impressions are incapable of place or local position; and yet those very impressions we suppose to have a local conjunction with the impressions of sight and touch, merely because they are conjoin'd by causation, and are already united in the imagination.²⁹

What We Would Have in Mind and What We
Actually do Have in Mind

- What Hume has presented, then, in the key passage under discussion is a theory of what he thinks we would have in mind when we make moral judgments (non-rational ones at any rate), were we not subject to a kind of illusion. Now, if we wish, to call this a theory of moral judgments, we may of course do so, but it is not a theory in the usual sense of offering an account of what we actually intend to say when we express moral judgments. To take it as such is to commit what William James called "the psychologist's fallacy,"³⁰ namely the fallacy of assuming that the mental state studied is conscious of itself as the psychologist is conscious of it.³¹ Whether Hume commits this fallacy in his

²⁸T 373. ²⁹T 504n.

³⁰William James, The Principles of Psychology (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1923), I, p. 196.

³¹Ibid., p. 196-99.

own thinking is perhaps unnecessary to decide. The theory he states and which concerns what he thinks we would have in mind entails the following as a theory concerning what he thinks we really do have in mind: When you pronounce any action or character vicious, you mean nothing but that in your contemplation of it, it is directly qualified by feelings of blame. Though this is similar to, and entailed by the account Hume explicitly states, it is sufficiently different from that stated account to have caused, I believe, much of the confusion over just what sort of complete theory he is really advancing.

Strictly speaking, however, it may be urged, that on Hume's view, even the account I have just proposed is not wholly correct (regarded as an account of what we really have in mind), and furthermore that, on its own principles, Hume's theory cannot yield such an account which does not in some way commit the psychologist's fallacy. For the point of his comparison with secondary qualities is that just so far as we are making a moral judgment and not theorizing about it, we are not aware that our feelings of blame are feelings. We are aware of them simply as the viciousness of the action or character we are judging. There is a sense, then, in which Hume's theory cannot present, or allow that it is possible to present, in wholly non-moral terms the meaning of any moral expression. One cannot define wholly in non-moral terms the meaning of moral good and evil, or give for the expression of any moral judgment

a synonymous expression in wholly non-moral terms.³² The most that one can do, according to the theory, is offer an account of what goes on when we make moral judgments.

Similar Recent Theories

While it is not my plan to expound Hume's theory by comparing it with the theories of other philosophers, I would like to digress momentarily to indicate some recent theories which are similar to as much of his as we have now arrived at.

On the interpretation I have been proposing, (up to this point at least) we can fairly say that Hume holds to a theory of alleged moral cognition very much like that which Santayana holds for alleged aesthetic cognition. Santayana proposes that, "Beauty is pleasure regarded as the quality of a thing."³³ Moral goodness or virtue, Hume appears to be saying, is a particular sort of pleasure regarded as the quality of actions and characters (derivatively of actions, fundamentally of characters). "The distinguishing impressions, by which moral good or evil is known, are nothing but particular pains or pleasures...."³⁴

It is interesting that Sir David Ross, too, while holding that our ordinary moral judgments are often veridical

³²This confirms both suggestions made in Chapter II in discussing Hume's argument from the inconceivability of deriving an 'ought' from an 'is.'

³³George Santayana, The Sense of Beauty (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), p. 39.

³⁴T 47L.

judgments of objective fact, holds to roughly this with respect to aesthetic judgments. For in The Right and The Good Ross says first,

"...if we ask ourselves what is the common attribute belonging to all beautiful objects, we can, I believe find none other than the power of producing the kind of enjoyment known as aesthetic."³⁵

And then he adds in a footnote,

"I think, however, that it must be admitted (and this, for what it is worth, an objection to the view suggested) that we do not mean by 'beautiful' an attribute having even this sort of reference to a mind, but something entirely resident in the object, apart from relation to a mind. What I am suggesting is that we are deceived in thinking that beautiful things have any common attribute over and above the power of producing aesthetic enjoyment."³⁶

Hume, of course, holds to this kind of view with respect to aesthetic judgments,³⁷ but the main point of what I have been saying is that he goes beyond Ross to hold that it is true of moral judgments too.

With respect to just this much of his theory, Hume's most recent followers (whether they are aware of it or not) have been Edward Westermarck, John Mackie, and Richard Robinson.³⁸ Westermarck claims,

³⁵W. David Ross, The Right and The Good (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 128.

³⁶Ibid., p. 128n.

³⁷David Hume, An Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, ed. Charles W. Hendel (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1957), p. 110.

³⁸See also Abraham Kaplan, "Are Ethical Judgments Assertions?", Phil. Rev., Vol 51, 1942. Kaplan is more concerned in this article, however, to point to the superior expressive capacity of an objective assertion over a report of feelings, than to stress the importance of any illusion which leads us to prefer the objective assertion.

If, as I maintain, the objective validity of all moral valuation is an illusion, and the proposition 'this is good' is meant to imply such validity, it must always be false.³⁹

Mackie puts his position bluntly in an article entitled "A Refutation of Morals":⁴⁰

In using moral terms we are as it were objectifying our own feelings, thinking them into qualities existing independently of us.

Robinson speculates that,

The cause of the mistake is probably multiple. Such a firmly persisting illusion would not arise from a single strand. Some of the strands are probably analogous to some of the causes of the corresponding error in perception.⁴¹

Difference Between Hume's Theory and Emotivism

Noting that these recent philosophers have proposed roughly similar views, leads one to pose the question, under what category are we to subsume Hume's theory? Can we refer to it as fundamentally an emotivist theory? Is it non-cognitive in character?

In the next chapter I shall try to show that Hume holds, although almost reluctantly, that besides non-rational moral judgments there are others which he is bound

³⁹ Edward Westermarck, Ethical Relativity (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Company, Ltd., 1932), p. 142.

⁴⁰ John Mackie, "A Refutation of Morals," Australasian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy, XXIV (September, 1946), Nos. 1-2, p. 81.

⁴¹ Richard Robinson, "The Emotive Theory of Ethics," Aristotelian Society, Sup. Vol. XXII, (1948).

to construe as judgments of reason. Now if this is so, clearly he cannot be either a thorough-going emotivist or non-cognitivist. But the question remains, is his theory to be classed as emotivist or non-cognitivist with respect simply to non-rational moral judgments with which we are concerned in the present chapter?

In the usual sense a theory is emotivist if and only if it claims that the word 'good,' in its peculiarly ethical sense, not only has emotive meaning, but "stands for nothing whatever."⁴² Now to hold that 'good' in its peculiarly ethical sense "stands for nothing whatever" is clearly enough to hold to a non-cognitive theory with respect to 'good' and with respect to judgments of moral or ethical goodness. That is, emotivism in this more usual sense is a form of non-cognitivism. The main question to be settled then is whether Hume's theory is or entails non-cognitivism.

It would seem best to construe a theory as non-cognitivist only so far as it holds with respect to a given predicate expression such as 'morally good' that this expression is not typically used to express judgments which are either true or false.

Now taken in this sense, Hume's theory cannot be said to be or to entail non-cognitivism. He holds, it may be admitted, that passions such as pleasure and pain are

⁴²C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, The Meaning of Meaning, 5th ed., (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938), p. 125.

all "original facts and realities, complete in themselves, and implying no reference to other passions...."⁴³ In this, however, they are no different from any other sorts of impressions, including acts of will, which are also impressions. Furthermore, we should recall that passions may be directed to objects. Hume even allows that a passion caused by one object may be directed to another, as when a man's possessions cause him to feel pride in himself. On the interpretation I have presented, what he holds specifically with respect to "moral approbation and disapprobation,"⁴⁴ to use Reid's phrase, is this: they are not simply cases of having agreeable or uneasy feelings, or of having these directed toward actions and characters as their objects; they are cases in which, having as it were involuntarily projected these passions or feelings into actions and characters (our own or anothers'), we take them to be distinct, monadic properties of actions and characters. Our approbation or disapprobation, then, while it consists in having a feeling, consists also in apprehending this feeling as though it were a property of something. And so far as it does this, the full and proper way to express our approbations is not by interjections, such as 'hurray for x,' but as we usually do express them by declarative

⁴³T 458.

⁴⁴Thomas Reid, Essays On The Active Powers Of The Human Mind (London: Thomas Tegg, 1843), Essay V, Chapter VII, "That Moral Approbation Implies A Real Judgment," p. 376.

sentences, cognitively meaningful, and possessed of a truth value. Approbations and disapprobations, or moral judgments, may be said to affirm that certain states of affairs obtain. The catch is, of course, that once we have seen clearly what they affirm, we can conclude that no such state of affairs can really exist (they are all false).

It is doubtful whether Hume could or would allow that taking feelings to qualify actions and characters is anything different from what I have been calling the involuntary projection of them into these actions and characters. So perhaps citing the projection as something preliminary is in theory really otiose. It does, however, serve to bring out the illusionary feature of moral judgments to which Hume is quite apparently committed. And as I have already indicated, I take it that he is committed along with this to holding that in making moral judgments we typically do not recognize the feelings we project and predicate of actions and characters either as feelings or as our feelings. In judging that a table is brown, Hume does not think we typically take the brown color of which we are directly aware to be either a sensation or our sensation. He even offers an explanation as to why we do not commonly recognize our moral feelings as feelings. In each case it, "is commonly so soft and gentle, that we are apt to confound it with an idea...."⁴⁵

⁴⁵T 470.

Hume's view affirms, then, the claim that all non-rational moral judgments, while meaningful, taken quite literally are false. They are all false, in spite of the fact they generally have subjects and that these subjects are often of practical importance. The universal falsity with respect to existent and important subjects, explains from Hume's point of view, why other philosophers, notably the rationalists such as Clarke and Wollaston, were led away from considering what moral judgments really mean to trying to invent meanings which could make them reasonable to assert.⁴⁶

It may be objected that beyond this there is little or no point or cash value in insisting on the difference between Hume's theory and the closely resembling forms of non-cognitivism. On Hume's theory, one pays little heed to the truth value of particular moral judgments, because they are all false rather than because they are without truth value, but in either case one seems best advised to treat them as expressions of feeling.

There is considerable force to this objection. It goes largely to show, however, that it might be well advised to enlarge the definition of 'non-cognitivist' to include theories according to which moral judgments are all false or all true. But in any case the specific character of Hume's theory is what it is, and to call it non-cognitivist on the present definition of that term would not be correct.

⁴⁶T 223 c.f.

Furthermore, the fact that non-rational moral judgments have a truth value may have certain systematic advantages when we come to look at the nature of rational moral judgments.

Reasons For Lack of Full Explicit
Statement of the Theory

A further question which arises at this point is this: If on Hume's view all moral judgments are literally false, one might ask, why do we not find him explicitly saying so? Part of the answer is that actually he has already come very close to saying so, by implication at least, in Book II. For there he speaks of, "those, who maintain that morality is something real, essential, and founded on nature."⁴⁷ Apparently Hume is willing to allow at that point that morality is not "something real, essential and founded on nature,"⁴⁸ which is practically equivalent, one might suppose, to saying that all moral judgments are false. But it must be granted that he does not express this thought again in Book III.

One reason he does not is doubtless that to do so would inevitably seem intended to disparage morals, which Hume has no wish to do, and for that matter might well be expected to weaken the influence in some minds of moral judgments and pronouncements, which he also has no wish to do. This much of his view would imply, after all, that the rational, philosophical attitude toward moral judgments is not mere scepticism, but active disbelief.

⁴⁷T 296. ⁴⁸T 296.

Another reason for Hume's lack of explicit emphasis on this aspect of his theory is that if all moral judgments are false, and necessarily false, then it is perhaps pointless to say of any of them that they are false. But Hume may not feel that this is pointless. He may wish to hold that some moral judgments are better than others, and that calling opposed ones false is sometimes useful. In line with this, we might also say for Hume what in recent value theory, Frankena has speculated may be the line which R. W. Sellars would choose to take: "Or he might say valuations are false only if we take them literally at the naive level, but argue that we should critically reconstruct our value predicates somewhat as we do in the case of secondary qualities...."⁴⁹

A Reconstruction

I think that by implication something like this really is what Hume does wish to hold to. We may suppose that in implicitly accounting for moral judgments in terms of an illusion, yet not wishing to emphasize that they are literally false, he is holding implicitly to a reconstruction of moral predicates. But what would this reconstruction amount to? To amend once more the passage I have been expounding, I think it would come to this: When you say

⁴⁹William K. Frankena, "Sellars' Theory of Valuation," Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, XV (September, 1954), p. 74.

that any action or character is vicious, you mean that in your contemplation of that action or character, it seems directly qualified by your own feelings of blame.

But if this is what Hume is going to take people to mean when they express moral judgments, he should allow that their judgments are always true. He never allows, after all, that there is any difference between judging that one is having a perception and simply having the perception; they are one and the same act. A person may lie about his feelings and other perceptions, so that moral pronouncements may still be false. But the judgments themselves must presumably be infallible.

It might seem unlikely then that this would be the sort of reconstruction to which Hume would turn, in view of the fact that it leaves moral judgments as much on a par with one another as before (they are now all true). One of the functions of a reconstruction I suggested above is to allow for or elucidate the way in which some moral judgments are better than others. Yet I think that with an important qualification Hume does adopt this reconstructed analysis. He seems to adopt it so automatically, in fact, that it is to be suspected that he thinks it is entailed by his first analysis, and hardly worth distinguishing from it. Yet, if I interpret him correctly, he is not proposing that it be adopted for general use, in place of the meaning on which all moral judgments would be false. Rather I think he is merely adopting it himself as the only alternative analysis

or theory, or meaning which a moral philosopher can adopt, and yet remain morally neutral. It is the only reconstruction a moral philosopher can offer a priori, which does not intrude any moral judgment of his own or any other, as a philosopher into his system - unless it is the judgment that moral judgments are sometimes worth making, or harking to. Hume is heeding the observation of William James that the moral philosopher will not be a sceptic, and also James' maxim that, "if the philosopher is to keep his judicial position, he must never become one of the parties to the fray."⁵⁰

The evidence that Hume does adopt the analysis according to which moral predicates refer to certain apparent qualities of actions and characters, occurs mainly towards the middle of Book III, first in his section "Of the source of allegiance":⁵¹

Nor need any one wonder, that tho' I have all along endeavour'd to establish my system on pure reason, and have scarce ever cited the judgment even of philosophers or historians on any article, I shou'd now appeal to popular authority, and oppose the sentiments of the rabble to any philosophical reasoning. For it must be observ'd, that the opinions of men, in this case, 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

⁵⁰William James, Essays in Pragmatism, ed. Alburey Castell (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1954), p. 80.

⁵¹T 539.

virtue in any character, as every one places in it, and that 'tis impossible in this particular we can ever be mistaken. And tho' our judgments concerning the origin of any vice or virtue, be not so certain as those concerning their degrees; yet, since the question in this case regards not any philosophical origin of an obligation, but a plain matter of fact, 'tis not easily conceiv'd how we can fall into an error.⁵²

It does not matter that "the opinions of men"⁵³ in the sphere of morals are just so many pains and pleasures of a particular kind which they project into and take to qualify actions and characters. For though we are not necessarily aware of it our concepts of moral good and evil originate simply from such feelings of pleasures and pains, projected in that way. "The distinction of moral good and evil is founded on the pleasure or pain...."⁵⁴ It is not as though our moral concepts originate in perceptions of something else which our pains and pleasures lead us to think present when it isn't. They originate with these pains and pleasures, which are their "essence."⁵⁵ Again, in the section "Of the measures of allegiance":⁵⁶

The general opinion of mankind has some authority in all cases; but in this of morals 'tis perfectly infallible. Nor is it less infallible, because men cannot distinctly explain the principles, on which it is founded.⁵⁷

His theory entailed that all moral judgments are literally false. But now he acknowledges that considered simply as judgments of the occurrences of certain pleasures and pains, "'tis impossible in this particular we can ever be mistaken."⁵⁸

⁵²T 546-47. ⁵³T 546. ⁵⁴T 546. ⁵⁵T 296.

⁵⁶T 549. ⁵⁷T 552. ⁵⁸T 547.

Justification and Elaboration

But if Hume is reconstructing moral predicates for the purpose of moral philosophy so that they refer only to apparent qualities (making moral judgments, which on their ordinary meaning are all false, infallible), we are naturally led to pose two questions: First, on what grounds can he reject an analogous reconstruction of the notion, for example, of substantial forms for the purpose of natural philosophy (science) or metaphysics? Second, will he allow that on this meaning for moral predicates the same action or character may be both morally good and evil?

Hume's answer to the first question must be prefaced with a terminological note: In the passages I quoted earlier he describes the projection of one's own impressions to appear as qualities of objects, as caused by an inclination of "the mind"⁵⁹ or "human nature."⁶⁰ In other passages, however, he says it is due specifically to "the imagination."⁶¹

Hume answers the first question in a passage in Book I, which anticipates Kant and is crucial to his philosophy as a whole:

But here it may be objected, that the imagination, according to my own confession, being the ultimate judge of all systems of philosophy, I am unjust in blaming the ancient philosophers for makeing [Sic.] use of that faculty, and allowing themselves to be entirely guided by it in their reasonings. In order to justify myself, I must distinguish in the imagination betwixt the principles which are permanent, irresistable, and universal; such as the customary transition from causes to effects,

⁵⁹T 167. ⁶⁰T 224. ⁶¹T 225.

and from effects to causes: And the principles, which are changeable, weak, and irregular; such as those I have just now taken notice of. The former are the foundation of all our thoughts and actions, so that upon their removal human nature must immediately perish and go to ruin. The latter are neither unavoidable to mankind, nor necessary, or so much as useful in the conduct of life; but on the contrary are observ'd only to take place in weak minds, and being opposite to the other principles of custom and reasoning, may easily be subverted by a due contrast and opposition.⁶²

We may safely infer from this that Hume reconstructs moral predicates as he does, largely because he thinks that moral judgments, as contrasted with judgments of substantial forms, are "useful in the conduct of life."⁶³ The utilitarian character of Hume's moral theory thus emerges at once from the beginning.

May we infer, too, that he thinks the "principles"⁶⁴ of the imagination which operate when we make moral judgments (as opposed to the principles operative in judgments of "occult qualities")⁶⁵ are "permanent, irresistable, and universal,"⁶⁶ and that therefore "upon their removal human nature must immediately perish and go to ruin"?⁶⁷ He may hold this, but one cannot be sure whether he actually does. Perhaps all he would wish to claim is that these principles are nearly "permanent, irresistable and universal"⁶⁸ and that upon their removal human society if not human nature must soon "perish and go to ruin."⁶⁹

⁶²T 225. ⁶³T 225. ⁶⁴T 225. ⁶⁵T 225.

⁶⁶T 225. ⁶⁷T 225. ⁶⁸T 225. ⁶⁹T 225.

It might be objected against Hume that he could not really distinguish different "principles"⁷⁰ or psychological mechanisms operative in the case of useful as opposed to useless kinds of judgments. On the face of it, however, it is one thing to project one's feeling of pleasure into an action or character, or one's feeling of necessity into the idea or appearance of an effect, and quite a bit more to project as it were a mind into the motion or appearance of an inanimate object. When, to use Hume's example, children beat stones which hurt them, they seem not to be so much projecting their own occurrent feelings (e.g. anger) as those which would in their eyes justify their having these feelings (e.g. malice). This kind of inclination does seem "suppress'd by a little reflection,"⁷¹ and so far as concerns philosophy, and the conduct of life, is not generally useful.

Turning to the second question, will Hume allow on his reconstructed meaning which treats moral judgments as judgments of appearances only that the same action or character may be both morally good and morally evil?

From what I have said so far, surely Hume should allow that this is logically possible. Indeed, he should allow that the same action or character might conceivably be morally good, morally neutral, and morally evil. But it may be argued that I have not expounded his reconstruction

⁷⁰T 225. ⁷¹T 225.

fully, and that when expounded fully, it can be seen that he need not admit that such opposed judgments are even logically possible.

Hume always has recourse to the plural in the passages I quoted earlier: He refers to "...the opinions of men"⁷² and "The general opinion of mankind..."⁷³ This might suggest that he is proposing to reconstruct the predicates of moral goodness and evil (and all other moral predicates) not simply as referring to certain appearances, namely feelings of pleasures and pains projected into actions and characters, but as referring to the fact of such appearances being present to a majority of men. But if this is what Hume means, then he is holding that moral judgments in the reconstructed sense are not made by "men" or "mankind"⁷⁴ in general, as he suggests, but only by moral philosophers, or students of the social scene.

The main difficulty with this interpretation is that according to it, it is not the opinions of individual men which Hume is holding to be infallible, but rather the opinions of men in general or "mankind;"⁷⁵ but, then, in this case, he should really offer a different sort of argument than he does offer for these opinions being infallible. His claim that "pleasure or pain cannot be unknown to the person who feels it"⁷⁶ is suited to establish at most that the perceptions of moral good and evil of each individual are infallible. And indeed, unless it establishes

⁷²T 552. ⁷³T 552. ⁷⁴T 552. ⁷⁵T 552. ⁷⁶T 546.

this first it would seem to do nothing to establish that the opinions of the majority of mankind in general are infallible. Of course, it would remain open to Hume to adopt a reconstructed notion of moral good and evil on which judgments of the majority are infallible, even though those of individuals were not or were really always false. But in doing this he would be intruding his own preferences into his moral philosophy in a way in which it is doubtful that he wishes to do. As a moral philosopher, Hume is probably willing to commit himself to the judgments that moral judgments are worth making and heeding (at least sometimes), but it is doubtful that he wishes to commit himself further than this, as by holding that the majority should decide what is and what is not virtuous, that "morally good"⁷⁷ means roughly accords with what the majority think morally good. It is doubtful that he wishes a preference of his own for abiding by the opinions of the majority to determine the theoretical foundations of his moral philosophy.

If Hume's qualifications with respect to what I have been calling his reconstruction of moral predicates have any importance for his system, it would seem to come to one or both of these two points:

First, like the pleasures and pains involved in other sorts of desires and aversions, those involved in moral judgments may be prompted by faulty or incomplete

⁷⁷T 456.

judgments of reason. Subsequent judgments of reason may thus 'correct' or remove them. They may be faulty in the sense that there really is no character or action which in their contemplation seems directly qualified by their feelings of blame or praise (desire or aversion, pleasure or pain), or it may not stand in the relation it seems to. In this sense particular moral judgments of particular characters and conduct may be said to be irrational or faulty or even fallible, whereas the abstract or "general opinion"⁷⁸ of men (for example, that ingratitude is a vice) remains largely infallible. Hume's references to "men"⁷⁹ and "mankind"⁸⁰ may then be partly to signify his interest in such general sorts of moral principles.

Second, Hume makes plain as early as the second section of Book III that the feelings of pleasure and pain which are the essence of moral good and evil are very special sorts of pleasures and pains. Pleasures after all differ enormously from one another, and so do pains.

A good composition of music and a good bottle of wine equally produce pleasure; and what is more, their goodness is determin'd merely by the pleasure. But shall we say upon that account, that the wine is harmonious, or the music of a good flavour?⁸¹

The characteristic of the pleasures and pains which are the form the essence of moral good and evil is, he insists, that they are disinterested, or impartial.

⁷⁸T 552. ⁷⁹T 552. ⁸⁰T 552. ⁸¹T 472.

'Tis only when a character is considered in general, without reference to our particular interest, that it causes such a feeling⁸² or sentiment, as denominates it morally good or evil.

I suggest that when Hume speaks later, in the passage I have already quoted, of the "general opinion"⁸³ of men, he has this important qualification in mind, in addition perhaps to the point I just made about judgments of reason, though he has not bothered to make any of this as clear as we could wish.

If these two points are correct, then the answer to the second question I raised above would seem to be this: On Hume's theory it is logically possible for one and the same action or character to be at once morally good, morally neutral and morally evil. But of many alleged moral judgments that are in fact opposed to each other, Hume can allow that some are founded on faulty or incomplete factual information, and that others are not really moral judgments at all, since they are not really disinterested.

Summary

Before proceeding further, I should like to summarize and make some further observations about what I have tried to establish concerning as much of Hume's theory as I have examined up to this point.

I have been attempting in this chapter to consider only his views about moral judgments which are definitely

⁸²T 472. ⁸³T 552.

not judgments of reason. As we saw from the previous chapter, these are based on impressions, in particular pleasures and pains felt as desires and aversions. It is from these (sometimes referred to as sentiments of praise and blame) that our concepts or notions of moral good and evil originate.

Hume anticipated this much of his view in Book II:

The most probable hypothesis, which has been advanc'd to explain the distinction betwixt vice and virtue, and the origin of moral rights and obligations, is, that from a primary constitution of nature certain characters and passions, by the very view and contemplation, produce a pain, and others in like manner excite a pleasure.⁸⁴

And he reiterated it in Book III:

The distinction of moral good and evil is founded on the pleasure or pain, which results from the view of any sentiment, or character....⁸⁵

In this Hume is arguing in much the same form as he did in Book I concerning other ideas, or notions - the notion of space, for example:

The table before me is alone sufficient by its view to give me the idea of extension.⁸⁶

Very early in Book III Hume states forcibly that his "hypothesis"⁸⁷ is not expected to accord with our ordinary views of the subject, but is a "discovery in morals, like that other in physics"⁸⁸ according to which so-called secondary qualities are not really qualities in objects, but merely perceptions in our minds:

Vice and virtue, therefore, may be compar'd to sounds, colours, heat and cold, which, according to modern philosophy, are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind.⁸⁹

⁸⁴T 296. ⁸⁵T 546. ⁸⁶T 34. ⁸⁷T 296.

⁸⁸T 469. ⁸⁹T 469.

Thus in those moral judgments or awarenesses in which we are directly acquainted with or are having an impression of moral good or evil (from which could originate our idea of moral good or evil), we are characteristically subject to a kind of illusion in which we project our own feelings as the "essence" of moral good or evil, into the actions and characters we are attempting to judge. On this account, all such moral judgments are literally false. They may, however, be treated as simply judgments of appearances, in which case they must all be considered true (though moral pronouncements may occasionally be false). This is Hume's reconstruction of moral predicates. In a loose way of speaking those judgments may still be called faulty, which something like complete knowledge would serve to alter, or remove. And Hume is probably concerned only with those which are not faulty. The most important qualification which he adds, however, both to his original analysis and his reconstructed one is that feelings of pleasure and pain (desire and aversion) which are the "essence"⁹⁰ of moral good and evil, are disinterested.

Adopting Hume's reconstruction, as contrasted with ordinary consciousness taken literally, it is doubtless logically possible for one and the same action or character to be at once morally good, morally neutral and morally evil. But, as I observed above, of many alleged moral judgments that are in fact opposed to each other, Hume can claim

⁹⁰T 296.

that some are founded on faulty or incomplete factual information, and that others are not really moral judgments at all, since they are not really disinterested.

Again, it is apparent that Hume's theory, as I have sketched it so far, resembles theories which are generally classed as non-cognitive. To begin with, moral goodness or evil is certainly not, according to Hume, a feature of morally good or evil actions or characters taken in themselves or in relation to their causes or effects.

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.⁹¹

Nor does Hume attempt to define any moral predicate expressions solely in terms of non-moral ones. Non-moral judgments about actions and characters, taken with Hume's accounts, would never entail that these actions and characters are morally good or that they are not morally good. Nor does Hume think they would. He clearly does not present his theory in order to be able to deduce what is morally good or evil.

Furthermore in a rough sense, the essence of moral goodness or evil for the person pronouncing an action or character good or evil is that person's own feelings of praise or blame. And while these feelings are peculiarly

⁹¹T 468.

disinterested they are feelings or passions (pleasures or pains) nonetheless. Thus, Hume declares that,

Morality, therefore, is more properly felt than
judg'd of.⁹²

And,

To have the sense of virtue, is nothing but to feel
a satisfaction of a particular kind from the con-
templation of a character. The very feeling
constitutes our praise or admiration.⁹³

But, again, before concluding that Hume's theory
thus far is non-cognitivist in character, we should recall
the features of the theory which renders this label not
altogether apt.

First of all, in the sort of judgments I have been
considering, the feeling of praise, blame or whatever must
seem to characterize an action or character. Hume suggests
that ordinarily they are taken as actually doing so, but
for the purpose of his moral philosophy I tried to show
that he adopts a reconstructed meaning according to which
they merely seem to do so. On both the ordinary view, and
on his reconstruction, however, moral judgments have a truth
value. As I have said before, on what he takes to be the
ordinary view, they are always false, and on his reconstructed
analysis, they are always true (except perhaps in the special
sense in which a judgment is called false if complete infor-
mation would lead to retracting it). Thus Hume does not
consider that he is contradicting the statement: "The very
feeling constitutes our praise or admiration,"⁹⁴ when he
goes on to say,

⁹²T 470. ⁹³T 471. ⁹⁴T 471.

We do not infer a character to be virtuous, because it pleases: But in feeling that it pleases after such a particular manner, we in effect feel that it is virtuous.⁹⁵

Hume's point here is just the one I have been stressing, though he is putting it in a somewhat different way. It is not because I find first that a character causes me to feel pleasure from contemplating it that I go on to infer that it is virtuous. My feeling "after such a particular manner,"⁹⁶ namely that is disinterested and projected into the character (taken to have a distinct, continued existence), is in effect the feeling that it is virtuous. Hume does not sharply distinguish between feelings of blame and feelings that an action is vicious, because the feelings of blame, so far as they are constituents of a moral judgments are feelings that the action is blameworthy or vicious. He is holding what E. M. Adams (who interprets Hume as an emotivist) has recently held, namely

The feelings and attitudes shown and evoked by the utterance of moral sentences are...semantic or cognitive. They are feelings that x is wrong, that x is an injustice, that x is right...
[They are therefore]..."subject to being appraised as correct or incorrect, as valid or invalid, as rational or irrational."⁹⁷

⁹⁵T 471. ⁹⁶T 471.

⁹⁷E. M. Adams, Ethical Naturalism and The Modern World-View (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1960). Adams observes that "feeling guilty about having done something involves thinking that it is wrong in the same way in which feeling indignant does." p. 92. This seems true, and to pose a prima facie objection against Hume's theory.

All this indicates, I believe, that Hume intends his title to section II, "Moral Distinctions deriv'd from a moral sense"⁹⁸ to be taken as an apt summary of his main account, even though he is not positing a totally unique faculty. The analogy to a sense even if not intended as completely exact is nevertheless deliberate.

Differentiation of Moral Value Judgments from
Judgments of Moral Right and Obligation
and Aesthetic Judgments

So far I have been concerned exclusively with what Hume holds concerning judgments of moral virtue and vice. I must now append some remarks to indicate more precisely what he holds concerning judgments of moral right and obligation, and also how he wishes to distinguish moral judgments from aesthetic ones.

In general Hume does not attempt to single out judgments of moral right and obligation as requiring any special discussion. To have an obligation, Hume implies, is simply to have a motive. And to have a moral obligation is to have specifically as a motive for doing or abstaining from an act the pleasure or pain which the disinterested contemplation of that act naturally calls forth. That is, one's moral obligation to do an act which is open to one naturally arises from, or is identical with, one's non-rational judgment that the act is or would be morally good.

⁹⁸T 470.

It may be supposed that there is a difficulty for Hume in this view; for he holds at one point that judgments of the moral virtue of actions are implicitly judgments of the motives which produce them.

When we praise any actions, we regard only the motives that produced them, and consider the actions as signs or indications of certain principles in the mind and temper. The external performance has no merit. We must look within to find the moral quality....⁹⁹

And again later (quite inconsistently with this) he holds that judgments of the moral virtue of actions are implicitly judgments of enduring traits of character.

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. Actions themselves, not proceeding from any constant principle, have no influence on love or hatred, pride or humility; and consequently are never consider'd in morality.¹⁰⁰

But then, having a moral obligation amounts to having either a motive to act from a certain motive, or having a motive to act from a certain trait of character. And it may be supposed that either is impossible. But actually, both of these things seem to be quite possible, and actually to be true of situations we sometimes put ourselves in when we reflect on the opposition that our motives and character traits have to each other.

As I have noted earlier, Hume makes clear that the pleasures and pains which are ingredients in moral approval and disapproval are disinterested or impartial. They arise

⁹⁹T 477. ¹⁰⁰T 575.

from contemplating the benefits or disadvantages produced by the action or character, or the rule in accord with which the action proceeds. But these benefits or disadvantages are for those affected by the action or character (or general obedience to the rule) whoever they may be.

'Tis therefore from the influence of characters and qualities, upon those who have an intercourse with any person, that we blame or praise him. We consider not whether the persons, affected by the qualities, be our acquaintance or strangers, countrymen or foreigners. Nay, we over-look our own interest in those general judgments....¹⁰¹

Where we ourselves are not directly affected by an action or trait of character, our pleasure or pain from contemplating its effects (benefits or disadvantages) must arise by the mechanism of sympathy with those who are affected. Thus our moral judgments are often the result of our sympathy with the interests of men in general.

Thus it appears, that sympathy is a very powerful principle in human nature, that is has great influence on our taste of beauty, and that it produces our sentiment of morals in all the artificial virtues. From thence we may presume, that it also gives rise to many of the other virtues; and that qualities acquire our approbation, because of their tendency to the good of mankind.¹⁰²

But clearly enough this does not suffice to distinguish moral judgments from aesthetic ones. And indeed, Hume declines to draw any sharp distinction in theory between "moral and natural beauty."¹⁰³ The main distinction is simply that the subjects of the two kinds of judgments are radically different, and because they are

¹⁰¹T 582.

¹⁰²T 577-78.

¹⁰³T 300.

different, the pleasures and pains involved in them
(produced by and projected into our views of the subjects)
are as a matter of fact also very different.

A convenient house, and a virtuous character,
cause not the same feeling of approbation;
even tho' the source of our approbation be
the same, and flow from sympathy and an idea
of their utility. There is something very
inexplicable in this variation of our feelings;
but 'tis what we have experience of with regard
to all our passions and sentiments.¹⁰⁴

104_T 517.

CHAPTER IV

INDUCTIVE MORAL JUDGMENTS

Throughout Book II and the first two-thirds of Book III, Hume's account of non-rational moral judgments contains few if any qualifications to suggest that he thinks there are any moral judgments at all which should be termed judgments of reason. When he reaches the third and final part of Book III, however, he explicitly poses such qualifications. In this chapter I shall: (I) try to show why he thinks they are needed; (II) present them; (III) try to show that they do entail that there are what we can call probable or inductive judgments of moral virtue and vice; and then try to explicate (IV) the main logical and (V) the main causal relations which must obtain on his view between these and the non-rational judgments of moral virtue and vice discussed in the preceding chapter.

Need for Qualifications

Hume is led to pose his qualifications in order to meet an objection which he states in this way:

We sympathize more with persons contiguous to us,
than with persons remote from us: With our
acquaintance, than with strangers: With our

countrymen, than with foreigners. But notwithstanding this variation of our sympathy, we give the same approbation to the same moral qualities in China as in England. They appear equally virtuous, and recommend themselves equally to the esteem of a judicious spectator.¹

Stating the objection in this way, Hume makes it appear directed simply to his hypothesis about sympathy. Actually, however, we easily can apply it in a more general form to his whole theory that feelings, however we suppose them to be produced, are essential to moral judgments. That is, we can restate what is at the heart of the objection in this way: Our feelings about distant actions and characters are noticeably less intense (and for that matter less deep) than our feelings about (toward) those nearby. This is true, as Hume later shows he is aware, whether the distance is in space or time.² And it seems true of feelings however they are produced; it seems true even of feelings we would all agree in calling moral feelings. But our moral judgments do not ascribe less virtuousness and viciousness to the same kinds of actions and characters, "the same moral qualities,"³ in China as nearby. Therefore our feelings cannot be identical with our perceptions of moral virtue and vice in our moral judgments; they must be at least incidental effects of our judgments.

¹T 581.

²T 584. "We blame equally a bad action, which we read of in history, with one perform'd in our neighbourhood t' other day...."

³T 581.

Clearly enough this objection is simply one of a whole class of related objections which an opponent of Hume's theory (and others besides)⁴ would wish to present: Our feelings are often constant in quantity when our ascriptions of moral virtuousness and viciousness are not. When I take one action to be more vicious than another, I am not necessarily feeling more intensely toward it. The worst crimes are not those which excite us the most intensely (or, again even the most deeply). Similarly, the amount of our feelings toward an act, and the degree of virtuousness or viciousness we ascribe to it, often vary, but not concomitantly.

Now these objections do seem persuasive. Leaving the mechanism of sympathy quite aside, then, we have to consider that what is at stake in the objections Hume has posed is his view that the pleasure and pain of the spectator are, "not only inseparable from vice and virtue, but constitute their very nature and essence."⁵ What Hume will have to defend is his claim that "we do not infer a character to be virtuous, because it pleases: But in feeling that it pleases after such a particular manner, we in effect feel that it is virtuous."⁶ If we accept just this much of his theory, we seem obliged to conclude that the various degrees of moral virtuousness and viciousness

⁴Notably the theories of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson.

⁵T 296. ⁶T 471.

which we attribute to actions and characters are and must be directly proportional to the quantity of our actual feelings of a certain sort toward them.

In fairness it should be emphasized that the qualification of a certain sort is important here. It is not incumbent on Hume to show that variations in all our feelings of praise and blame are not an objection to his theory; he need only explain why variations (or apparent variations) in whatever he wishes to identify as our moral feelings do not constitute an objection.

Why, it may be asked, does Hume not try to pursue this qualification further to provide a complete reply to the objection he has raised? The reason he does not is probably just that he does not find any kind or quality of feelings which do not occasionally vary independently of our moral ascriptions. Our disinterested feelings vary less than our interested ones, but they, too, vary. Perhaps the disinterested feelings we are justified in feeling or ought to feel do not vary in this way. But even if they did not, Hume might wonder, how would he identify these feelings? Would he identify them in reference to our obligation to feel them? What would this obligation be? If he claimed it to be a moral obligation, then his attempt to meet the original objection would seem to involve him in an endless regress. And also, (a point surely on Hume's mind), what we ordinarily take to be specifically moral

feelings do vary; what I would ordinarily describe as my feelings of moral indignation or blame are far stronger immediately after an action which has provoked them than months or years later.

It should be added that if the descriptive part of Hume's theory is shown false, then what I interpreted as his own way of reconstructing moral judgments loses its presumed justification. That is, Hume loses his reason for adopting the view that, "there is just so much vice or virtue in any character as everyone places in it...."⁷ There is no clear or apparent reason why a moral philosopher should exactly correlate his own ascriptions of moral virtuousness and viciousness with the feelings of men in general, if the feelings of individual men do not even bear an exact correlation with their own ascriptions.

At least three lines of reply appear open to Hume to meet the objection he has posed: (1) He might seek to correlate ascriptions of a given degree of virtuousness or viciousness not with a given amount of feeling, but with a given felt quality; the thought of murder in China provokes the same quality of feeling as murder in England; even if it provokes it less intensely or deeply. (2) He might try to elaborate his theory to show that while our feelings taken at large vary in amount, in our moral judgments we somehow take account of only a certain part of this intensity; or that from the point of view we adopt when we make moral

⁷T 547.

judgments, our feelings do not really vary in amount independently of our ascriptions, or at least that they do not seem to do so. (3) He might modify his theory to allow that in our moral judgments we are not always ascribing our actual feelings, but are often predicting those we would have under standard or specifiable conditions.

The first line of reply is open to Hume. And indeed late in Book III he observes,

Each of the virtues, even benevolence, justice, gratitude, integrity, excites a different sentiment or feeling in the spectator.⁸

Ten pages later, however, he seems to want to take this back:

Whenever we survey the actions and characters of men, without any particular interest in them, the pleasure, or pain, which arises from the survey (with some minute differences) is, in the main, of the same kind....⁹

And in any case, he makes no attempt to pursue this line of reply. This is doubtless just as well. If we insist that we ascribe a given degree of virtuousness or viciousness to different actions and characters from feeling a given quality rather than amount of pleasure or pain toward them, then we will be faced with the task of explaining why we ever ascribe different degrees of virtuousness or viciousness. We can of course say that the qualities differ; but how does a difference in qualities yield a difference in degree or magnitude? We cannot say that it is because we

⁸T 607. ⁹T 617.

experience some qualities of pleasure or pain as better than others: If we experience them as morally better, our theory is circular. If we say that we naturally prefer them (desire them more or dislike them less), then the original problem recurs in a new and only slightly mitigated form. For we must also grant that when there is no difference in quality, we naturally prefer pleasures which are greater and pains which are less in amount.¹⁰

Hume adopts both of the other lines of reply to meet the objection posed, but he does not attempt to present them in an altogether separate way which makes clear that the one is an elaboration of his view as presented thus far, and the other is an important qualification and supplement to it. He presents both initially as though he is citing one and the same "method of correcting our sentiments."¹¹ This is understandable if not excusable, since he presents both by drawing again on the analogy of a "moral sense"¹² to the external senses, and it is surely true that the allegedly analogous instances in the case of the external senses are often difficult to distinguish from each other.

Hume presents the elaboration of this theory in this way:

¹⁰ There is a further problem which is acute for Hume's reconstruction: Other factors being equal, is one action more virtuous or vicious than another because the moral feelings of more men are directed to it? Is it more virtuous or vicious other factors being equal because their feelings last longer?

¹¹ T 582. ¹² T 582.

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. Experience soon teaches us this method of correcting our sentiments....Such corrections are common with regard to all the senses....¹³

Let us suppose that in this passage Hume is simply describing further what I called non-rational moral judgments. That is, let us assume that he is not discussing any kind of moral judgments he would call either judgments of demonstrable or judgments of probable reason. Then by implication what he is claiming must essentially come to this: Explain it as we will, it is a fact about our external sense experience, that we somehow learn (or come) to use our beliefs about the spatial and temporal relations in which objects stand to us so as to condition what we immediately perceive of these objects or the way we perceive them. What we see does not depend simply on how near or far away an object is, but also on how near or far away we believe it to be. One crucial effect of such beliefs is to reduce the differences between our perceptions of the same or similar objects in different relations. Thus a six foot man actually appears of approximately the same height whether we see him as being five or twenty-five feet away, though we know that the image of him projected on our retina varies enormously. A further

example not available to Hume bears mention: Experimental evidence has recently confirmed Ptolemy's hypothesis that we see the moon at the horizon as larger than at the zenith only because we are more nearly aware of its great distance from us.¹⁴ Now in much the same way, our beliefs about the relations in which actions and characters stand to us conditions our feelings of moral pleasure and pain from contemplating them.

In order to complete the analogy and make it serve Hume's purpose, we must recall the illusionary feature of non-rational moral judgments, to which Hume holds (on the interpretation offered in the preceding chapter). When we make a moral judgment of an action or character, we are mistaking what is really a feeling of our own for a quality of the action or character. This is not to say that taken from another point of view or at a different time we may not become aware of the same kind of feelings we project for what they really are, namely feelings of our own. Nor is it to say that when we project a certain amount of a certain kind of feeling into an object, we have none of this kind left over which we are aware of as feelings. Nor is it, finally, to say what is surely false, that we always project the same amount of feeling into actions and characters of the same kind. Other things being equal, an action or character close to us produces more pleasure or

¹⁴Lloyd Kaufman and Irving Rock, "The Moon Illusion," The Scientific American, Vol. 207 (July, 1962).

pain from contemplating it than one which is more remote, and as a consequence we project more pleasure or pain into it. (Hume's example of children, "beating the stones which hurt them"¹⁵ is evidence that generally speaking the greater is the quantity of feeling, the greater is the absolute quantity projected.) However (and this is the point of Hume's analogy) where a lesser amount of our pleasure or pain is projected into an action or character which is more remote, because it is more remote, we are not so apt to ascribe less of our feelings to it. The action or character being itself less vivid in our contemplation a lesser amount of feeling projected will seem like more, not in an absolute sense, but taken as a quality of the action or character. It is again not simply our feeling of pleasure or pain produced by the action or character we are judging (along with our own constitution), but this feeling so far as it is referential or has a semantic function. It must be our feeling that an action or character is virtuous or vicious.

The analogue, then, of our implicit beliefs about the distance of a physical object is probably best construed for Hume as simply the vividness with which we perceive or imagine the action or character we are judging. But this vividness may itself often be determined in part by our beliefs as to how near or far away it is in space or time.¹⁶

¹⁵T 224.

¹⁶"'Tis certain that distance diminishes the force of every idea, and that upon our approach to any object; tho' it does not discover itself to our senses; it operates upon the mind with an influence that imitates an immediate impression." T 100.

This whole elaboration of Hume's theory makes apparent, I think that even with respect to non-rational moral judgments he must be holding to a more complex view than at first appeared. Up to this point it seemed that in making moral judgments reason or the understanding was strictly limited to presenting us with subjects (actions or characters as conceived in non-moral terms) and beliefs about them (also conceived in non-moral terms), notably beliefs about how they affect people. The moral judgment itself in each case amounted to feeling pleasure or pain in a certain way as a natural result of our conception of the subject and our beliefs about it. The most we needed to add was that the pleasure or pain must be disinterested and somehow felt as a quality of actions and characters (perhaps due to the operation of fancy). But on the elaboration just now sketched our judgments of how near or remote are the actions and characters, that is judgments of our understanding, actually enter into assessing the degree to which we ascribe these feelings to the actions and characters, and hence the degree to which we apply moral predicates to them. It remains true that, "morality...is more properly felt than judged of...."¹⁷ A non-rational moral judgment would be impossible without feelings of pleasure or pain as the "essence"¹⁸ of virtue or vice. But granting that we find an act or character virtuous or vicious, an act of the

¹⁷T 470.

¹⁸T 295.

understanding or a faculty analogous to it can partly (and presumably properly) determine just how virtuous or vicious we judge it to be. Or so Hume puts his view by implication. Later, in the Appendix he makes explicit:

'Tis thus the understanding corrects the appearance of the senses, and makes us imagine, that an object at twenty feet distance seems even to the eye as large as one of the same dimensions at ten.¹⁹

The questions to which I wish to turn next are, first, to what extent does this elaboration by analogy meet the objection against his theory which Hume posed, and, second, to what extent does he think it meets this objection?

It should be emphasized that I have been assuming that Hume is concerned up to this point with non-rational moral judgments and only with these. That is, I have assumed that he has been treating only judgments in which the disinterested pleasure or pain which we mistakenly ascribe to an action or character is one we are at the moment feeling. And I have therefore been concerned with his analogy to "the senses"²⁰ only so far as it claims a parallel to judgments of the appearances of sensible objects made on the basis of immediate impressions of those appearances: 'The table I am now trying to lift feels heavy,' and 'The man I see at the other end of the room looks as tall as the one I see at this end,' would express two examples of this kind of judgments. Now Hume surely does wish to claim that there is a parallel between non-rational moral judgments and

¹⁹T 632. ²⁰T 632.

these judgments of the apparent characteristics of sensed objects. Thus when he speaks of "Such corrections [which are]...common with regard to all the senses,"²¹ we can certainly take him to be including these "corrections"²² according to which, "an object at twenty feet distance seems even to the eye as large as one of the same dimensions at ten,"²³ even if he wishes to include other corrections besides. That is, we can take him to be concerned with citing "corrections"²⁴ in what we immediately perceive, even if he also has in mind other kinds of "corrections."²⁵ The first question, then, is this: Will simply elaborating his account of non-rational moral judgments so as to take advantage of this analogy to corrections in what we immediately perceive of sensible objects, suffice to meet the original objection?

Clearly it will not. Hume's elaboration by analogy is a consistent development of his theory, and allows him to show how non-rational moral judgments may after all be far more stable than the bare account offered earlier would have led us to expect. But this does not suffice to meet the objection. To do this simply by elaborating an account of non-rational moral judgments, he would have to show the following: That however near or remote may be the actions and characters to which we ascribe

²¹T 582. ²²T 582. ²³T 632. ²⁴T 582.

²⁵T 582.

like degrees of virtuousness or viciousness, these actions and characters always seem qualified by equal amounts of our disinterested pleasure or pain. That is, he would have to show that actions conceived of as happening in China must seem to be qualified by the same amounts of our actual feelings (disinterested pleasure or pain) as similar ones (those with "the same moral qualities")²⁶ nearby. All this may not be blatantly false, but the point is that if he wishes to show that it is true, he must at that point abandon the analogy to "corrections...with regard to all the senses."²⁷ Or, if he wishes to keep the analogy, he must abandon this further elaboration. For in fact, with regard to each of the senses there are pronounced limits beyond which we (or the understanding) cannot bring the actual look, sound, and feel of things into accord with each other or our judgments of the understanding. When we are tired, heavy objects feel heavier; and they feel heavier even when we know they are not and when we know we are tired. From twenty-five feet a six foot man still looks as tall as he did from ten, but from much further he does not. From a tall building, mountain, airplane we invariably find that people look like ants.

The analogy which Hume draws to sense experience, then, does nothing to show that our ordinary moral judgments are all to be identified with his non-rational ones.

²⁶T 581. ²⁷T 582.

Rather, if anything it suggests that many are not to be so described. Furthermore, leaving the analogy aside, there is this more direct evidence that many of our ordinary moral judgments are quite different in character: Hume's account of non-rational moral judgments has been able to explain why we do not ordinarily think that simply feeling any kind of pleasure or pain ever is a sufficient condition for making a moral judgment (the account adds that we must ascribe our feeling to an action or character). But neither do we think that feeling a pleasure or pain is even a necessary condition. One might answer that on Hume's theory the feelings which are necessary are precisely those which in making the judgment we are not aware of as feelings. But by implication Hume does allow that in reflective moments at least we can discover them as feelings. His account of non-rational moral judgments can be directly verified.

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.²⁸

Now the fact is that we do not commonly go so far as to suppose that our feelings are irrelevant to making a moral judgment, for indeed we often say that we feel an act or character to be virtuous or vicious; but neither do we think they, our feelings, are an absolutely necessary condition

²⁸T 468-69.

for making moral judgments. The parallel which seems most apt is with our judgments of the real, as opposed to apparent, characteristics of sensible objects. We do not, for example, suppose that our sensations of the weight (resistance or whatever) of an object are irrelevant to judging its weight, but neither do we think that they are necessary. There are other ways of judging the weight of an object than hefting it. Furthermore, just as we allow that our sensations of the weight of an object may mislead us, we sometimes allow that our feelings of the virtuousness or viciousness of an action or character may mislead us.

We can now turn to the second question, namely to what extent does Hume think that simply elaborating his account of non-rational moral judgments suffices to meet the objection he posed? We need not rely on circumstantial evidence. Hume is quite explicit.

But however the general principle of our blame or praise may be corrected by those other principles [by taking a disinterested view and by correcting for distance], 'tis certain they are not altogether efficacious, nor do our passions often correspond entirely to the present theory. 'Tis seldom men heartily love what lies at a distance from them, and what no way redounds to their particular benefit.²⁹

Any other answer would have been surprising. In the third part of Book II he devoted an entire section (vii) to emphasizing the prodigious influence on our passions of our beliefs about the proximity or remoteness of things.

²⁹T 583.

Furthermore, the limits to our "corrections"³⁰ of immediate sense experience are more often noticed than the corrections themselves.

The Qualifications

Hume initially presents the main qualification of his whole theory of non-rational moral judgments as though it is about the language of moral judgments rather more than about moral judgments themselves. It is, however, intimately related to the kind of corrections discussed earlier.

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. 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. 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 would command a much higher degree of affection and admiration.³¹

Hume, then, qualifies his theory to allow that we do not always use moral language to express the precise degree of feelings we are actually having, or even the precise degree of feelings we are at the moment experiencing as though

³⁰T 582. ³¹T 582.

they are qualities of actions or characters. Rather we use it sometimes when we "know"³² that if we were able to take a disinterested view, and were to approach close enough to an action or character, we would experience certain feelings of pleasure or pain as a quality of it. And he goes on to allow that sometimes we do this even when we are too involved to have any purely disinterested feelings at all.

Here we are contented with saying, that reason requires such an impartial conduct, but that 'tis seldom we can bring ourselves to it, and that our passions do not readily follow the determination of our judgment.³³

Inductive Judgments of Moral
Virtue and Vice

It is significant to find Hume here acknowledging, at least implicitly, that our ordinary use of the word "reason"³⁴ to characterize moral judgments is not after all in these cases inappropriate. For what is it that he thinks leads us to use moral language, to apply moral predicates of praise or blame to actions or characters even when we are not actually feeling any pleasure or pain from contemplating them? Is it that we feel that applying the predicates to these actions or characters in particular is expected of us, and that not to do so would be socially unconventional? That Hume does not mention this conventional use of moral language can hardly be because it has escaped

³²T 582. ³³T 583. ³⁴T 582.

his notice, since it is so very common. Clearly he is not interested in expressions of merely conventional morality. Rather he is interested in expressions either of genuine non-rational moral judgments, or those which are doing essentially the same thing. That is, he is interested in the peculiarly moral, or at any rate normative or evaluational, use of moral language. What leads us to apply moral predicates to actions and characters when we are not having feelings toward them is in this respect the same as what leads us to apply these predicates when we are having the feelings. In both cases we mean to be ascribing the feelings (of a special sort) either as real or apparent qualities of them. It is just that the datum or immediate ground of our ascriptions are different in the two cases. When we express or make genuine non-rational moral judgments this datum is in each case an immediate and complete appearance of such a feeling as qualifying an action or character as completely as it is possible for it to do, given the characteristics of the action or character we are judging. The feeling of pleasure or pain has arisen from complete sympathy with those affected by the action. But, when we use "reason,"³⁵ our immediate data are either (1) similar but less intense or deeply experienced feelings apparently qualifying an action or character, along with beliefs about the distance of the action or character from

³⁵T 582.

us, and our condition which prevents complete sympathy. In this case we in a sense ascribe stronger feelings than we feel, doing so on the basis of an inference from the immediate data which includes those we do feel. Or (2) our immediate data may be no actual feelings at all but only beliefs about the non-moral features of the action or character (just what sort of action or character it was or is). In this case we ascribe feelings which we do not feel at all, doing so again on the basis of an inference.

The inference here is presumably in each case an instance of our non-moral beliefs simply enlivening (or evoking and enlivening) our ideas of moral virtuousness and viciousness, bringing these ideas to the level of beliefs, and conjoining them to the idea we have of the action or character. Thus, while we cannot always correct our actual feelings, we can "regulate our abstract notions":³⁶

The passions do not always follow our corrections;
but these corrections serve sufficiently to regulate
our abstract notions....³⁷

And, as we know, according to Hume,³⁸ our ideas of moral virtuousness and viciousness are simply copies of the kind of pleasures and pains we feel from the sympathetic and disinterested contemplation of actions and characters. Thus we are finally in the position in which we can make moral judgments though we are experiencing no actual feelings at all:

³⁶T 585. ³⁷T 585.

³⁸See chapter III above.

Sentiments must touch the heart to make them control our passions. But they need not extend beyond the imagination to make them influence our taste.³⁹

Our implicit criterion for applying moral predicates is always that we apply them to the comparative degree to which we would apply them if our judgment were a complete and genuine non-rational one. That is, we seek to apply them as we would if our sympathies were completely engaged by those affected by the action or character. This is the analogue of our standard or 'normal' condition for applying certain sense predicates. Its choice is apparently in part arbitrary. Hume suggests that the choice of identifying with those affected is based on the claim that it is the most conspicuous one which diverse people will agree to adopt, and thus makes consistent discourse about morals possible.⁴⁰

'Twere impossible we cou'd ever make use of language or communicate our sentiments to one another, did we not correct the momentary appearances of things, and overlook our present situation.⁴¹

Being thus loosen'd from our first station [our own interest], we cannot afterwards fix ourselves so commodiously by any means as by a sympathy with those, who have any commerce with the person we consider.⁴²

³⁹T 586.

⁴⁰T 225. C.f. chapter III, in which it is claimed that Hume implies that without some fixed sentiment of morals, human life would quickly "perish and go to ruin."

⁴¹T 582. ⁴²T 583.

And having adopted the point of view of sympathy with those affected, consistency requires further that we make complete sympathy the standard or 'normal' condition, to which we always implicitly refer. Thus Hume does not consider the character of Marcus Brutus as indifferent:

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.⁴³

Nor is a misdeed in history less vicious than "one perform'd in our neighbourhood t'other day":⁴⁴

We know from reflexion, that the former action wou'd excite as strong sentiments of disapprobation, as the latter, were it plac'd in the same position.⁴⁵

Now whether an act of "reflexion"⁴⁶ or inference is one which leads us to ascribe real or only apparent qualities to a subject, it surely must, on Hume's scheme, be classified as an act of the understanding or probable reason. Whether an act or perception is an act or perception of the imagination only, or truly of probable reason does not, for Hume, depend on whether it is directed to real rather than apparent qualities, but only on whether it is an act resulting from custom rather than mere caprice.

One who concludes somebody to be near him, when he hears an articulate voice in the dark, reasons justly and naturally; tho' that conclusion be deriv'd from nothing but custom, which infixes and inlivens the idea of a human creature, on account of his usual conjunction with the present impression.⁴⁷

To take another example (adapted from Hume),⁴⁸ let us suppose I infer from the appearance of a certain color as

⁴³T 582. ⁴⁴T 583. ⁴⁵T 584. ⁴⁶T 584.

⁴⁷T 225. ⁴⁸T 416-17, 460.

a property of a piece of fruit, that the fruit is delicious. My inference is a genuine act of reason, even though the color and the taste are both, according to "modern philosophy"⁴⁹ merely apparent properties of the fruit.

Hume, then, is allowing in effect that some moral judgments are after all judgments of reason - namely judgments of probable reason. This is the possibility which I have argued in chapters I and II Hume, contrary to what is often held about him, never ruled out, or at any rate never committed himself to denying in advance.

Since these judgments are based on prior experience, we might call them inductive moral judgments. This should not suggest, however, that they must all on Hume's view be general in character. They must in part be based on broad judgments (such as that characters with certain non-moral features usually excite pleasure or approval), but they may quite well have particular actions or characters as subjects. We might call them predictive moral judgments, or dispositional moral judgments, except that this would suggest that Hume thinks that when we make them we are consciously making a prediction or affirming a disposition. And he offers no ground for concluding that we think this is what we are doing, or that if we do we think this, that we think it is essential. What we are essentially doing is ascribing feelings or the appearance of them under standard

⁴⁹T 469.

conditions as qualities of actions or characters. And if these ascriptions can sometimes be verified in the manner of predictions, so too can such sense judgments, as my judgment that the table in the next room is brown, sometimes be verified as though they were predictions. But this is not to say that I ordinarily take my judgment that the table is brown to be essentially affirming a prediction (or even an endless set of predictions), or to be claiming that either I or the table have dispositions of certain sorts. All that I must be doing, on Hume's theory, in the case of the table is having an idea of the table as brown, made sufficiently vivid to be a belief, from its association with a present impression or with an idea which is already a belief. So presumably all I need to be doing when I make an inductive moral judgment is having an idea of an action or character seeming to exemplify my idea of virtuousness or viciousness, so long as this idea is being rendered sufficiently vivid to constitute a belief, from its association with some present impression or with some other belief.

What would be an example of a present impression enlivening an idea of moral virtue or vice? It might be my impression (or my impressions) of external behavior which manifests the action or character I am judging, or (since this would itself more likely produce an actual impression of moral pleasure or pain), an impression of printed words describing the action or character.

Logical Relations

On the interpretation I have been offering, what must be the main logical relations between non-rational moral judgments and these others on which I have been insisting and which I have called inductive?

First of all, it should be recalled that non-rational moral judgments are all literally false, on Hume's theory, unless taken in a reconstructed sense, in which case they are about appearances and hence all true. Let us assume the reconstructed meaning, and let us assume the reconstructed meaning, too, for inductive moral judgments. Now if what I said earlier is correct, the meaning these two kinds of judgments affirm is the same; both ascribe feelings to actions and characters as apparent qualities of them.⁵⁰ The difference is in the data or the ground on the basis of which they ascribe these feelings. The non-rational judgments are direct and intuitive in the sense that in making the judgment one simply experiences immediately the feelings as apparent qualities of the action or character. The inductive judgments either ascribe them on the basis of partial non-rational judgments along with certain beliefs, or on the basis of certain beliefs alone.

⁵⁰ They are mistakenly affirmed as real qualities in the unreconstructed sense.

It follows from this that inductive moral judgments can be false.⁵¹ At least in theory they can be conclusively disverified by a genuine and complete non-rational judgment of exactly the same subject. Similarly, it would seem that they can be completely confirmed, in theory, by a genuine and complete non-rational judgment of exactly the same subject. An inductive moral judgment ascribing a given degree of moral value to an action will be logically equivalent to the judgment that a full and complete non-rational judgment would ascribe that degree of moral value to that action.

This is roughly correct, but needs to be qualified in one important respect. So far in order to simplify presentation I have spoken as though, according to Hume, our feelings of disinterested pleasure and pain are produced by a sympathy with those we think are actually affected by the action or character we are judging. But he holds that in the case of most non-rational judgments, the feelings which we take to qualify an action are instead those produced by a sympathy with no given set of actual individuals, but rather with men in general so far as they are affected in general by actions or characters in general of the kind we are judging. This is to account for the fact that according to our ordinary judgments:

⁵¹In the unreconstructed sense, they must all be false. In this sense, however, we could continue to speak of those ascribing the same degree of virtue and vice to actions and characters as would be ascribed by full and complete non-rational judgments as 'adequate' or 'useful.'

Virtue in rags is still virtue; and the love which it procures attends a man into a dungeon or desert, where the virtue can no longer be exerted in action, and is lost to the world.⁵²

Now this is apparently the particular kind of sympathy we are feeling when we have or make those complete and full non-rational judgments which we take as the standard for completely verifying or completely disverifying our inductive judgments. That is, we would not take a non-rational moral judgment based on complete sympathy with those actually affected as completely confirming or disconfirming an inductive judgment, since in the inductive judgment, the feelings we are thinking about or imagining the action or character to have are those which would be produced by sympathy with men in general.

Where a character is, in every respect, fitted to be beneficial to society, the imagination passes easily from the cause to the effect, without considering that there are still some considerations wanting to render the cause a complete one. General rules create a species of probability, which sometimes influences the judgment, and always the imagination.⁵³

Since all non-rational moral judgments (complete or incomplete) are true, one can never contradict another, nor can one be contradicted by an inductive judgment. When an inductive judgment "corrects"⁵⁴ a non-rational one it either (1) alters it causally, as beliefs often alter immediate sense experience, or (2) utilizes the non-rational one as a datum, but ascribes a different degree or kind of

⁵²T 584. ⁵³T 585. ⁵⁴T 585.

feeling. In the second case the non-rational judgment has not been contradicted, but we will generally wish to be governed by the inductive one in making pronouncements and weighing relative merits.

We might suppose that sympathizing with different people could produce different and opposed (non-rational) moral judgments. But unless we sympathize impartially with all the people affected, our judgment will not be truly disinterested, and hence will not be a moral judgment, however closely it may resemble a moral one in other respects, and however hard it may be to tell from a moral one in practice.

Finally, while we cannot say that a non-rational judgment is false, we must allow, as I observed in Chapter III, that it can be founded on false beliefs about the non-moral features of an action or character. And this puts it to some extent on a par with inductive judgments. Where we think we discover such false beliefs with respect to either non-rational or inductive judgments, we will either cease to make the judgment, ignore it, forget it, or treat it as though it is about a hypothetical rather than an actual subject. We may choose in addition to characterize it as 'false' or irrational after a manner of speaking. Hume, it will be recalled, does allow that we may call a passion "irrational"⁵⁵ if it "is founded on the supposition of the

⁵⁵T 585.

existence of objects, which really do not exist,"⁵⁶ though he thinks this is a sense "which philosophy will scarce allow of."⁵⁷

Causal Relations

I have already noted one causal relation between inductive and non-rational moral judgments. Some inductive judgments, Hume thinks, may or do alter the degree of non-rational ones. That is, the inductive judgment that an act is extremely vicious may possibly suffice to increase the quantity of actual felt pain which one discerns as a quality of the act.

A far more important causal relation has been suggested in the preceding chapters. Non-rational moral judgments are the actual source or the origin of our moral ideas. They are, at least in part, the impressions of the specific kind of pleasure and the specific kind of pain of which our ideas of moral virtue and vice are merely fainter

⁵⁶T 416.

⁵⁷T 459. Hume also allows that sympathy sometimes operates erroneously, so we have an emotion by sympathy with another, when he does not himself really have the emotion:

"...the communicated passion of sympathy sometimes acquires strength from the weakness of its original, and even arises by a transition from affections, which have no existence. Thus when a person obtains any honourable office, or inherits a great fortune, we are always the more rejoic'd for his prosperity, the less sense he seems to have of it....the imagination is affected by the general rule, and makes us conceive a lively idea of the passion, or rather feel the passion itself, in the same manner, as if the person were really actuated by it." T 370.

copies. Thus if we had not had or made at least one non-rational moral judgment of virtue and one of vice, we in fact would be quite unable to make any inductive ones at all. This is not to say that any given non-rational moral judgment in particular is a necessary condition for our being able to make any inductive judgment.

The non-rational judgments which give us our moral ideas must, of course, be impartial. But there is no reason to suppose they need be based on as complete sympathy (and hence as great a quantity of feelings) as what I have been referring to as (complete) non-rational moral judgments. And it is doubtful whether they must be based on sympathy with men in general, as affected by types or classes of actions and characters, rather than simply a sympathy with these particular men actually affected.

General Conclusions

Our exposition of Hume's theory of moral judgments in the Treatise is now complete. What general conclusions does this exposition permit us to draw concerning the theory itself and Hume's presentation of it?

We saw in Chapter II, from our examination of the argument which we called the argument from the inconceivability of deriving an 'ought' from an 'is,' that Hume did not think it possible to define or analyze moral ideas wholly in terms of non-moral ones. In Chapter III Hume's actual view concerning non-rational moral judgments was shown to entail

that no analysis of moral judgments in wholly non-moral terms can be strictly accurate.⁵⁸ On this count then we must conclude that Hume's theory is not to be labeled a form of ethical naturalism, in the currently accepted use of that term.⁵⁹

In Chapter III and again in Chapter IV we have seen that Hume's theory entails that every moral judgment affirms a proposition and is either true or false (taken in the unreconstructed sense, all non-rational moral judgments are false). From this it was concluded that Hume's theory is not strictly a form of emotivism.

We have seen in this chapter that Hume posed an objection to his theory which forced him to elaborate and qualify further; and we have also seen that this qualification committed him to the view that some moral judgments are judgments of probable reason. But we saw early in Chapter I that Hume did not rule out this possibility when he posed his fundamental question; and we saw in Chapter III that he did not rule it out in his arguments against the rationalist answer to it. Furthermore, on his account we cannot make inductive moral judgments unless we have previously made non-rational ones (the non-rational ones furnish us with our ideas of moral virtue and vice). Hume then has presented a single, coherent theory, and he has not contradicted himself in his presentation and argumentation for this theory.

⁵⁸ See Chapter III, Section IV

⁵⁹ This is the use deriving from G. E. Moore, Principia Ethica (Cambridge University Press, 1903).

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