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Reason and Sentiment in Hume's Moral Theory

Imelda Dundas

A Thesis
in
The Department
of
Philosophy

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Reason and Sentiment in Hume's Moral Theory

Imelda Dundas

The moral philosophy of David Hume has caused controversy since the first publication of A Treatise of Human Nature. A great deal of the controversy can be resolved if an accurate interpretation of his moral theory is reached. Hume's critique of ethical rationalism is not a denial that reason is an important component of moral judgments. Rather, the critique is a recognition that both reason and the passions are necessary when making moral judgments. Moreover, his emphasis on moral sentiments does not commit him to a theory of ethical subjectivism. Hume's notion of a general standard of approval supports the objectivity of moral judgments. These claims are corroborated by a careful examination of A Treatise of Human Nature and An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals. The moral theory which was actually developed by Hume is much more subtle than many contemporary interpretations suggest.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter One: Reason and Passion	8
Chapter Two: The Moral Sentiments	46
Chapter Three: The Standard of Approval	84
Conclusion	108
Bibliography	112

Introduction

The Scottish philosopher David Hume was born in Edinburgh in 1711. He was originally expected to pursue a career in the law. However, in Hume's brief autobiography, he confesses that he found an "unsurmountable Aversion to everything but the pursuits of Philosophy and general Learning."¹

The pursuit of philosophy led Hume to compose A Treatise of Human Nature during a three year retreat in France. After returning to London, Hume anonymously published Books I and II of the *Treatise* in 1739, and Book III appeared the following year. The work did not receive the attention that Hume had hoped for. Instead, Hume states: "Never literary Attempt was more unfortunate than my *Treatise of human Nature*. It fell *dead-born from the Press*...."²

The *Treatise* was not dead-born if one means by that that it went unnoticed. It was noticed; however, the attention it received was not favourable. One of the first criticisms of the *Treatise* came in 1740 in the periodical Common Sense. As Ernest Campbell Mossner explains, the unsigned review claimed that Hume's work was "...so incomprehensible as to delude weak readers into accepting it as important

¹David Hume, My Own Life, 1776. in The Letters of David Hume, ed. J. Y. T. Greig, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932) 1.

²Hume, My Own Life 2.

philosophy!"³ Perhaps, even more damning for Hume were the charges that he had "evil intentions".⁴ Hence, the reception of the *Treatise* was hostile and the hostility had practical consequences for Hume. In 1745, he was refused the chair of Ethics and Pneumatical Philosophy at Edinburgh University in part because of the views he expressed in the *Treatise*.⁵ He was later refused a chair at Glasgow University.

While there are various possible reasons that the *Treatise* may have failed, Hume's own estimation was that much of the failure was due to its style, rather than its content. He states in his autobiography:

I had always entertained a Notion, that my want of Success, in publishing the *Treatise* of human Nature, had proceeded more from the manner than the matter; and that I had been guilty of a very usual Indiscretion, in going to the Press too early.⁶

Thus, Hume attempted to recast the work in a more intelligible form. In 1748, he published, no longer anonymously, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding which treated the subjects contained in Book I of the *Treatise*. Book III of the *Treatise* was presented anew as An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals; this work first appeared in 1751. Again the reception of Hume's work was not what he had hoped for. Hume considered the *Enquiry of Morals* his best work, yet to his

³Ernest Campbell Mossner, The Life of David Hume, 1954. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980) 132.

⁴Mossner, Life 120.

⁵For a detailed account of this episode in Hume's life, see Ernest C. Mossner and John V. Price, introduction, A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh, by David Hume (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1967) vii-xxv.

⁶Hume, My Own Life 3.

frustration it came "unnoticed and unobserved into the World".⁷

Hume's self-confessed pursuit of "literary fame" was achieved in areas other than philosophy. In 1742 Hume published a volume of Essays Moral and Political which was successful, although most of the public's attention was focused on the political essays, rather than the philosophical essays.⁸ Most of his fame during his own lifetime was due to his six volume History of England which was published from 1754-1762. Mossner states: "Though the first volume (on the House of Stuart) was poorly received, the finished *History* soon became the most popular one ever written in Britain."⁹ The copy money from the publication of Hume's more successful works allowed him to become "not only independent but opulent".¹⁰

In the Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding Hume wisely states: "Be a philosopher; but, amidst all your philosophy, be still a man" (EU,I,p.9) This seems to be precisely how Hume lived his own life. After Hume's death in 1776, the philosopher Adam Smith described Hume:

And that gaiety of temper, so agreeable in society, but which is so often accompanied with frivolous and superficial qualities, was in him certainly attended with the most severe application, the most extensive learning, the greatest depth of thought, and a capacity in every respect the most comprehensive. Upon the whole, I have always considered him, both in his lifetime, and since his death, as approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature

⁷Hume, My Own Life 4.

⁸Mossner, Life of David Hume 143.

⁹Mossner, Life of David Hume 224.

¹⁰Hume, My Own Life 5.

of human frailty will admit.¹¹

This thesis will examine the moral philosophy of Hume that is presented in the *Treatise* and in the *Enquiries*. Hume requests in the "Advertisement" to the *Enquiries* that they alone, rather than the *Treatise*, be "regarded as containing his philosophical sentiments and principles". For he believes that the *Enquiries* correct "negligences in his former reasoning and more in the expression". It is certainly true that the written style of the *Enquiries* is more accessible than the style of the *Treatise*. However, it is also true that in his attempt to write a more popular work, Hume omitted some of the detail that is present in the *Treatise*. Therefore, this thesis shall concentrate more attention on the fuller presentation of Hume's moral theory that is found in the *Treatise*. Relevant differences and clarifications in the *Enquiry of Morals* will however, be duly explored.

Nearly 250 years ago Hume was denied the chair of Ethics and Pneumatical Philosophy at Edinburgh University, in part because it was believed that in the *Treatise* he had destroyed the foundation of morality. In A Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Edinburgh, Hume states the criticism as follows:

I come now to the last Charge, which, according to the prevalent Opinion of Philosophers in this Age, will certainly be regarded as the severest, viz. the Author's destroying all the Foundations of Morality.¹²

¹¹Adam Smith, "To William Strahan," 9 Nov. 1776, letter III, Appendix L of The Letters of David Hume, ed. J. Y. T. Greig, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932) 452.

¹²David Hume, A Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Edinburgh 1745. ed. by Ernest C. Mossner and John V. Price, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1967) 30.

Hume believes that the accusation is based on selected passages taken out of their context. He states:

The Words which have been carefully pickt out from a large Volume will no doubt have a dangerous Aspect to careless Readers; and the Author, in my Apprehension, cannot fully defend himself without a particular Detail, which it is impossible for a careless Reader to enter into.¹³

It is interesting that 250 years later the same sort of criticism of Hume is prevalent. The early criticisms suggested his work was "unintelligible" and the result of "evil intentions". Recently, Hume has been accused of being "confused" or "devious".¹⁴ Moreover, he is still held responsible for destroying the foundations of morality. Mortimer Adler has claimed that Hume "...is responsible for the skepticism about the objective truth of moral philosophy that is prevalent in the twentieth century."¹⁵

The accusations against Hume are, as Hume himself recognized, the result of considering certain passages from his work without paying due attention to the details. Therefore, this thesis will defend Hume from some of the most common misinterpretations of his moral theory, by providing a detailed consideration of his work. There are various ways that one may evaluate Hume's moral theory; however, they will not all be included in this thesis. Instead, attention will be focused on the

¹³Hume, Letter from a Gentleman 33-34.

¹⁴R. D. Miller, Hume's Moral Philosophy: A Commentary on the "Treatise" (Harrogate: The Duchy Press, 1991) 37.

¹⁵Mortimer J. Adler, Ten Philosophical Mistakes (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1985) 118.

roles of reason and sentiment in Hume's moral theory.

In the first chapter of this thesis, Hume's critique of ethical rationalism will be examined. Many commentators have assumed that in this critique Hume has denied that reason plays any role in morality. This, however, is not the case. Hume does not provide a concise definition of the term "reason". Nonetheless, in the context of his distinction between the methods of demonstrative reasoning and probable reasoning, Hume's use of the term will be established. It will be shown that in his critique of rationalism, Hume has only denied that reason *alone*, without the influence of the passions, is the source of moral judgments.

The second chapter will address perhaps the most common misconception about Hume's moral philosophy. Hume is often regarded as an ethical subjectivist. This view is so widely accepted that it is stated in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy that: "The greatest... subjectivist was the Scottish philosopher David Hume."¹⁶ Despite this prevalent opinion, it will be argued in the second chapter that Hume's emphasis on the role of passions or sentiments does not commit him to a subjectivist theory of ethics.

In the third chapter the objectivity of Hume's moral theory will be explored. This will be done by examining two notions that are too often neglected when Hume's moral theory is considered. If due attention is paid to general rules and the general point of view in Hume's moral theory, it will be recognized that Hume is not

¹⁶Jonathan Harrison, "Ethical Subjectivism," The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Paul Edwards, vol. 3 (New York: Free Press, 1967) 78.

an ethical subjectivist. The aim throughout the thesis will be to show that Hume's moral theory is much more balanced than is commonly supposed.

Chapter 1

Reason and Passion

Hume begins his inquiry into morals by criticizing rationalist theories of ethics. It is important to get a proper understanding of this negative phase of Hume's theory in order to do justice to the theory of moral sentiments that he develops in its place. Hume's arguments against rationalist ethics in A Treatise of Human Nature, are to be found mainly in Book II, Part III, Section III and Book III, Part I, Section I. In An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals his critique of rationalism is found primarily in Appendix I.

Hume has often been criticized for his analysis of rationalism. However, much of this criticism falsely assumes that in his arguments against rationalism Hume has denied any role for reason. For example, R.D. Miller suggests that Hume is either confused or devious when he "...conceals his outright rejection of reason as a principle."¹⁷ Miller goes on to say: "It is sad to listen to Hume as he systematically weakens his moral philosophy, based as it is on natural feeling and sentiment, by denying it any connection with reason."¹⁸ Alasdair MacIntyre expresses a similar

¹⁷R.D. Miller, Hume's Moral Philosophy: A Commentary on the "Treatise" (Harrogate: The Duchy Press, 1991) 37.

¹⁸R.D. Miller, Hume's Moral 38.

view when he states:

What drives Hume to the conclusion that morality must be understood in terms of, explained, and justified by reference to, the place of the passions and desires in human life is his initial assumption that *either* morality is the work of reason *or* it is the work of the passions and his own apparently conclusive arguments that it cannot be the work of reason.¹⁹

Both Miller and MacIntyre have failed to see that Hume does indeed suggest that reason has a role to play in morality. What Hume has denied is that *only* reason has a role. That this is Hume's view shall become clear once we turn to Hume's arguments. Before this, however, the position of ethical rationalism should be briefly considered.

The ethical rationalists, that Hume criticized, argued that moral truths are discovered by reason. Reason discovers eternal and immutable moral truths in much the same way that reason discovers mathematical truths. D. D. Raphael summarizes the position nicely:

According to ethical rationalism, moral judgment is an exercise of reason, discerning an absolute right and wrong, and moral action is motivated by that discernment.²⁰

Thus, reason was supposed to reveal the moral truth and motivate one to act in accordance with that truth.

In the *Treatise* Hume did not name the philosophers that he was criticizing for

¹⁹Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue: A Study of Moral Theory (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) 49.

²⁰D.D. Raphael, "Hume's Critique of Ethical Rationalism," Hume and the Enlightenment: Essays Presented to Ernest Campbell Mossner, ed. William B. Todd (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1974) 15.

their ethical rationalism. However, from his wording there is good reason to suspect that some of his targets are Locke, Clarke and Wollaston. At one point his discussion of Wollaston becomes so specific that the editor, L. A. Selby-Bigge, interpolates Wollaston's name in brackets.²¹ In the *Enquiries* Hume does identify Malebranche, Cudworth and Clarke as some of the philosophers who "pretend" to found morality on reason alone.²² It is not necessary to discuss in detail the views of all of these philosophers, yet it may be helpful to point out a few examples of the ideas Hume had in mind in his critique of rationalism.

Hume states that some philosophers have argued that morality is capable of demonstration and that "...this science may be brought to an equal certainty with geometry or algebra" (T,III,I,I,p.463). It is quite conceivable that this is directed at Locke, even though Locke is most often considered to be an empiricist. If one understands that empiricism holds that knowledge of all matters of fact comes from experience, one may expect Locke, like Hume, to argue that moral knowledge is discovered by experience rather than pure reason. However, in An Essay Concerning

²¹David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, 1739-1740. Edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge. Second Edition by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978): (III,I,I,p.461n). Hereafter references will be indicated in the text by the abbreviation "T" followed by the book, part, section, and page numbers.

²²David Hume, Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals, 1777. Edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge. Third Edition by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975): (EM,III,II,p.197). Hereafter references to An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding will be indicated in the text by the abbreviation "EU" followed by the section, part (where applicable), and page numbers. References to An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals will be indicated in the text by the abbreviation "EM" followed by the section, part (where applicable), and page numbers.

Human Understanding, Locke states that we:

...might place *morality* amongst the *sciences capable of demonstration*; wherein I doubt not but from self-evident propositions, by necessary consequences, as incontestible as those in mathematics, the measures of right or wrong might be made out....²³

In referring those who affirm "...that there are eternal fitnesses and unfitnesses of things, which are the same to every rational being that considers them...", Hume may be referring to the philosophy of Clarke (T,III,I,I,p.456). This becomes evident if Clarke's A Discourse of Natural Religion is examined. There one finds many statements such as the following: "...these eternal and necessary differences of things make it *fit and reasonable* for creatures so to act; they cause it to be their *duty*, or lay an *obligation* upon them, so to do...."²⁴ This passage not only shows that Hume may have had Clarke in mind; it also displays the tenets of rationalism that moral truths are eternal and reason gives rise to obligations.

The point of providing these examples from Locke and Clarke is to show that Hume was not arguing against imaginary philosophers, 'straw men', in his critique. Furthermore, the examples support the concise description of ethical rationalism provided above. We are now in a position to turn to Hume's critique directly.

The first section of Book III, Part I of the *Treatise* is entitled "Moral Distinctions not deriv'd from Reason". Hume begins by asserting that: "Morality is

²³John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, 1690, ed. A.D. Woozley (Glasgow: William Collins Sons and Co. Ltd., 1964) p.39 (*Essay*, IV, iii, 18).

²⁴Samuel Clarke, A Discourse of Natural Religion, 1706, in British Moralists, ed. D.D. Raphael, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969) 192.

a subject that interests us above all others..." (T,III,I,I,p.455). Not only is morality of great interest, it is also something that we believe "lies within human comprehension" (T,III,I,I,p.456). Morality is a part of practical, rather than speculative philosophy which means that it is "...supposed to influence our passions and actions, and to go beyond the calm and indolent judgments of the understanding" (T,III,I,I,p.457). If morality did not influence actions and passions, it would be pointless to try to inculcate it. Yet, according to Hume, we do try to inculcate morality and we do believe that morality is a part of practical philosophy. Thus, morality influences our actions and passions.

It must at this point be recalled that in Book I of the *Treatise*, Hume argued that nothing is present to the mind but perceptions, and that perceptions are either impressions or they are ideas (T,I,I,I,p.1). Thus, the question for moralists becomes: "*...Whether 'tis by means of our ideas or impressions we distinguish betwixt vice and virtue, and pronounce an action blameable or praiseworthy?*" (T,III,I,I,p.456).

The ethical rationalists maintain that is by means of our ideas that we discern moral truths. That is, morality is discovered by the understanding or reason. Hume suggests that if this is the case virtue and vice must be discovered in one of two ways.

He states:

As the operations of human understanding divide themselves into two kinds, the comparing of ideas, and the inferring of matter of fact; were virtue discover'd by the understanding; it must be an object of one of these operations, nor is there any third operation of the understanding, which can discover it. (T,III,I,I,p.463)²⁵

²⁵See also (T,II,III,III,p.413) for a similar statement.

Hume, however, believes that neither of these operations will provide the knowledge the rationalists claim.

Hume's argument can be summarized quite simply: morality influences actions and passions, reason alone cannot influence actions and passions, therefore moral distinctions cannot be derived from reason alone. Hume clearly believes that moral distinctions influence actions and passions. If they were derived from reason, then it would be possible for the operations of reason alone to influence actions and passions. Hume is adamant that this is not possible.

To understand why Hume believes that reason is "wholly inactive", it is necessary to turn back to Book II, Part III, Section III entitled "Of the influencing motives of the will". In this section Hume enters the debate of the supposed conflict between invariable, eternal reason, and the blind, inconstant passions.

It has already been pointed out that Hume believes reason to be concerned with either the *relations of ideas* or *matters of fact*. Thus, since there is an apparent conflict between reason and passion, it is not surprising that Hume defines passions not as *ideas* but as the other sort of perception: *impressions*. Passions are impressions of reflexion as opposed to impressions of sensation. Hume explains this distinction:

Original impressions or impressions of sensation are such as without any antecedent perception arise in the soul, from the constitution of the body, from the animal spirits, or from the application of objects to external organs. Secondary, or reflective impression are such as proceed from some of these original ones, either immediately or by the interposition of its idea. (T,II,I,I,p.275)

Hume offers a two-pronged argument against those who "...give the preference

to reason, and ...assert that men are only so far virtuous as they conform themselves to its dictates" (T,II,III,III,p.413). First, reason *alone* can never be a motive for actions of the will. Second, reason cannot oppose the passions in their direction of the will.

To understand the first part of the argument Hume recalls a distinction first made in Book I. There are two sorts of reasoning; demonstrative reasoning is concerned with relations of ideas, and probable reasoning is concerned with matters of fact. Demonstrative reasoning is not a motive for the will because:

As it's [sic] proper province is the world of ideas, and as the will always places us in that of realities, demonstration and volition seem upon that account, to be totally remov'd, from each other. (T,II,III,-III,p.413)

Mathematics is one sort of demonstrative reasoning, and although it is very useful in life, it has no influence by itself. Hume provides an example of this: "A merchant is desirous of knowing the sum total of his accounts with any person: Why: but that he may learn what sum will have the same *effects* in paying his debts..." (T,II,III,-III,p.414). Demonstrative reasoning may guide our judgments, but it is not itself a motive.

In order to prove that reason is never a motive to actions of the will, Hume must now address the possibility that probable reasoning may provide motives for the will. This sort of reasoning concerns objects and their relations of cause and effect. An object may be accompanied by the prospect of pain or pleasure. These prospects, according to Hume, give rise to corresponding aversions and propensities. The emotions of aversion and desire are extended to the causes and effects of the

object; these relations of cause and effect are discovered by reason and experience.

The crucial point that Hume makes is that if we are not concerned with, or are indifferent to, the object and its relations, they will have no influence on our actions.

He states:

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. (T,II,III,III,p.414)

Thus, reason alone cannot be a motive to action, for we may quite possibly be indifferent to its discoveries.

Taking it as established that reason alone is not a motive, Hume begins the second portion of his attack on rationalism. He claims that reason cannot prevent the will from acting or dispute the preference of the passions. The prevention of a volition requires giving an impulse in the contrary direction. If reason were capable of providing such a contrary impulse, then it must be capable of having an original influence on the will. Hume has already shown why reason alone cannot influence the will, hence it cannot oppose the passions by providing a contrary impulse. To speak of the combat of reason and passion, as the rationalists do, is not to speak strictly and philosophically.

At this point in the argument Hume makes one of his most notorious and controversial statements. He states: "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them" (T,II,III,III,p.415). This passage is so often used as a sort of summation of Hume's theory that it is important to consider it immediately, rather than wait until the later

discussion of his theory. For if we fail to understand this metaphor, we may too easily accept Miller's claim that reason has no role in Hume's moral theory, or MacIntyre's view that Hume advocates an either/or view of the passions and reason.

In the section in which this metaphor of Hume's occurs, he is arguing against the rationalist philosophers who claim that reason is the victor in the supposed combat of reason and passion. Hume, having shown that reason alone can never be the motive to action or oppose the passions, is reiterating his view that reason alone is not the master. The passions are always necessary if we are not to be indifferent to objects and their relations.

David Norton is quite convincing in his explanation of this metaphor. He states that the slavery Hume had in mind was not that of North American chattels. Rather, Hume was recalling the slavery of classic Rome in which Greek slaves, although restricted, were required to teach the Roman youths. Norton aptly suggests:

...given that they educated those very masters and influenced not only their ideas of what was true and false, but also their ideas of good and evil, it seems scarcely credible to claim that their subordination was thorough and complete.²⁶

The essential point that Norton is making is that the slavery metaphor does not commit Hume to the view that reason has no role in morality. Given that reason does have a role, A. T. Nuyen is quite right to propose: "If reason is the slave, it

²⁶David Fate Norton, David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982) 126.

will be in our interest to cultivate it, sharpen it, and use it always and to the full."²⁷

Hume is aware that his arguments may seem quite extraordinary and for this reason he offers some further considerations. A passion cannot be opposed to or contradict truth and reason because passions are original existences. In saying that passions are original existences, Hume means that they are non-representative qualities. They do not copy or refer to other existences. The passions themselves cannot oppose reason because:

...nothing can be contrary to truth or reason, except what has a reference to it, and as the judgments of our understanding only have this reference, it must follow, that passions can be contrary to reason only so far as they are *accompany'd* with some judgment or opinion.
(T,II,III,III,p.416)

When we say that a passion is unreasonable we mean, according to Hume, one of two things. Either we mean that the passion is founded on the supposition of an object that does not actually exist, or we mean that in exercising the passion we have chosen means which are insufficient for the desired end. In both cases, however, it is actually the judgment that is unreasonable rather than the passion itself.

It is in this light that we must understand Hume's seemingly bizarre statement that: "'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger" (T,II,III,III,p.416). This preference is not contrary to reason because passions can never be contrary to reason, nor is the preference accompanied

²⁷A.T. Nuyen, "David Hume on Reason, Passions and Morals," Hume Studies 10.1 (April 1984): 27.

by either of the two sorts of false judgments. The preference does not involve a false judgment about the existence of any object, nor does it involve choosing means which are insufficient for the desired end. Furthermore, whenever a judgment is recognized to be false, the passions will capitulate to reason. Hume states: "The moment we perceive the falsehood of any supposition, or the insufficiency of any means our passions yield to our reason without any opposition" (T,II,III,III,p.416). This statement quite clearly supports Norton's contention that reason is not thoroughly and completely subordinated to the passions. Hume has clearly allowed for cases in which the passions are guided by reason.

Hume concludes this section of the *Treatise* by explaining how it is possible that we may mistakenly come to believe that reason influences action. Reason often, according to Hume, "...exerts itself without producing any sensible emotion; and except in the more sublime disquisitions of philosophy, or in the frivolous subtilties [sic] of the schools, scarce ever conveys any pleasure or uneasiness" (T,II,III,-III,p.417). Some desires and tendencies are so calm and tranquil that, although they are passions, we actually confuse them with the calmness of reason because of the similarity of the sensations to the mind. Hume suggests that the following sorts of passions could be mistaken for reason:

These desires 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. (T,II,III,III,p.417)

It is important to note that in suggesting that some passions are so calm in their influence on the will, Hume has not denied that more violent passions have

influence. Nor has Hume claimed that the more violent passions have a greater influence. In addition to the distinction between calm and violent passions, there is a separate distinction of strong and weak. Thus, a calm passion may be stronger than a violent one (T,II,III,IV,pp.417-418). In fact when calm passions have a greater influence than the violent ones on a person's will, we call it "strength of mind" (T,II,III,III,p.417). From these considerations, it becomes clear why Hume did not accept the rationalists' view of the passions as blind and deceitful things to be conquered by reason.

John Laird has suggested that Hume's argument that reason does not affect conduct is merely a "counter assertion" against the rationalists.²⁸ This may seem like a plausible suggestion in view of the brevity of the arguments Hume offers in Book II, Part III, Section III. However, in Book III, Part I, Section I, Hume does attempt to "render still more conclusive, and more applicable to the present subject", the arguments that reason is inert (T,III,I,I,p.458). These arguments will support R. David Broiles' claim that Laird is mistaken, because Hume provides an *analysis* of reason to show that it alone cannot be a motive for action.²⁹

In Book III, Hume reiterates his claim from Book II that reason is inactive. The claim is supported by more detailed arguments. Reason discovers truth and falsehood. "Truth or falsehood consists in an agreement or disagreement either to

²⁸John Laird, Hume's Philosophy of Human Nature. 1932 (N.p.: Archon Books, 1967) 204.

²⁹R. David Broiles, The Moral Philosophy of David Hume (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964) 38.

the *real* relations of ideas, or to *real* existence and matter of fact" (T,III,I,I,p.458). Passions and actions can be neither true or false, reasonable or unreasonable, because they are original existences that refer to nothing else, and therefore cannot agree or disagree with anything else.

Hume believes that this argument shows two things. First, that actions do not derive their merit from conformity to reason. Second, he claims it shows more indirectly that:

...as reason can never immediately prevent or produce any action by contradicting or approving of it, it cannot be the source of the distinction betwixt moral good and evil, which are found to have that influence. Actions may be laudable or blameable; but they cannot be reasonable or unreasonable.... (T,III,I,I,p.458)

Broiles claims that it is inconceivable that Hume's argument that passions are neither reasonable nor unreasonable can indirectly prove that reason cannot produce or prevent any action.³⁰ If Broiles is correct, then it seems that Hume's statement that reason can never produce or prevent any action is unfounded. This would be quite damaging to Hume's argument. For his critique of rationalism depends upon proving that reason alone does not influence action, and therefore that reason is not the source of the distinction between moral good and evil.

If one only examines the above quoted passage, Broiles' claim has a certain plausibility. There does not seem to be any necessary connection between Hume's premise and conclusion in the passage. However, in defense of Hume one must recall that Hume believes he has already proven reason is never capable of producing

³⁰Broiles, Moral Philosophy 75.

or preventing action in Book II. Thus, it is not the case that Hume has not defended the claim that reason does not produce or prevent action. Consequently, his claim that reason is not the source of the moral distinction between good and evil, is not unfounded in light of his overall moral theory.

Hume next considers a possible objection to his theory that actions are neither reasonable nor unreasonable. One may agree with this claim and yet maintain that the judgments which attend an action are the source of immorality. One may suggest:

The action may cause a judgment, or may be *obliquely* caus'd by one, when the judgment concurs with a passion; and by an abusive way of speaking, which philosophy will scarce allow of, the same contrariety may, upon that account, be ascrib'd to the action. (T,III,I,I,p.459)

Hume acknowledges that we do sometimes speak as if an action were reasonable or unreasonable. However, it is not the actions that are conformable or contrary to reason; it is only the judgments which can be described in this way. Still the question remains; can a judgment that attends an action be the source of immorality?

There are, according to Hume, only two sorts of judgments that accompany our actions; either the judgment informs us of the existence of an object which is the proper object of the passion, or it informs us of the means to an end. However, Hume maintains that a false judgment that is made in one of these two ways is only a mistake of fact. Such mistakes "...moralists have not generally suppos'd criminal, as being perfectly involuntary" (T,III,I,I,p.459). He continues by claiming: "No one can ever regard such errors as a defect in my moral character" (T,III,I,I,p.460).

Hume's contention that mistakes of fact are not regarded as defects in moral

character seems odd at this point. One may make an involuntary mistake of fact because one has been careless or lazy. This would certainly seem to be a defect in character. There is no reason for Hume not to agree with this. Carelessness and laziness are certainly avoidable. However, Hume seems to have only unavoidable errors in mind. In the examples that Hume provides for his contention, he more specifically refers to "unavoidable" errors not being criminal (T,III,I,I,p.460). Moreover, Hume argues that it is the one who claims that moral distinctions are derived from the truth or falsity of judgments, who cannot distinguish avoidable and unavoidable errors.

If moral distinctions were derived from the truth or falsehood of a judgment, there would be absurd consequences. Hume maintains that the moral distinctions would occur whenever a judgment is made. This would allow no difference between questions concerning "...an apple or a kingdom, or whether the error be avoidable or unavoidable" (T,III,I,I,p.460). Furthermore, it would suggest that all virtues and vices are equal, because judgments do not admit of degrees of agreement or disagreement with reason. In essence, if moral distinctions were derived from the truth or falsehood of judgments, there would be none of the subtleties that we allow for in morality.

Perhaps, an objector may admit that a mistake of fact is not criminal, but maintain that a mistake of right may be criminal. For example, Wollaston maintains: "*Moral good and evil are coincident with right and wrong.* For that cannot be good,

which is wrong; not that evil, which is right."³¹ Hume points out, however, that to say moral good is right and moral evil is wrong begs the question. Hume states: "...I would answer, that 'tis impossible such a mistake [of right] can ever be the original source of immorality, since it supposes a real right and wrong; that is a real distinction in morals independent of these judgments" (T,III,I,I,p.460).

Hume continues to argue against what he takes to be Wollaston's view that falsehood is the source of immorality. Hume may have had in mind the following statements of Wollaston:

I lay this down then as a fundamental maxim, *that whoever acts as if things were so, or not so, doth by his acts, declare that they are so; as plainly as he could by words, and with more reality. And if the things are otherwise, his acts contradict those propositions, which assert them to be as they are.*³²

Wollaston adds to this:

*No act (whether word or deed) of any being, to whom moral good and evil are imputable, that interferes with any true proposition, or denies any thing to be as it is, can be right.*³³

Hume suggests in response to Wollaston's views that our actions do not cause judgments in ourselves, it is only others who make true or false judgments of our actions. For example, a person may see through a window Hume behaving lewdly with his neighbour's wife, and falsely conclude that the woman is Hume's wife. However, it was not Hume's intention to produce such a false conclusion. Therefore,

³¹William Wollaston, The Religion of Nature Delineated, 1722, in British Moralists, ed. D.D. Raphael, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969) 289.

³²Wollaston, Religion 243.

³³Wollaston, Religion 243.

if Hume closes the curtains, there is no immorality in the actions because when concealed the actions do not produce any false conclusions. Moreover, Wollaston's arguments are circular, according to Hume, because a reason must be given why falsehood is vicious, and truth is virtuous (T,III,I,I,p.462n).

In Book III, Hume expands the arguments against the view that morality is capable of demonstration, which he previously made in Book II. If morality were capable of demonstration, then it would concern the relations of ideas. Thus, this position would require that virtue and vice consist in such relations.

Hume states that there are only four relations susceptible of demonstration and certainty; resemblance, contrariety, degrees in quality, and proportions in quantity and number.³⁴ These four relations are all applicable to irrational beings and inanimate objects. Therefore, if morality consisted in these relations, it would be equally applicable to irrational or inanimate objects. Hume states: "'Tis unquestionable, therefore, that morality lies not in any of these relations, nor the sense of it in their discovery" (T,III,I,I,p.464).

One may object to Hume by claiming that there are other sorts of relations. However, Hume challenges the objector: "To this I know not what to reply, till some one be so good as to point out to me this new relation. 'Tis impossible to refute a system, which has never yet been explain'd" (T,III,I,I,p.464).

Barry Stroud has criticized Hume's argument for amounting to no more than

³⁴The claim that these four relations are the only ones capable of demonstration is based on earlier arguments in the *Treatise* (T,I,III,I,p.69-70).

a counter-claim to the rationalists who believe morality is capable of demonstration.

Stroud states:

No defence at all is given anywhere for the principle that the four kinds of relations mentioned are the only ones that things can be demonstrated to bear to each other. Hume does no more than hurl his familiar challenge for someone to come up with some new relation that will secure the demonstrability of moral judgments.... But that hardly establishes the truth of Hume's own unexplained counter-claims, and if he had fully established those claims no such challenge would be necessary.³⁵

Stroud's criticism seems quite unfounded. It has already been pointed out that Hume defends the claim that these four relations are the only ones susceptible of demonstration in Book I, Part III, Section I. Perhaps, one may feel that this is not a possible defense of a claim made in Book III, for Hume himself says in the advertisement to Book III:

I think it proper to inform the public, that tho' this be a third volume of the Treatise of Human Nature, yet 'tis in some measures independent of the other two, and requires not that the reader shou'd enter into all the abstract reasonings contain'd in them. (T,III,Advertisement)

However, even if the discussion is confined to the arguments of Book III, Hume may be defended from the criticism of making a mere counter-claim. For, immediately after Hume challenges one to point out a fifth relation, he argues that a fifth relation could never meet the requirements of morality.

The first condition any possible fifth relation would have to meet, is that it must hold between internal actions of the mind and external objects. Hume states:

As moral good and evil belong only to the actions of the mind, and are

³⁵Barry Stroud, Hume (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977) 174.

deriv'd from our situation with regard to external objects, the relations, from which these moral distinctions arise, must lie only betwixt internal actions, and external objects, and must not be applicable either to internal actions, compared among themselves, or to external objects, when placed in opposition to other external objects. (T,III,I,I,p.465)

This is not an arbitrary condition that Hume has set forth. If the relations held between internal actions alone, it would be possible for people to be guilty of crimes within themselves. If the relations held between external objects alone, then inanimate objects would be susceptible to virtue and vice.

The second condition that a fifth sort of relation must meet is even more difficult to satisfy. The rationalists maintain not only that there are eternal, immutable truths, but also that awareness of these truths has the same effect on every rational creature. For example, Clarke states:

...all rational creatures ought, that is, are obliged to take care that their wills and actions be constantly determined and governed by the eternal rule of right and equity: so the certainty and universality of that obligation is plainly confirmed....³⁶

Hume points out that it is not enough for the rationalists to point to the supposed relation between moral good and evil, they must also explain how it creates duties and obligations. Hume states:

In order, therefore, to prove, that the measures of right and wrong are eternal laws, *obligatory* on every rational mind, 'tis not sufficient to shew the relations upon which they are founded: We must also point out the connexion betwixt the relation and the will; and must prove that this connexion is so necessary, that in every well-disposed mind, it must take place and have its influence; tho' the difference betwixt these minds be in other respects immense and infinite. (T,III,I,I,p.465)

³⁶Clarke, Discourse of Natural Religion 201.

This draws attention to an important insight of Hume's; it is one thing to know what is virtuous and quite another thing to act in accordance with this knowledge.

The difficulty for the rationalists is that even if there was a fifth sort of moral relation, it would not have the desired effect of resulting in obligations to act in a certain manner. Hume provides two reasons for this. First, he has already established that reason which always deals with relations, can never alone produce any action or passion. Second, the relation of cause and effect is always based on experience. Since the moral relation is supposed to cause the action, the rationalist, "...cannot prove *a priori*, that these relations, if they really existed and were perceiv'd, wou'd be universally forcible and obligatory" (T,III,I,I,p.466). In essence, even a moral relation will not do the work that the rationalists require.

To support his contention that morality does not consist in any relation discovered by reason, Hume offers two examples. The first is the crime of parricide. If the viciousness of this act was due to a relation, a sapling could be guilty of this crime. For example, the sapling may grow so large that it deprives the parent tree of sun, thus resulting in the parent's death. This is no different from a son murdering his father. Hume adds that it is useless to claim that the cases are different because the sapling does not act voluntarily, for the will does not give rise to any difference in the relation. Thus, since the same relation does not in both cases lead to immorality, the relation cannot be the source of the notion of immorality.

Hume's second example examines why incest in animals is not considered

immoral, although it is immoral in human beings. It is not helpful to respond that animals, unlike humans, do not have sufficient reason to discover the moral turpitude of the action. Hume states:

...this is evidently arguing in a circle. For before reason can perceive this turpitude, the turpitude must exist; and consequently is independent of decisions of our reason, and is their object more properly than their effect. (T,III,I,I,p.467)

If the immorality of incest is due to some relation, it is irrelevant to point to the different reasoning capacities of animals and humans. The obligation of animals not to commit incest would exist regardless of whether or not the animals realize their obligation. Reason discovers, but does not produce the obligations.

Having denied the plausibility of any view that suggests that morality concerns relations of ideas, Hume next turns to the other operation of the understanding. Perhaps, one may maintain that morality consists in a matter of fact that can be discovered by reason. In response to this Hume asks one to find the matter of fact called vice in wilful murder. Hume suggests:

In which-ever way you take it, you find only 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. (T,III,I,-I,p.468)

Reason cannot discover any matter of fact that is called vice in an action.

Hume does not maintain that there is no matter of fact in wilful murder. He only maintains that the matter of fact is not an object of reason. He states:

You can never find it [vice], till you turn your reflexion 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. (T,III,I,I,p.469)

This statement contains important elements of Hume's more positive arguments about morality. The positive aspects of his theory will be developed in detail in the following chapter. The important point to be noticed now is that Hume has only denied that there is a matter of fact in moral acts that can be discovered by reason.

In the *Treatise*, Hume concludes his attack on rationalist ethics with one of his most widely discussed passages. The interpretations of what has come to be called the 'is-ought' passage, differ greatly. Because it is such a controversial passage, it should be quoted in its entirety:

I cannot forbear adding to these reasonings an observation, which may, perhaps, be found of some importance. 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 imperceptible; 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 given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from the others, which are entirely different from it. But as authors do not commonly use this precaution, I shall presume to recommend it to the readers; and am persuaded, that this small attention wou'd subvert all the vulgar systems of morality, and let us see, that the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceiv'd by reason. (T,III,I,I,pp.469-470)

This passage of Hume's is most often interpreted in terms of the current ethical debate between ethical naturalism and ethical non-naturalism. Ethical naturalists believe that it is logically possible to infer an evaluative conclusion (an

'ought' statement) from non-evaluative premises ('is' statements). The non-naturalists deny that this is possible, in essence maintaining that there is an unbridgeable gap between 'is' and 'ought'.

Hume has been supposed alternatively to support both the ethical non-naturalists and the naturalists. For example, Dorothy Mitchell maintains Hume's passage attacks naturalism. She states:

Earlier in the chapter he has concluded that moral claims are neither true or false. Of course, given that conclusion, it follows that moral conclusions could not be deduced from factual premisses. The real attack on naturalism, to which his final paragraph is a corollary, lies in his attempt to show that there are no moral facts.³⁷

Thus, Mitchell is maintaining that Hume has denied that factual premises can lead to an evaluative conclusion. It should be noted that her argument is based on the assumption that Hume denies that there are any moral facts. Mitchell's argument misses an important point. Hume has not denied that there are any moral facts; he has only denied that the facts of the matter relevant to morality are objects of reason. Nevertheless, she provides us with an example of Hume being enlisted in support of anti-naturalism.

MacIntyre, in contrast with Mitchell, has in essence defended the view that Hume is a naturalist. For MacIntyre draws attention to the fact that Hume has not stated that it is impossible for one to move from is to ought, only that it seems "inconceivable".³⁸ It is true that Hume does not state that the move is impossible.

³⁷Dorothy Mitchell, "Must We Talk About 'Is' and 'Ought'?" Mind 77 (1968): 544-545.

³⁸A. C. MacIntyre, "Hume on 'Is' and 'Ought'," Philosophical Review 68 (1959): 460.

However, his statement in the 'is-ought' passage that it is "altogether inconceivable" seems to imply, despite MacIntyre's claim, that Hume thought the move was much more than a difficult conceptual task.

MacIntyre continues his argument that Hume is a naturalist:

What I want to suggest next is that if Hume does affirm the impossibility of deriving an "ought" from an "is" then he is the first to perform this particular impossibility.... It would be very odd if Hume did affirm the logical irrelevance of facts to moral judgments, for the whole difference in atmosphere- and it is very marked- between his discussion of morality and those of, for example, Hare and Nowell-Smith springs from his interest in the facts of morality.³⁹

This passage is in stark contrast with Mitchell's. MacIntyre maintains that Hume is a naturalist because Hume himself makes the difficult transition from 'is' to 'ought'. MacIntyre also draws attention to the point, the important point that Mitchell missed, that Hume is keenly interested in moral facts.

From the examples of Mitchell and MacIntyre, it becomes obvious that one could enter into a great deal of discussion of Hume's non-naturalism or his naturalism. However, this would lead one away from examining Hume's own argument. His concern, as Terence Penelhum has correctly pointed out, is not the debate between naturalism and anti-naturalism; rather his concern is with the failure of the vulgar systems of morality.⁴⁰

MacIntyre agrees that Hume's passage is meant to subvert the vulgar systems. He maintains, however, that by 'vulgar' Hume was not referring to any moral systems

³⁹MacIntyre, " 'Is' and 'Ought'" 455.

⁴⁰Terence Penelhum, Hume (London: Macmillan Press LTD, 1975) 161.

presented by philosophers. MacIntyre supports his claim: "Nor is there any ground for supposing Hume to depart from ordinary eighteenth century usage on this point. Elsewhere in the *Treatise* [e.g., T,I,IV,II,p.216] there is a passage in which he uses interchangeably the expressions 'the vulgar' and 'the generality of mankind'."⁴¹ Thus, MacIntyre suggests that Hume was attacking the commonly accepted morals of his time, rather than philosophers. Furthermore, the ordinary morality in the eighteenth century would be religious morality.

The difficulty with MacIntyre's interpretation is that Hume has also used the word 'vulgar' in reference to debates that it would be hard to characterize as referring to the generality of mankind. For example, he refers to the "vulgar dispute concerning the *degrees* of benevolence & self-love" (EM,IX,I,p.270). Moreover, as D. D. Raphael points out, it would be quite strange for Hume to suddenly, at the end of a discussion, shift from criticising the rationalists to attacking common morality.⁴² MacIntyre's explanation would also fail to account for the fact that Hume believes this added consideration would reinforce his point that moral distinctions are not discovered by reason alone.

Raphael maintains that the is-ought passage is an argument limited to the rationalist philosophy of Clarke.⁴³ Clarke makes statements such as: "The same necessary and eternal *different relations*, that different things bear to one another...

⁴¹MacIntyre, "'Is' and 'Ought'" 464.

⁴²Raphael, "Hume's Critique " 26.

⁴³Raphael, "Hume's Critique" 26-27.

ought likewise determine the wills of all subordinate rational beings...."⁴⁴ Raphael points out that Clarke is suggesting that we can "deduce statements of obligation from statements of fact".⁴⁵ It seems quite plausible that Hume had Clarke in mind when he wrote this passage. What seems questionable is Raphael's suggestion that Hume's argument only works against Clarke.

Hume believes that the consideration of the points made in the is-ought passage would subvert *all* the vulgar systems of morality that believe that reason alone can discover moral distinctions. In this passage, Hume seems to be drawing attention to his earlier point that it is "...one thing to know virtue, and another to conform the will to it" (T,III,I,I,p.465). There Hume pointed out that the rationalists could not merely show the relations upon which moral distinctions are based, they must also show how this relation will have an influence on every rational mind.

The rationalist systems will be subverted when we consider the new relation expressed by 'ought' because they cannot, as Penelhum points out, "explain how moral distinctions can engage our feelings and dispose us to act".⁴⁶ Hume's main argument has been to show that reason alone can never be a motive for action. Even if it were allowed that moral distinctions were derived by reason from a moral relation or a matter of fact, the rationalists would still be unable to account for how these create any obligation for us. However, morality does influence our actions, and

⁴⁴Clarke, Discourse of Natural Religion 192.

⁴⁵Raphael, "Hume's Critique" 26.

⁴⁶Penelhum, Hume 161.

if we pay a "small attention to the matter" we will realize the rationalists' mistake.

As Stroud states:

But if we understand the peculiar nature of these 'conclusions'[the 'ought' conclusions]- if we recognize their 'active' or motivational force- we see that the transitions by which they are reached are not ones that reason determines us to make.⁴⁷

Thus, in the is-ought passage of the *Treatise*, Hume summarizes his critique of rationalism.

In An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, Hume's arguments against rationalist ethics are very similar to his critique in the *Treatise*. Hume states in his very brief autobiography that this enquiry: "...in my own opinion (who ought not to judge on that subject), is of all my writings, historical, philosophical, or literary, incomparably the best."⁴⁸ Given Hume's high opinion of this work, it would be culpable to avoid discussion of it.

In the *Enquiry of Morals*, Hume does not make any mention of the difficulty of passing from 'is' to 'ought'. This omission can be understood in light of the above discussion of the passage. One need not assume that Hume had repudiated any naturalist or non-naturalist stance. If it is correct that Hume was not concerned with the naturalist/anti-naturalist debate, and if he was pointing out that the rationalists were unable to explain how supposed moral relations influence the will, then he has merely omitted what amounts to a summary of his rationalist critique in the *Treatise*.

⁴⁷Stroud, Hume 187.

⁴⁸David Hume, My Own Life, 1776, in The Letters of David Hume, ed. J. Y. T. Greig, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932) 4.

This explanation of the omission is supported by Penelhum's contention that:

The 'is-ought' passage itself seems to me to be of only modest importance in the development of Hume's theory of evaluation, however critical that matters raised in it might be for contemporary meta-ethics.⁴⁹

Since the arguments in the *Enquiry of Morals* are very similar to those of the *Treatise*, it will not be necessary to repeat them. However, in the later work there are some important points that are made in a clearer manner. It is to these points that we must turn.

In the *Treatise*, Hume argued that moral distinctions are not discovered by reason alone. Hume did not deny that reason had any role to play in morality. He even stated: "Reason and judgment may indeed, be the mediate cause of an action, by prompting, or by directing a passion..." (T,III,I,I,p.462). However, some commentators (for example, Miller and MacIntyre) have missed this point. When one turns to the *Enquiry of Morals*, it becomes quite clear that Hume has not denied that reason has any connection with morality.

In the *Enquiry of Morals*, Hume suggests that both reason and sentiment are involved in morality. He states: "...I am apt to suspect... that *reason* and *sentiment* concur in almost all moral determinations and conclusions" (EM,I,p.172). What Hume is arguing against is "...that philosophy, which ascribes the discernment of all moral distinctions to reason alone, without the concurrence of sentiment" (EM,-App.1,p.287).

⁴⁹Penelhum, Hume 160.

The problem with moral systems that deny sentiment any role, is that they cannot explain how morality influences action. The point that Hume is again drawing attention to is that it is one thing to know virtue and another thing to act on this knowledge. He states concerning the conclusions of reason: "They discover truths: but where the truths which they discover are indifferent and beget no desire or aversion, they can have no influence on conduct and behaviour" (EM,I,p.172).

If reason is the slave of the passions, one may question what precisely is the proper role for reason in morality. It was already suggested that this metaphor allows reason to play a role; now this role must be examined. In the *Treatise*, Hume suggested that reason may influence our conduct by informing us of the existence of a particular object, or by informing us of the means to a particular end. Furthermore, if it is recognized that a particular passion is based on a false judgment, then the passion will yield to reason. In the *Enquiry of Morals*, Hume places more emphasis on, and provides more detail about the role reason plays in morality.

Reason has a great deal of work to do in moral theory, even in one that emphasizes that sentiment is necessary if one is not to be indifferent to moral distinctions. Hume states:

But in order to pave the way for such a sentiment, and give a proper discernment of its object, it is often necessary, we find, that much reasoning should precede, that nice distinctions be made, just conclusions drawn, distant comparisons formed, complicated relations examined, and general facts fixed and ascertained. (EM,I,p.173)

Thus, reason can inform one about the facts pertaining to a particular state of affairs that is to be assessed morally. In fact, Hume suggests that whenever one is to make

a moral assessment, one must be aware of all the facts *before* one's sentiments can operate. He states: "If any material circumstance be yet unknown or doubtful, we must first employ our inquiry or intellectual faculties to assure us of it; and must suspend for a time all moral decision or sentiment" (EM, App. 1, p. 290). If there was ever any doubt in the *Treatise*, the *Enquiry of Morals* makes it perfectly clear that reason is an important guide in morality.

Hume's argument that reason alone can never influence the will has been widely criticized. For example, J. L. Mackie argues that Hume has not adequately argued against the rationalist claim. Mackie suggests that we consider the example of a person who sacrifices his or her own desires and interests to the welfare of others. Mackie states:

Hume will say that there is a passion of some sort at work here, though it is not recognized and does not present itself as such. Clarke will say that what does the work is the perception of a fitness which in itself necessarily requires the action in question.⁵⁰

These are no more than two rival theories, according to Mackie, simply asserting counter-claims.

Mackie is quite correct that Hume will say that there is a passion here, and that Clarke denies this. However, Hume would also point out that Clarke cannot explain how the perception of fitness influences action. Again Hume's response would be that it is one thing to know virtue and another to conform one's will to it. Clarke must explain how the eternal fitnesses influence every rational mind. Hume,

⁵⁰J. L. Mackie, Hume's Moral Theory (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980) 48-49.

however, can explain the action by reference to a passion. The arguments do not, as Mackie claims, amount to mere counter-assertions providing "...no overwhelming or immediately cogent reason for adopting one theory and rejecting the other."⁵¹

Hume has argued that we come to believe that reason alone influences actions by confusing reason with what is in fact a very calm passion. Stroud points out that this explanation conflicts with earlier statements Hume made.⁵² How can we confuse reason with a calm passion, when Hume himself claims that we are never mistaken about the contents of our own mind? Hume states:

Every thing that enters the mind, being in *reality* a perception, 'tis impossible any thing shou'd to *feeling* appear different. This were to suppose, that even where we are most intimately conscious, we might be mistaken. (T,I,IV,II,p.190)

Stroud states that Hume's explanation of the confusion indicates: "Hume is willing to forget one of the foundations of his theory of ideas in order to support his account of the role of reason in action...."⁵³

It certainly seems that Stroud has detected a serious problem of inconsistency in Hume's theory. However, if one examines the matter closely, Hume can be defended. Stroud attributes to Hume the "...fundamental principle that we cannot be wrong about the contents of our own minds at a given moment."⁵⁴ Is Stroud correct that this is a fundamental principle of Hume's theory of ideas?

⁵¹Mackie, Hume's Moral 49.

⁵²Stroud, Hume 164.

⁵³Stroud, Hume 164.

⁵⁴Stroud, Hume 164.

In Book I Hume presents the theory of ideas that Stroud is referring to. Hume has claimed that everything present to the mind is a perception. These perceptions are either impressions or ideas. Quite early in the *Treatise* Hume allows for the possibility that mistakes can be made with regard to perceptions. He states:

The common degrees of these are easily distinguished: tho' it is not impossible but in particular instances they may very nearly approach to each other. Thus, in sleep, in fever, in madness, or in any very violent emotions of the soul, our ideas may approach to our impressions: As on the other hand it sometimes happens, that our impressions are so faint and low, that we cannot distinguish them from our ideas. (T,I,I,I,p.2)

Later in Book I Hume asks: "That is, in other words, whether in pronouncing concerning the identity of a person, we observe some real bond among his perceptions, or only feel one among the ideas we form of them" (T,I,IV,VI,p.259). This quote is in sharp contrast to the above quote from (T,I,IV,II,p.190) that Stroud relied upon to claim that it is a fundamental principle that we cannot be wrong about the contents of our own mind. For here Hume clearly allows not only the possibility of error, but also the possibility that something may *feel* different from what it is in reality. Hence, Hume's explanation of how the rationalists come to hold the mistaken view that reason alone influences action, is not inconsistent with his own theory of ideas. Moreover, Hume is certainly aware that we make mistakes, but these can be corrected upon a closer examination.

Stroud does correctly draw attention to a flaw in Hume's explanation of the rationalist mistake. Stroud points out that Hume has claimed that the calm passions are more often known by their effects than by their immediate sensation. The sorts

of effects that Hume must have in mind are that certain actions occur. Stroud states:

If we knew that passions were always involved in the production of every action we could infer from the occurrence of an action that a passion existed, even if it was not 'violent' enough to be felt. That is in effect what Hume does. But he still has given no such independent justification. The question of whether a separate passion is in fact involved in the causality of every action is precisely what is at issue.⁵⁵

This is an important flaw in Hume's explanation of the rationalist mistake.

However, it does not seem to be a fatal one for his critique of rationalism. Hume's aim is to show that moral distinctions are not derived from reason alone. He does this by arguing that moral distinctions are not derived from the relations of ideas or matters of fact discovered by reason alone. Furthermore, the critique of rationalism found in the *Enquiry of Morals* is done without attempting to explain how the rationalists come to their mistaken conclusion. Thus, even though Hume's explanation of the confusion of calm passions and reason is flawed, his critique of rationalism can still be defended.

Penelhum does not believe that Hume has established that passion, not reason, is involved when we make moral distinctions. Penelhum states:

For Hume's theory of the passions requires him to say that many passions do not lead to action of themselves, but only lead to it indirectly by stimulating desire or aversion; and he also appears to hold that although reason never generates actions, it can prompt passions that do generate it (as he seems to admit even here when he says reason 'of itself' is impotent). If one admits these two things, the fact that reason does not lead to action directly, or of itself, is not a sufficient ground for his insistence that it must be passion and not reason that is at work when we make our moral discriminations. The most it would show is that reason would have to be attended by a

⁵⁵Stroud, Hume 165.

desire for that which it showed us to be good before our actions would reflect the judgment that it had made.⁵⁶

The problem with Penelhum's criticism is that even if we admit his two claims, it seems to miss Hume's point. Penelhum's criticism depends on accepting that Hume strongly insists that either morality is the work of reason, or that it is the work of passions. To be fair to Penelhum, it must be admitted that there are passages that suggest that this is the claim Hume wants to defend. For example, Hume says: "Since morals, therefore, have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows that they cannot be derived from reason..." (T,III,I,I,p.457).

Hume however, as was pointed out earlier, does admit that reason has an important role to play in morality. Hume does not insist that reason does not do work in morality. His critique of rationalism is only meant to prove that reason *alone* is not the source of moral distinctions. Hence, it seems that Hume would be perfectly contented to have established the weaker conclusion that Penelhum suggests.

Hume's argument has also been criticized on the basis of his other major claim; morality influences action. Jonathan Harrison has argued that Hume has only supported the claim that moral beliefs move us to action, but this is insufficient. Harrison states: "In order to show that, where morality is concerned, the case is different, he needs to prove that morality, unlike reason *alone*, moves us to action

⁵⁶Penelhum, Hume 132-133.

(i.e. moves us to action *without* the cooperation of any passion).⁵⁷ This is a very curious suggestion. Harrison is certainly correct that Hume has not proven this point. The question is; why would Harrison think Hume needed to?

Harrison's argument seems to be based on the assumption that Hume is directly comparing reason and morality. However, the comparison Hume is making is between the roles of reason and passion in morality. Hume has not proven that morality moves us to action without the cooperation of passion, because his point is precisely that passion is necessary. Reason alone cannot move the will; therefore passion is necessary if moral distinctions are to influence actions.

Broiles offers an interpretation of what Hume means when he claims that morality influences actions. Broiles suggests:

It is true, that as a matter of fact, moral judgments do usually affect our actions, i.e., when we believe something morally bad we are driven away from it. But Hume is saying more than this. He is saying that they *must* affect our actions; they must cause us to move in relation to the object that is judged (or, more properly, felt) to be bad.⁵⁸

Broiles supports this interpretation by denying that Hume means that as matter of fact we are moved by moral considerations. If this were Hume's intention, one could simply deny the premise by pointing to a case where moral considerations do not move us.⁵⁹

Broiles' suggestion that the premise that morals move could be denied by

⁵⁷Jonathan Harrison, Hume's Moral Epistemology (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976) 11.

⁵⁸Broiles, Moral Philosophy 53-54.

⁵⁹Broiles, Moral Philosophy 54.

pointing out a case where they do not move, seems to apply more to his own interpretation. If there are cases where moral judgments do not affect our actions, it seems that it cannot be the case that morals *must* move us. However, if it is a matter of fact that we are moved by moral considerations, it does not follow that we must always be moved by them. Thus, the interpretation of Hume that Broiles denies, actually seems more plausible than Broiles' alternative interpretation.

Mackie believes, like Broiles, that the premise 'morality influences action' is problematic. Mackie suggests that we could very easily deny the "*intrinsic* action-guidingness" of moral judgments.⁶⁰ This means:

We could simply deny the minor premiss that the state of mind which is the making of moral judgments and distinctions has, *by itself*, an influence on actions. We could say that just seeing that this is right and that is wrong will not tend to make someone do this or refrain from that....⁶¹

Nuyen is quite correct to point out that "...nothing will come of denying the 'action-guidingness' of a moral judgment."⁶² The reason that nothing will come of this is:

What Hume insists is that it takes more than reason to judge an action to be right. Whether or not we go on to emulate the action we have judged to be virtuous is a different matter, and Hume's argument does not depend on it.⁶³

Both Broiles and Mackie have missed this point. Furthermore, not only does

⁶⁰Mackie, Hume's Moral 54.

⁶¹Mackie, Hume's Moral 54.

⁶²Nuyen, "David Hume on Reason" 35.

⁶³Nuyen, "David Hume on Reason" 31.

Hume's argument not depend on it, he has never even suggested that every moral judgment leads to action.

One cannot ignore, however, that Hume does not offer a great deal of support for his contention that morality influences actions. He claims that if it did not influence action, it would be in vain to try to inculcate it. This is certainly true, yet it would not be the first time that human beings did something in vain. Hume, however, does not feel that the point needs much defense. It must be remembered that the subtitle of the *Treatise* is "Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects". Hume believes that common experience will confirm that morality influences action. To deny this is to be a "disingenuous disputant" (EM,I,p.169).

Hume's arguments against rationalism are difficult. It can too easily seem that he is denying reason has a role in morality. However, once it is recognized that this is not his intention, they become easier to understand. The rationalists denied that anything but reason was necessary for morality. Hume has quite forcefully pointed out the flaws of this position. If one is indifferent, none of the moral knowledge in the world will influence conduct.

Hume denies that there is a strict dichotomy between reason and passion. Reason may not be a sufficient condition for moving the will, but it is certainly a necessary one. Nuyen expresses this view with an apt metaphor: "Reason is the track on which the human train is running, passions the engine. Without passions,

we go nowhere, but without reason, we go nowhere in particular."⁶⁴ Thus, the negative phase of Hume's theory is concluded; now we must turn to his alternative to rationalism.

⁶⁴Nuyen, "David Hume on Reason" 44.

Chapter Two

The Moral Sentiments

Hume has denied that moral distinctions are derived from reason alone. In place of a rationalist theory of ethics, Hume offers an argument that emphasizes the role of feeling, or sentiments, in moral distinctions. This emphasis has led many commentators, some favourably and others unfavourably, to suppose that Hume is advocating ethical subjectivism. The term 'ethical subjectivism' is here being used in its broadest sense. As James Rachels explains: "Ethical subjectivism is the idea that our moral opinions are based on our feelings, and nothing more. On this view, there is no such thing as 'objective' right or wrong."⁶⁵

The suspicion that Hume is advocating complete ethical subjectivism seems to be based in part on Hume's denial that reason alone is the source of moral distinctions. It is presumed that this denial leads Hume to accept that subjective feelings alone are the source of moral distinctions. Admittedly, some of Hume's statements support this simple subjectivist interpretation. However, it seems that in light of his overall theory this interpretation is not accurate. To understand why it is not accurate, it will be necessary to examine Hume's alternative to ethical

⁶⁵James Rachels, The Elements of Moral Philosophy (New York: Random House, Inc., 1986) 26.

rationalism. After this it will be possible to evaluate more specific charges of subjectivism.

Hume has established that moral distinctions are not derived from reason alone, or the comparison of ideas. He suggests that they must therefore be derived from an impression, or more specifically a sentiment. A moral sentiment is a feeling of approbation or disapprobation, approval or disapproval, that one has from observing a particular object. Thus, in Book III of the *Treatise*, Hume makes the statement that is often quoted as a summary of his entire moral theory: "Morality, therefore, is more properly felt than judg'd of..." (T,III,I,II,p.470).

The moral distinctions of virtue and vice are discovered by the impressions they occasion. The impression that arises from virtue is agreeable or pleasurable; the impression arising from vice is uneasy or painful. It is the feeling of pleasure or pain that indicates whether or not an action, or character, is virtuous or vicious. Thus, Hume states:

To have the sense of virtue, is nothing but to *feel* a satisfaction of a particular kind from the contemplation of a character. The very *feeling* constitutes our praise or admiration. (T,III,I,II,p.471)

Hume is aware that his argument seems vulnerable to a criticism that he himself made of rationalist ethics. His argument, like the rationalists', seems to entail that irrational or inanimate objects can be virtuous or vicious. If virtue and vice are determined by pleasure and pain, then it seems that the moral distinctions apply to any objects that occasion pleasure or pain. For example, since a good wine causes pleasure, one may say that the wine is virtuous. Hume provides two

arguments to show that his theory is not vulnerable to this criticism.

First, Hume suggests that there are different sensations of pleasure. For example, both wine and music are pleasurable. However, one does not say that the wine is harmonious, nor does one say that the music is of good flavour. Similarly, the satisfaction arising from an inanimate object can be distinguished from the satisfaction that arises from consideration of a person's character. However, not every satisfaction or uneasiness that arises from consideration of a person's character or actions, is "...of that *peculiar* kind, which makes us praise or condemn" (T,III,I,-II,p.472). Hume states:

'Tis only when a character is considered in general, without reference to our particular interest, that it causes such a feeling or sentiment, as denominates it morally good or evil. (T,III,I,II,p.472)

Hume does not suggest that it is easy to consider things from this general viewpoint. It is difficult to separate one's interests from the moral sentiments, yet it is possible. One can distinguish the displeasure that arises from an enemy's opposition to one's interests, from the displeasure that arises from the enemy's real vices.

The second argument that Hume employs, to distinguish the pleasure and pain associated with virtue and vice from the pleasure and pain associated with inanimate objects, is more difficult. It concerns the relation of virtue and vice to pride, humility, love, and hatred. To understand this relationship, it is necessary to understand certain aspects of Book II.

In Book II, Hume draws a distinction between direct and indirect passions. The direct passions are things such as desire, grief, hope, joy, and fear. The direct

passions are "...such as arise immediately from good or evil, from pain or pleasure" (T,II,I,I,p.276). It is the indirect passions, however, that are of immediate concern for understanding Hume's second argument to distinguish the pleasures and pains peculiar to virtue and vice.

Pride, humility, love, and hatred, as well as envy, pity, malice and generosity, are indirect passions. The indirect passions arise from the same principles as the direct passions, but the indirect passions also involve "...the conjunction of other qualities" (T,II,I,I,p.276). The indirect passions have both a *cause* and an *object*. The cause of an indirect passion is that which excites the passion connected with it. The cause results in a further distinction between the *quality* which operates, and the *subject* in which the quality is placed. For example, a cause of pride may be a beautiful house; the beauty is the quality of the cause, the house is the subject in which the quality is placed.

When a passion is excited, one's view turns to another idea; the object. The object is either oneself or another person. For example, in the cases of pride and humility the object is oneself; in the cases of love and hatred the object is another person. Thus, one is proud of one's own beautiful house, and loves another person's beautiful house. The indirect passions are produced by a double association of ideas and impressions. Páll S. Árdal gives a clear explanation of this double association using the example of pride. Árdal states:

If thinking of *x* pleases me, and *x* is related to me, then the pleasure gives rise to pride, which is related to pleasure by similarity. Pride in turn is *naturally* such as to make one think of oneself. We thus have a double association, between oneself and the object related to oneself

and pleasure and pride, which is itself a pleasant passion.⁶⁶

In Book III, Hume appeals to the indirect passions of pride, humility, love, and hatred to explain the distinguishing features of the pleasure and pain associated with virtue and vice. The relevant passage has been interpreted in different ways, thus for the sake of clarity it will be quoted in full. Hume states:

Pride and humility, love and hatred are excited, when there is any thing presented to us, that both bears a relation to the object of the passion, and produces a separate sensation related to the sensation of the passion. Now virtue and vice are attended with these circumstances. They must necessarily be plac'd either in ourselves or others, and excite either pleasure or uneasiness; and therefore must give rise to one of these four passions; which clearly distinguishes them from the pleasure and pain arising from inanimate objects, that often bear no relation to us.... (T,III,I,II,p.473)

The first thing to be noted about this passage is that it quite clearly emphasizes that Hume's discussion of the indirect passions in Book II is closely related to his ethical theory. Thus, Norman Kemp Smith was mistaken when he suggested that:

More than a third of Book II is employed in the treatment of four passions which have no very direct bearing on Hume's ethical problems, and play indeed no really distinctive part in his system- pride and humility, love and hatred, viewed as operating in and through a complex double process of association.⁶⁷

The difficulty, however, is to determine what the relationship is between the passions and the moral distinctions.

⁶⁶Páll S. Árdal, *Passion and Value in Hume's Treatise* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1966) 26.

⁶⁷Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume* (London: Macmillan and Co. LTD, 1941) 160.

Corliss Swain has argued that Hume's passage indicates that the moral sentiments are indirect passions. He states: "On my reading, the separate sensation that virtue and vice produce is not itself a moral sentiment, but part of the cause of the sentiment; the moral sentiments are themselves indirect passions."⁶⁸ The difficulty with this interpretation is that although the objects of an indirect passion are always human beings, either oneself or another person, the causes are not always human beings. Hence, it would be possible for a moral sentiment to be caused by an inanimate object. However, this is precisely what Hume is trying to avoid in this passage.

David Norton's explanation of the passage recognizes that the moral sentiments are closely connected with the indirect passions, without suggesting that the moral sentiments are indirect passions. Norton states: "On Hume's view, one will experience an indirect passion whenever a moral sentiment is experienced, but one may experience an indirect passion without at the same time experiencing a moral sentiment."⁶⁹ This seems to be a more accurate reading of the passage.

The moral sentiments distinguish between virtue and vice. Virtue and vice "give rise" to the indirect passions.⁷⁰ Hence, when a moral sentiment is experienced, an indirect passion will also be experienced. Virtue and vice are related to the object

⁶⁸Corliss G. Swain, "Passionate Objectivity," *Noûs* 26.4 (1992): 467.

⁶⁹David Fate Norton, *David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982) 115, n.19.

⁷⁰Hume has also made this point elsewhere. He states: "...VICE and VIRTUE...are the most obvious causes of these passions..." (T,II,I,VII,p.295).

of a passion because they "must be necessarily plac'd in ourselves or others". Furthermore, virtue and vice "produce a separate sensation", pleasure or uneasiness, "related to the sensation of the passion". Thus, the indirect passions and the moral sentiments are closely associated.

The association is such that it is impossible for an inanimate object to give rise to the same sorts of pleasure or pain as virtue and vice. For inanimate objects do not bear the necessary relation to ourselves or other human beings. Thus, it is a particular kind of pleasure or pain that distinguishes virtue and vice. It is a pleasure or pain that occurs when a character is considered in general, rather than with reference to one's particular interests. Furthermore, it is a pleasure or pain that is attended by an indirect passion.

Hume next considers the principles from which this particular sort of pleasure or pain is derived. He claims that it is absurd to suggest "...that in every particular instance these sentiments are produc'd by an *original* quality and *primary* constitution" (T,III,I,II,p.473). There is not a separate instinct for each moral sentiment. The number of particular instances that produce these sensations is so great that it would be impossible for there to be an original instinct for each instance. Moreover, "Such a method of proceeding is not conformable to the usual maxims, by which nature is conducted, where a few principles produce all that variety we observe in the universe..." (T,III,I,II,p.473). Thus, Hume believes that there are more general principles which are the foundations of morals.

These general principles may be considered to be of a natural origin,

depending upon what is meant by 'natural'. If nature is opposed to the miraculous, then moral distinctions are natural. Similarly, if nature is opposed to the rare and unusual, then the moral sentiments are natural. For the moral "...sentiments are so rooted in our constitution and temper, that without entirely confounding the human mind by disease or madness, 'tis impossible to extirpate and destroy them" (T,III,I,II,p.474). However, if nature is opposed to artifice, Hume suggests that some virtues will be *natural* and others *artificial*. This will become evident as the particular virtues and vices are examined.

In the *Treatise*, Hume discusses the artificial virtues in Part II of Book III. An artificial virtue is one that: "...produce[s] pleasure and approbation by means of an artifice or contrivance, which arises from the circumstances of mankind" (T,III,II,I,p.478). Hume discusses many different examples of artificial virtues: justice, the obligations of promises, and chastity and modesty. All of these discussions are important; however, it is the discussion of justice that is most relevant for an understanding of his overall moral theory.

Hume develops his theory of justice in great detail. However, not all of the details are necessary for an examination of the charge of ethical subjectivism. Therefore, instead of considering the theory of justice in its entirety, only those details that are essential for an understanding of his the overall moral theory shall be considered.

Hume suggests that in praising or blaming an action, only the motive that produced the action is considered. The action is taken only as an external sign or

indication of the motive. Hume states: "It appears, therefore, that all virtuous actions derive their merit only from virtuous motives, and are consider'd merely as signs of those motives" (T,III,II,I,p.478). It follows from this, according to Hume, that the regard to the virtue of an action can never be the first motive that produces an action. For before one can regard the virtue of an action: "...the action must be really virtuous; and this virtue must be deriv'd from some virtuous motive: And consequently the virtuous motive must be different from the regard to the virtue of an the action" (T,III,II,I,p.478). Thus, Hume suggests that it is an "undoubted maxim" that no action is virtuous unless there is in human nature a motive to produce the action, distinct from the sense of the action's morality.

Hume is careful to explain that this does not mean that human beings never perform actions solely because of a sense of morality or duty. One may, for example, lack a sense of gratitude, and yet perform grateful actions from a sense of duty. One may perform the action to disguise one's lack of the virtue, or in hopes of acquiring the virtue by practice. However, even though these occasions may occur, this still "...supposes in human nature some distinct principles, which are capable of producing the action, and whose moral beauty renders the action meritorious" (T,III,II,I,p.479). Thus, no actions are performed from a sense of duty, unless there are other antecedent motives in human nature that render the action praiseworthy.

It follows from this that the motive to perform just acts cannot be the regard to their virtue. Hume thus considers other possible motives. The motive cannot be self-love or one's private interests; for as soon as one's private interest ceased to be

concerned in a particular case, then one would have no motive to behave in a just manner.

Hume argues that the motive to perform just actions cannot be a regard for the public interest. The first reason for denying that this is the motive is that the: "...public interest is not naturally attach'd to the observation of the rules of justice; but is only connected with it, after an artificial convention for the establishment of these rules..." (T,III,II,I,p.480). The second reason is that the public interest is not always involved. For example, one may loan another person money in secret. The public can have no interest in the borrower performing the just act of repaying the loan, for the public is not even aware of the loan. The third reason that Hume provides is that the public interest is too remote and too sublime to be involved in all cases where a person behaves justly. In ordinary life, human beings simply do not consider the public interest when they repay a loan or perform other just actions.

Hume, in the *Treatise*, argues that public benevolence cannot be the original motive to justice. It cannot be the motive because there is no universal love of humankind simply as such. He states:

...there is no such passion in human minds, as the love of mankind, merely as such, independent of personal qualities, of services, or of relation to ourself. 'Tis true, there is no human, and indeed no sensible, creature, whose happiness or misery does not in some measure affect us, when brought near to us, and represented in lively colours: But this proceeds merely from sympathy, and is no proof of such an universal affection to mankind.... (T,III,II,I,p.481)

Thus, there is no universal benevolence to motivate one to perform just actions. Nevertheless, the pleasure or misery of individuals does affect us.

This may lead one to expect that Hume believes that the original motive to justice is a private benevolence, or a regard to the interests of the individual concerned. However, Hume denies that this is the case. If the individual concerned is an enemy or a vicious person, private benevolence would be inoperative. Hence, in such a case the original motive to justice would fail. For example, if one is not concerned with the interests of a particular person who loaned one money, then one would have no motive to perform the just act of repaying the loan.

From these considerations Hume concludes that justice arises: "...artificially, 'tho necessarily from education and human conventions" (T,III,II,I,p.483). The conventions are devised as remedies to certain "inconveniences". These inconveniences are often due to human beings' selfishness and limited generosity. Selfishness, however, is a characteristic of human beings that should not, according to Hume, be exaggerated as it has been by some philosophers (T,III,II,II,p.486). Hume explains his view of selfishness:

...I am of the opinion, that tho' it be rare to meet with one, who loves any single person better than himself; yet 'tis as rare to meet with one, in whom all the kind affections, that taken together, do not over-balance all the selfish. (T,III,II,II,p.487)

Generosity is, according to Hume, usually limited to one's family relations and acquaintances. The inconveniences occur when one's selfishness or limited generosity, conflicts with the interests of other members of society.

The possible conflicts are compounded by the situation of external objects. There is a scarcity of external objects in relation to the desires and wants of human beings. External objects are also problematic because their possession is not always

stable. Thus, one may want the possessions of another, and may even violently procure the other's possessions.

Hume claims that it is from these two sorts of inconvenience that justice derives its origin. The rules of justice depend on the interests of both the public and the individual. The rules are artificial because they cannot be explained by the natural pursuit of either public or private interest alone. Hume states:

These rules, therefore, are artificial, and seek their end in an oblique and indirect manner; nor is the interest, which gives rise to them, of a kind that cou'd be pursu'd by the natural and inartificial passions of men. (T,III,II,II,p.497)

Thus, society establishes certain conventions that serve both the interest of the public and the interest of individuals. Hume explains:

And thus justice establishes itself by a kind of convention or agreement; that is, by a sense of interest, suppos'd to be common to all, and where every single act is perform'd in expectation that others are to perform the like. Without such a convention, no one wou'd ever have dream'd that there was such a virtue as justice, or have been induc'd to conform his actions to it. (T,III,II,II,p.498)

Having explained that the origin of justice is artificial, Hume must examine the relation of justice to the moral sentiments. He must connect justice with virtue, and injustice with vice. Hume points out that as society grows and the artifices become more established, the original inconveniences that gave rise to the rules of justice are lost sight of. Nevertheless, human beings maintain a sense of justice and injustice.

The original source of justice may no longer be immediately evident, yet human beings still consider injustice pernicious to society. A particular act of

injustice may in no way affect one's interests, and yet one will feel moral disapprobation on consideration of that action. Hume explains how this is possible:

We partake of their [the victims of injustice] uneasiness by *sympathy*; and as everything, which gives uneasiness in human actions, upon the general survey, is call'd Vice, and whatever produces satisfaction, in the same manner, is denominated Virtue; this is the reason why the sense of moral good and evil follows upon justice and injustice. (T,III,II,II,p.499)⁷¹

Moreover, once the artifices of justice are established, the moral sentiments follow *naturally*. Hume states: "After that interest is once establish'd and acknowledg'd, the sense of morality in the observance of these rules follows *naturally*, and of itself..." (T,III,II,VI,p.533).

The claim that the moral sentiments follow naturally once the artifice of justice is established, is not a denial that artifice is in any way involved in the moral sentiments. Hume admits, for example, that public instruction by politicians or private education by parents may influence the sentiments (T,III,II,II,p.500, and T,III,II,VI,p.533-534). Hume is arguing only against "...certain writers on morals, who seem to have employ'd their utmost efforts to extirpate all sense of virtue from among mankind" (T,III,II,II,p.500). Hence, his point is that artifice cannot be the sole source of moral distinctions. He states:

The utmost politicians can perform, is, to extend the natural sentiments beyond their original bounds; but still nature must furnish the materials, and give us some notion of moral distinctions. (T,III,II,-II,p.500)

Thus, while justice and other virtues may arise artificially, the moral sentiments are

⁷¹The mechanism of sympathy will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

originally natural.

In Part III, Book III of the *Treatise*, Hume discusses the natural virtues. The natural virtues and vices are those qualities that are not dependent upon any artifices or conventions of human beings. Hume reiterates that virtue is a mental quality that is agreeable upon its survey, and vice is a quality that gives uneasiness.

With regard to the natural virtues, Hume again stresses the relation of virtue and vice, and the indirect passions. His statements in Part III, Book III, provide further support for the interpretation of a close relationship between the moral sentiments and indirect passion. Hume states:

Now since every quality in ourselves or others, which gives pleasure always causes pride or love; as every one, that produces uneasiness, excites humility or hatred: It follows, that these two particulars are to be consider'd as equivalent, with regard to our mental qualities, *virtue* and the power of producing love or pride, *vice* and the power of producing humility or hatred. (T,III,III,I,p.575)

This passage may seem to support Swain's interpretation that the moral sentiments are indirect passions. However, on a closer examination, it is evident that this is not the case. Virtue and vice are not equivalent to the indirect passions. They are equivalent to the "power of producing" the indirect passions. Moreover, Hume clearly specifies that it is only with "regard to our mental qualities", that virtue and vice are related to the indirect passions. Hence, the moral sentiments of approval and disapproval, unlike the indirect passions, must arise only "with regard to our mental qualities".

Later in the *Treatise*, Hume states that: "...approbation or blame... is nothing but a fainter and more imperceptible love or hatred" (T,III,III,V,p.614). Again this

is not a direct identification of the moral sentiments as indirect passions. The point Hume is stressing is that they are closely related. Thus, when one experiences a moral sentiment, one will experience an indirect passion, but one may experience an indirect passion without experiencing a moral sentiment. The indirect passions are "unavoidable attendants" of virtue and vice (T,II,I,VII,p.296).

Hume claimed in his discussion of justice, that actions are deemed virtuous or vicious only because they are taken as external signs of virtuous or vicious motives. The reason that actions are not virtuous or vicious in themselves, is explained more fully in Part III of Book III. Actions by themselves are not durable enough to be the basis of moral distinctions. Actions are relevant only to the extent that they are external signs of a human being's character. Hume states:

We are never to consider any single action in our enquiries concerning the origin of morals; but only the quality or character from which the action proceeded. These alone are *durable* enough to affect our sentiments concerning the person. (T,III,III,I,p.575)

Thus, actions are praised or blamed because they are taken as indications of a person's durable character.

The moral sentiments of praise or blame, approbation or disapprobation, cannot be fully understood without an understanding of the principle of sympathy. Hume uses the term sympathy in two different manners. In the *Enquiry of Morals*, Hume refers to the "sentiment of sympathy and humanity" (EM,VI,I,p.234). In this enquiry, sympathy is a passion, or a sentiment; here it is synonymous with the virtue of benevolence or humanity. However, Hume also uses the term sympathy in a more technical manner. For the sake of clarity, it will be helpful to restrict the use of the

term sympathy to its technical sense.

Sympathy, in its technical sense, is not a passion or moral sentiment. Rather, it is a principle or mechanism that allows one "to receive by communication" the inclinations and sentiments of other human beings (T,II,I,XI,p.316). The mechanism operates when one forms an idea of another person's passion or sentiment. This idea is formed when one observes certain external signs, such as the other person's behaviour or statements. One infers that these external signs are the effect of a particular passion. Subsequently, the idea is "...converted into an impression, and acquires such a degree of force and vivacity, as to become the very passion itself, and produce an equal emotion, as any original affection" (T,II,I,XI,p.317). Thus, through the mechanism of sympathy one converts the idea of another's passion into one's own passion.

Hume appeals to an impression of self to explain how the idea of another's passion is converted into an impression. He states:

...the impression of ourselves is always intimately present with us, and that our consciousness gives us so lively a conception of our own person, that 'tis not possible to imagine, that any thing can in this particular go beyond it. Whatever object, therefore, is related to ourselves must be conceived with a like vivacity of conception....
(T,II,I,XI,p.317)

The impression of self confers vivacity on things related to it. Human beings are related to each other by a great amount of resemblance in their basic constitution. Hence, the idea of another's passion is enlivened into an impression in oneself, because the other person is related by resemblance to oneself. Particular individuals may resemble each other in more ways than their basic constitution. For example,

they may also have similar characters. The greater the resemblance is between individuals, the easier the transition will be from the idea of the other person's passion to the sympathetic impression of the passion in oneself.

Human beings may also be related by contiguity, or closeness in time and space. The more forceful this relation is, the easier it will be to convert the idea of another's passion into an impression of one's own. For example, it is harder to sympathize with a person who lived centuries ago in a distant place, than it is to sympathize with a neighbour. Thus, sympathizing with another person may be easy or difficult, depending upon the person's relation to oneself.

The mechanism of sympathy depends on an impression of self. This, however, seems to be inconsistent with Hume's theory of personal identity developed in Book I of the *Treatise*. There Hume argues against those philosophers who suggest:

.. we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our SELF; that we feel its existence and its continuance in existence; and are certain, beyond the evidence of a demonstration, both of its perfect identity and simplicity. (T,I,IV,VI,p.251)

The difficulty with such of view of the self, according to Hume, is that we do not have "...any idea of *self*, after the manner it is here explain'd. For from what impression cou'd this idea be deriv'd?" (T,I,IV,VI,p.251).

Kemp Smith states that there is "contradiction between the two books" of the *Treatise*, concerning the impression of self.⁷² The contradiction is that in Book I, Hume denies the impression of self that he relies upon in Book II. Moreover, Kemp

⁷²Kemp Smith, David Hume 173.

Smith argues that in the *Enquiry of Morals*, "...Hume has come to recognise that his theory of sympathy as resting on an *impression* of the self is untenable...."⁷³ Kemp Smith's claims do have a certain initial plausibility. However, they are mistaken because they overlook important aspects of Hume's theory of personal identity.

Hume distinguishes the notion of self that is his concern in Book I, from the notion of self that is involved in discussions of the passions. In Book I, Hume states: "...we must distinguish betwixt personal identity, as it regards *our thought* and imagination, and as it regards our *passions* or the concern we take in ourselves. The first is our present subject..."(Italics added.) (T,I,IV,VI,p.253). Thus, the self that Hume denies in Book I, is a self that has "perfect identity and simplicity". He suggests instead that the self is "...a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement" (T,I,IV,VI,p.252).

The self that Hume appeals to in Book II is consistent with the self conceived of as a bundle of perceptions. In his discussion of the passions, he refers to the "...self, or that succession of related ideas and impressions, of which we have an intimate memory and consciousness" (T,II,I,II,p.277). This self is all that he needs

⁷³Kemp Smith, David Hume 152.

in his discussion of sympathy. For as Árdal explains:

All that Hume needs in his account of sympathy is that at any particular time, when we are conscious, there should be a complex impression we can identify as the impression of our own person. This impression need not remain unchanging, although at all times during our conscious existence there is something we can call 'self'....⁷⁴

Hume claims that sympathy is the "chief source of moral distinctions" (T,III,III,VI,p.618). Thus, the artificial virtues are approved of because human beings sympathize with the tendency of such virtues to promote the good of humankind. For example, Hume says of justice: "After it is once establish'd by these conventions, it is *naturally* attended with a strong sentiment of morals; which can proceed from nothing but our sympathy with the interests of society" (T,III,III,I,p.579-580).

Many of the natural virtues have a similar tendency to promote the good of society. According to Hume, examples of such "social virtues" are: meekness, beneficence, charity, generosity, clemency, moderation, and equity (T,III,III,I,p.578). He argues that although an individual act of justice may be contrary to the public good, every act of social virtue promotes the good of humankind. Therefore, if justice is approved of because of sympathy with the public good, it is even more likely that the social virtues are approved of because of sympathy with the public good that they promote.

There are other natural virtues that are approved of, not because they promote the good of society, but because they are serviceable to their possessor.

⁷⁴Árdal, Passion 45.

Hume provides examples of this sort of virtue, they are: prudence, temperance, frugality, industry, assiduity, enterprise, and dexterity (T,III,III,I,p.587). The approval of these virtues is also due to sympathy. These qualities serve the interest of their possessor; they are a means to an end. The end is the possessor's happiness or good. One may have no personal interest in the possessor's happiness, nevertheless the happiness affects one by sympathy. Hume states:

Our fancy easily changes its situation; and either surveying ourselves as we appear to others, or considering others as they feel themselves, makes us enter by that means, into sentiments, which no way belong to us, and in which nothing but sympathy is able to interest us. (T,III,III,I,p.589)

Thus, not only can one sympathize with other human beings' feelings, one can also sympathize with their view of oneself.

According to Hume, the sentiments of pleasure and pain that distinguish virtue from vice arise from four sources. Some qualities of mind are immediately agreeable to persons other than the possessor of the quality. Other qualities of mind are immediately agreeable to the possessor. There are also qualities of mind that are useful to persons other than the possessor. Similarly, there are qualities that are useful to oneself.

Hume makes an interesting statement about the moral distinctions arising from qualities that are *immediately agreeable*, and those arising from *useful* qualities. He states:

Moral good and evil are certainly distinguish'd by our *sentiments*, not by *reason*: But these sentiments may arise either from the mere species or appearance of characters and passions, or from reflexions on their tendency to the happiness of mankind, and of particular

persons. (T,III,III,I,p.589)

Moreover, Hume suggests that although both of these sources are involved in moral distinctions, reflections on the useful tendencies of characters have a greater influence on the moral sentiments (T,III,III,I,p.590). This supports the argument of the proceeding chapter: reason alone is not the source of moral distinctions, yet it does have an important role to play in morality. One function of reason is to reflect on the useful tendencies of particular qualities.

Hume has argued that the mechanism of sympathy is one of the chief sources of moral distinctions. However, Hume is certainly aware that there are cases in which sympathy does not result in a complete alteration of one's own sentiments. He states:

And tho', on many occasions, my sympathy with him goes not so far as entirely to change my sentiments, and way of thinking; yet it seldom is so weak as not to disturb the easy course of my thought, and give an authority to that opinion, which is recommended to me by his assent and approbation. (T,III,III,II,p.592)

One may sympathize with another person, and yet one's sentiments may remain relatively unchanged. Thus, there are variations in the effects that sympathy may have on one.

There is another principle that operates in moral distinctions; the principle of comparison. This principle is quite important because its effects are contrary to those of sympathy. Hume claims that things are most often judged in comparison to other things, rather than with regard to their intrinsic value. Most often comparisons are made with reference to one's own situation. For example, one may

compare another's pain to one's own pain. The principle of comparison is contrary to the principle of sympathy because:

In all kinds of comparison an object makes us always receive from another, to which it is compar'd, a sensation contrary to what arises from itself in its direct and immediate survey. (T,III,III,II,p.594)

Thus, if one sympathizes with another's pain, one will experience uneasiness. However, if one compares the other person's pain to one's own feelings, the comparison will actually augment one's own feeling of pleasure.

Hume must address the issue of why one principle operates rather than the other. He argues that the principle of comparison operates as a mean between the other person's sentiments having no effect on one, and one sympathizing with the other person. For example, if the idea of another person's pain is too faint, there will be no comparison. If the idea of another's pain is of a moderate intensity, one will compare oneself to the other. However, if the idea of another's pain is very forceful and lively, the principle of sympathy will operate. Thus, Hume claims: "No man has so savage a heart as to reap any pleasure from such a spectacle [of extreme distress], or withstand the motions of the tenderest compassion and sympathy" (T,III,III,II,p.594).

It is important to remember that Hume does not expect the impossible from human beings; he recognizes that the mechanism of sympathy is variable. Sympathy is proportionable to the degree of contiguity and resemblance one has with another person. Thus, one is more sympathetic to persons who are close to one in time and space, and with persons who have a resembling character.

When one considers the moral character of another, one considers the narrow circle of human beings who are most likely affected by that character (T,III,III,-III,p.602-603). One must, in other words, adopt a more general point of view. This is the only way, according to Hume, that we are able to form a general standard of approval and disapproval. He states:

The intercourse of sentiments, therefore, in society and conversation, makes us form some general and inalterable standard, by which we may approve or disapprove of characters and manners. (T,III,III,-III,p.603)

The details of the notion of adopting a general point of view will be explored in the following chapter. What is important for present purposes, is that Hume believes that there is a general standard of approval and disapproval.

There are, according to Hume, certain tender passions that make a person useful and agreeable by giving direction to all of the person's other qualities. These passions are: *"generosity, humanity, compassion, gratitude, friendship, fidelity, zeal, disinterestedness, liberality, and all those other qualities, which form the character of good and benevolent"* (T,III,III,III,p.603). Hume suggests, for example, that courage that is not tempered by benevolence may actually produce tyranny. Thus, courage by itself is indifferent to the interests of society; it is only when courage is directed by benevolence that it is conducive to the public good.

Hume's emphasis on the importance of the tender passions is not meant to suggest that all "angry passions" are vicious. Hume states: "Anger and hatred are passions inherent in our very frame and constitution. The want of them, on some occasions, may even be the proof of weakness and imbecility" (T,III,III,III,p.605).

It is only when the angry passions cause excessive pain, that they are considered vicious. Hume is carefully trying to give a very balanced account of virtue and vice. The tender passions are, understandably, very important. However, he also recognizes that there are other aspects of human beings, and these aspects are not necessarily vicious.

Thus, moral distinctions are based on feeling, or sentiments. Pleasurable or agreeable sentiments are indications of a subject's virtue; painful or disagreeable sentiments are indications of vice. The principle of sympathy is the chief source of moral distinctions because it allows one to experience the feelings of the particular person affected by a character or action. This principle is a very powerful and estimable principle in human beings. Hume believes that:

All lovers of virtue... must certainly be pleas'd to see moral distinctions deriv'd from so noble a source, which gives us a just notion both of the *generosity* and *capacity* of our nature. (T,III,III,VI,p.619)

The precise relationship between the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry of Morals* is somewhat difficult to establish. The works present topics in a different order. For example, justice is the first virtue discussed in the *Treatise*. However, in the *Enquiry of Morals*, the natural virtue of benevolence is presented first. Furthermore, the emphasis on certain subjects seems to be different. In the *Enquiry of Morals* there is not a great deal of emphasis placed on the distinction between natural and artificial virtues. There is, however, in the *Enquiry of Morals*, more attention given to each of the four sources of moral pleasures and pains: qualities useful to others, qualities useful to oneself, qualities immediately agreeable to oneself, and qualities

immediately agreeable to others. Our present interest, however, is not all of the possible differences between these two works.

The immediate concern is whether or not Hume altered his theory in a manner that affects his alleged subjectivism. It seems that he has not. For Hume's primary thesis remains unchanged in the *Enquiry of Morals*. Hume states:

The hypothesis which we embrace is plain. It maintains that morality is determined by sentiment. It defines virtue to be *whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation*; and vice the contrary. (EM, App. 1, p. 289)

In the *Treatise*, the principle of sympathy plays a very important role in the making of moral distinctions. Kemp Smith argued that the principle was untenable because it contradicted Hume's own theory of personal identity. It was earlier pointed out, however, that there is no inherent contradiction between the two doctrines. However, Kemp Smith also argues that in the *Enquiry of Morals*, Hume recognizes the contradiction, and that Hume therefore relinquishes the principle.

Kemp Smith states:

In the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, on the other hand, while the term 'sympathy' is still of frequent occurrence, the psychological, mechanistic explanation of sympathy given in Book II of the *Treatise* is no longer in evidence.... [T]he admission is made that the explanation of sympathy attempted in the *Treatise* cannot be maintained.⁷⁵

Kemp Smith supports his view with the following passage from Hume:

It is needless to push our researches so far as to ask, why we have humanity or a fellow-feeling with others. It is sufficient, that this is experienced to be a principle in human nature. We must stop

⁷⁵Kemp Smith, *David Hume* 151.

somewhere in our examination of causes; and there are in every science, some general principles, beyond which we cannot hope to find any principle more general.... [W]e may here safely consider these principles as original: happy, if we can render all the consequences sufficiently plain and perspicuous! (EM,V,II,p.219-220,n.1)

Kemp Smith is certainly correct that in the *Enquiry of Morals*, Hume does not provide the mechanistic explanation of sympathy that he provides in Book II of the *Treatise*. However, this does not necessarily mean that Hume has renounced the principle. Regarding this passage, Terence Penelhum argues quite persuasively that:

...although Hume is prepared to settle for less in the *Enquiry*, his remarks there do not imply an abandonment of the doctrine of sympathy as we have it from the *Treatise*, but at most a lessening of interest in it, and a conviction that his account of evaluation, which is otherwise not changed, can stand in its other features without it.⁷⁶

In addition to Penelhum's point, there is another reason to suspect that Hume has not abandoned the principle of sympathy. The reason is that there are allusions to the principle in the *Enquiry of Morals*. Hence, Hume refers to "a sympathetic movement of pleasure or uneasiness" (EM,V,II,p.221). In addition, he states:

Sympathy, we shall allow, is much fainter than our concern for ourselves, and sympathy with persons remote from us much fainter than that with persons near and contiguous; but for this very reason it is necessary for us, in our calm judgments and discourse concerning the characters of men, to neglect all the differences, and render our sentiments more public and social. (EM,V,II,p.229)

This certainly seems to indicate that Hume is relying on something very much like the principle of sympathy developed in the *Treatise*. What is missing in the *Enquiry of Morals*, is the explicit explanation of how the mechanism operates. Thus, in the

⁷⁶Terence Penelhum, *Hume* (London: Macmillan Press LTD, 1975) 148.

Enquiry of Morals Hume's primary thesis remains unchanged and the principle of sympathy is not entirely abandoned. Therefore, if the charge of ethical subjectivism is found to apply to the *Treatise*, it will also apply to the *Enquiry of Morals*.

Ethical subjectivism was described very broadly in the beginning of this chapter as any theory that denies all objectivity in morals. This definition presents the basic idea of subjectivism; there are, however, many variations of ethical subjectivism. Thus, if one claims that Hume is a subjectivist, one could mean any number of different things. Therefore, an accurate examination of Hume's alleged subjectivism will be possible only if more specific charges of ethical subjectivism are considered. There is an important point to recognize before beginning this discussion; many of the terms employed here will be used anachronistically. Nevertheless, it is still possible to investigate whether or not Hume's theory is representative of the theory indicated by the contemporary terms.

The first issue to consider is, what leads to the suspicion that Hume is an ethical subjectivist? The interpretation seems to be supported by certain passages in Hume. For example, Hume states of vice:

You can never find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. Here is a matter of fact; but 'tis the object of feeling, not of reason. It lies in yourself, not in the object. So that 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. (T,III,I,I,p.468-469)

He also claims that: "Morality, therefore, is more properly felt than judg'd of..."

(T,III,III,II,p.470). These passages seem to suggest that morality is entirely based on the subjective feelings of the person judging. They seem to support at least some sort of ethical subjectivism. Thus, for many interpreters of Hume, the only issue to be decided is what sort of subjectivism Hume holds.

One possibility is that Hume holds the view that moral judgments are about the feelings of the person making the judgment. This view may be labelled, following Barry Stroud, 'psychologism'.⁷⁷ Psychologism refers to the view that moral judgments are statements about the feelings of the speaker.⁷⁸ Thus, the truth or falsity of the judgment depends upon whether or not the speaker actually has that feeling. Moreover: "The 'moral judgments' I make are about me, and when you say 'X is vicious' you are saying that you have a certain sentiment towards X."⁷⁹ A consequence of this view is that moral disagreement is reduced only to disagreement about whether or not the speaker has the particular feeling he or she claims to have.

Philippa Foot seems to attribute psychologism to Hume; however she uses the label 'subjectivism'. She states:

Now this theory of Hume's about moral sentiment commits him to a subjectivist theory of ethics. He could not consistently maintain both that a man calls qualities virtues when he happens to feel towards them this peculiar sentiment, and that statements about virtue and vice are objective. For if they were objective, like ordinary statements of

⁷⁷There are other labels for this view. For example, Árdal employs the term 'subjectivism' to refer to the same position. However, for the sake of clarity 'psychologism' will be employed, reserving 'subjectivism' for the use in the broader sense discussed above. (See Árdal, Passion 194.)

⁷⁸Barry Stroud, Hume (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul LTD., 1977) 180-182.

⁷⁹Stroud, Hume 180.

fact, there would have to be some method of deciding, in the case of disagreement, whether one man's opinion or another's was correct....⁸⁰

Thus, a virtuous character is simply one that gives the person making the judgment pleasure. Another person may judge this same character to be vicious, because it causes this person uneasiness. There is no standard to which the two judges can appeal in order to resolve this difference, because each judgment amounts to no more than a personal preference.

Foot's interpretation is not accurate. Hume does not identify the moral distinctions of virtue and vice, with the moral sentiments; they are distinguishable. Virtue and vice "give rise" to the moral sentiments. Hume states we: "...must pronounce the impression *arising from* virtue, to be agreeable, and that *proceeding from* vice to be uneasy"(Italics added.) (T,III,I,II,p.470). Similarly, he states: "An action, or sentiment, or character is virtuous or vicious; why? because its view *causes* a pleasure or uneasiness of a particular kind"(Italics added.) (T,III,I,II,p.471).

One does not just "happen" to have a particular moral sentiment; a moral sentiment is caused by something, virtuous or vicious characters. There is no evidence for assuming that this is an entirely arbitrary process in which one's personal preferences alone are authoritative. In fact, Hume has suggested that one must consider a character without reference to one's own interests; one must adopt a general point of view. Moral judgments are not, therefore, as personal as Foot has suggested.

⁸⁰Philippa Foot, "Hume on Moral Judgment", in David Hume: A Symposium, ed. D. F. Pears (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1966) 71.

If one characterizes Hume's view as psychologism, then one attributes to Hume the view that there is no way to resolve moral disagreement. One may state that 'X is vicious', and another may state that 'X is virtuous'. There is no disagreement to resolve because both statements only claim that the speaker has a particular feeling. This, however, is not Hume's view. As Árdal states:

But since one of Hume's main problems in the *Treatise* is to show how in moral evaluation the *natural* bias of each individual's passion is overcome, he surely would not have accepted reference to the speaker's peculiar nature as part of the meaning of such expressions as 'x is virtuous'.⁸¹

This suggests the possibility of a more significant moral disagreement than is suggested by psychologism; for moral judgments are not merely statements about the speaker's feelings.

There is another possible interpretation of Hume. It is possible that Hume is an emotivist. The emotivist position differs from psychologism, in that emotivism denies that moral utterances are statements capable of truth or falsity. Stroud explains this view:

It might be that in uttering 'X is good' I am not saying anything... but am simply expressing in a linguistic way a certain feeling or emotion I have towards X. It would be like a cheer for X; cheers are linguistic, but are typically not assertions.⁸²

A. J. Ayer holds this view in Language, Truth and Logic. Ayer argues that: "...in every case in which one would commonly be said to be making an ethical judgment,

⁸¹Árdal, Passion 203.

⁸²Stroud, Hume 181-182.

the function of the relevant ethical word is purely 'emotive'. It is used to express feeling about certain objects, but not to make any assertion about them."⁸³ Is this Hume's view?

It seems most unlikely that Hume is an emotivist; in fact, even Ayer does not argue that Hume is strictly speaking an emotivist. Ayer claims: "...if we did insist on extracting from Hume a reformulation of our moral statements, we should come nearer the mark by crediting him with the modern 'emotive' theory...."⁸⁴ However, Ayer also states that Hume is not intending to reformulate our moral statements.⁸⁵ Ayer is correct that this is not Hume's intention. However, even if this was Hume's intention, emotivism still does not seem that near to the mark.

Emotivism, like psychologism, is unable to account adequately for disagreement about moral value. In the emotivist theory it is impossible for there to be a disagreement, because nothing true or false is uttered in a moral judgment. However, Hume contends that there is a standard of approval. This indicates that there is something that human beings can disagree about, and that this standard can resolve the disagreement. Moral judgments, on Hume's view, do not merely state or express the speaker's feelings.

Perhaps the most plausible subjectivist interpretation of Hume, is that Hume holds a projectionist theory. Both J. L. Mackie and Stroud argue for this interpreta-

⁸³ Alfred Jules Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic. 1936. (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1952) 108.

⁸⁴ A. J. Ayer, Hume (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980) 85.

⁸⁵ Ayer, Hume 84.

tion of Hume. Stroud explains the theory as follows:

I contemplate or observe an action or character and then feel a certain sentiment of approbation towards it. In saying or believing that X is virtuous I am indeed ascribing to X itself a certain objective characteristic, even though according to Hume, there really is no such characteristic to be found 'in' X. In that way virtue and vice are like secondary qualities.⁸⁶

Thus, one attributes or 'projects' qualities onto characters and actions that are not 'really' there.

These 'fictitious' qualities are action-guiding, because "these fictitious features are projections of sentiments which are intrinsically action-guiding".⁸⁷ Moreover, there is a reason that we make these fictitious projections. Mackie states:

...there is a system in which the sentiments of each person both modify and reinforce those of others; the supposedly objective moral features both aid and reflect this communication of sentiments, and the whole system of thought of which the objectification, the false belief in the fictitious features, is a contributing part, flourishes partly because... it serves a social function.⁸⁸

Thus, the projections are action-guiding and socially useful.

Both Stroud and Mackie find support for the projectionist interpretation in the following passage from Hume:

Thus the distinct boundaries and offices of *reason* and of *taste* are easily ascertained. The former conveys the knowledge of truth and falsehood: the latter gives the sentiment of beauty and deformity, vice and virtue. The one discovers objects as they really stand in nature, without addition or diminution: the other has a productive faculty,

⁸⁶Stroud, Hume 184.

⁸⁷J. L. Mackie, Hume's Moral Theory (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1980) 71.

⁸⁸Mackie, Hume's Moral 72.

and gilding or staining all natural objects with the colours borrowed from internal sentiment, raises in a manner a new creation. (EM,- App.1,p.294)

The 'new creation' on the projectionist interpretation is a world with the added fictitious qualities of virtue and vice, good and evil, and beauty and deformity.⁸⁹ These qualities, however, are not really features of the external world. Moreover, this projection parallels the mind's operation with regard to secondary qualities. In the case of the secondary quality of colour, for example, the mind projects 'redness' on to an object even though this quality is not inherent in the object.

Mackie argues that one reason to attribute the projectionist view to Hume is that this view is largely correct.⁹⁰ Stroud, however, correctly takes a more critical view of the projectionist theory. Stroud states:

The Humean suggestion I have been considering is that our thoughts are generated by a creative or productive process which "takes" something or other from our impressions or feelings and leads us somehow to "spread" what it takes on to objects which we unproblematically believe to populate the world. But that is only a prejudice or a hope or a fairy-story without a convincing account of exactly *what* we "take," and exactly how it is turned into something which it becomes intelligible to predicate of objects or the relations between them.⁹¹

There does certainly seem to be a difficulty in understanding what we fictitiously project onto characters and actions, and in understanding how this is done. Stroud

⁸⁹Barry Stroud, "'Gilding and Staining' the World with 'Sentiments' and 'Phantasms'," Hume Studies 19.2 (November 1993): 259.

⁹⁰Mackie, Hume's Moral 72. See also J.L Mackie, Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1977) 48-49.

⁹¹Stroud, "Gilding" 270.

is dissatisfied because these two issues are not explained by Hume. Stroud believes that this indicates a failure on Hume's part; however it is more likely an indication of the failure of the projectionist interpretation.

There is something peculiar about the projectionist interpretation. It has the consequence that all moral judgments are false. Daniel Shaw explains:

...on this interpretation, Hume is committed to the view that all our moral judgments, being projections on to reality of characteristics that do not really exist in reality, are all, strictly speaking, false judgments. Surely if Hume meant that, he would have said that, and he doesn't.⁹²

Shaw is quite correct about this failure of the projectionist interpretation. However, it raises the issue of how one is then to understand the 'gilding and staining' passage quoted above, and the analogy with secondary qualities.

Stroud's projectionist interpretation of Hume seems to be marred by the erroneous belief that Hume denies any role for reason in morality. Thus, Stroud can be found dismissing a possible interpretation of Hume for the following reason: "Therefore 'X is vicious', so understood, could not be a 'pronouncement' we arrive at by feeling or sentiment alone."⁹³ It should, however, be clear from the preceding chapter that this is not a good enough reason to dismiss a possible interpretation; Hume is certainly prepared to admit that reason is involved in morality.

Stroud's interpretation of the 'gilding and staining' passage is effected by his belief that Hume is committed to the view, that either reason is involved in moral

⁹²Daniel Shaw, "Hume's Moral Sentimentalism," Hume Studies 19.1 (April 1993): 10.

⁹³Stroud, Hume 184.

distinctions, or the sentiments are. Stroud seems to believe that, for Hume, reason concerns things as they really stand in nature, but taste does not. Taste only projects 'fictitious' things onto the external world. However, there is a difference between saying, which Hume does, that taste cannot discover things as they really stand in nature; and saying, which Hume does not, that judgments of taste have no connection with things as they really are. Moreover, shortly after the 'gilding and staining' passage, Hume makes the point that reason precedes taste. Hume states:

From circumstances and relations, known or supposed, the former [reason] leads us to the discovery of the concealed and unknown: after all circumstances and relations are laid before us, the latter [taste] makes us feel from the whole a new sentiment of blame or approbation. (EM, App.1, p.294)

Thus, the 'new creation' is not a projected quality, but the sentiment of blame or approbation. Moreover, the 'productive faculty' of taste, is its ability to be a motive to action. This ability, as the preceding chapter showed, is what reason lacks. Hence, *both* reason and sentiment are necessary for morality.

Both Mackie and Stroud find that the projectionist interpretation is supported by Hume's analogy between secondary qualities and, virtue and vice. Hume states:

Vice and virtue, therefore, may be compar'd to sounds, colours, heat and cold, which, according to the modern philosophy, are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind.... (T, III, I, I, p.469)

Mackie and Stroud interpret the doctrine of secondary qualities as entirely subjectivist. Thus, Stroud states:

This suggests that Hume endorses 'modern philosophy's' view that the redness we see is nothing more than a feature of our impressions.... The same would be true of the disgust or displeasure we might expe-

rience when observing an act of willful murder....⁹⁴

The difficulty with this interpretation of the analogy, is that it places too much emphasis on the subjective nature of secondary qualities. Penelhum points out that:

...it is important to recall that the doctrine of primary and secondary qualities, as we find it in Locke, is not a mere denial of the physically real existence of colours or smells or sounds. It is also an assertion that our mental perceptions of these qualities are due to real physical or chemical configurations, even though these configurations do not *resemble* the colour, smell, or taste sensations to which they give rise in us.⁹⁵

Moreover, it is rather peculiar to place a great deal of emphasis on the analogy, for Hume argued against the doctrine of primary and secondary qualities in Book I of the *Treatise*. Nevertheless, his description of the doctrine makes it clear that he does not understand modern philosophy's doctrine to be a 'mere denial of the physically real existence' of secondary qualities. Hume describes the view as follows:

The fundamental principle of that philosophy is the opinion concerning colours, sounds, tastes, smells, heat and cold; which it asserts to be nothing but impressions in the mind, *deriv'd from the operation of external objects*, and without any resemblance to the qualities of the objects. (Italics added.) (T,I,IV,IV,p.226)

The impressions are clearly connected with the external world. Hence when Hume draws the analogy, he does not mean to suggest that virtue and vice have no connection with things external to the mind.

The projectionist interpretation of Hume had a certain plausibility. It recognized that Hume did not claim that moral judgments are merely statements or

⁹⁴Stroud, "Gilding" 261.

⁹⁵Penelhum, Hume 149.

expressions of a speaker's feelings. Hume recognized, according to this view, that there *seem* to be objective characteristics in characters and actions. However, the interpretation erred by holding that these characteristics are not really there; they are only fictitious projections. Thus, A. E. Pitson is correct in claiming:

Neither beauty nor virtue consists in any particular matter of fact but, as with, e.g. the colour of an object, their existence is a complex matter involving both the objects to which they are ascribed and also observers so constituted that these objects affect them as they do.⁹⁶

Virtue and vice are distinguishable from the moral sentiments. They are characteristics, of durable characters (and actions insofar as they are signs of a durable character), that give rise to the moral sentiments of approval and disapproval. Thus, one can understand Hume's analogy with secondary qualities as indicating the following:

When I call some action or character virtuous or vicious, I am not merely expressing a feeling which it has aroused in me, but also stating something about those features in the object (the person) which have caused it to do so. More, accurately, I am not merely expressing my approval or disapproval, but also claiming that the object has those characteristics, or causal properties, which produce in an objective observer the characteristic moral feeling which I myself am expressing.⁹⁷

Hence, moral judgments are not merely statements about or expressions of a speaker's feelings, as the psychologist or emotivist interpretations maintain. Nor are moral judgments merely fictitious projections of qualities onto the 'real' world,

⁹⁶A. E. Pitson, "Projectionism, Realism, and Hume's Moral Sense Theory," Hume Studies 15.1 (April 1989): 71.

⁹⁷Penelhum, Hume 149.

as the projectivist maintains. According to Hume, moral distinctions are real:

Those who have denied the reality of all moral distinctions, may be ranked among the disingenuous disputants; nor is it conceivable, that any human creature could ever seriously believe, that all characters and actions were alike entitled to the affection and regard of everyone. (EM,I,p.169-170)

Hume is not an 'ethical subjectivist', if by that term one means to deny that there any objective characteristics relevant to morals. He does, however, emphasize that the moral sentiments have an important role to play in morality. Therefore, any accurate interpretation of Hume will have to do justice to the 'complex relation' between the objects morally evaluated and the subject who does the evaluating. A full understanding of this complex relation requires an examination of Hume's notion of a general standard of approval.

Chapter 3

The Standard of Approval

The subjectivist interpretations of Hume's moral theory fail to represent Hume's theory adequately. These interpretations concentrate attention on isolated passages from Hume. However, this does not provide a balanced interpretation of Hume, because it neglects other passages of Hume that demonstrate his concern for objectivity and rational reflection. An adequate interpretation of Hume requires that one examines Hume's reliance on the notions of a general point of view and general rules.

Hume considers sympathy to be one of the chief sources of moral distinctions. The role of this mechanism may seem to support a subjectivist interpretation because the operation of sympathy is variable. One, for example, sympathizes more with persons who are contiguous in space and time. This variability may seem to support the interpretation that moral distinctions are governed solely by the particular feelings of the individual making the moral judgment. This, however, is not the case.

Hume considers the variableness of sympathy in the context of a possible objection. One may object that the moral sentiments cannot proceed from sympathy because sympathy is variable, but moral approval and disapproval are not. The

objection runs as follows:

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*.... The sympathy varies without a variation in our esteem. Our esteem, therefore, proceeds not from sympathy. (T,III,III,I,p.581)

Hume is aware that sympathy is variable. Thus, to avoid the thrust of this objection, Hume claims that one must adopt a general point of view. He states:

Our situation, with regard both to persons and things, is in continual fluctuation; and a man, that lies at a distance from us, may, in a little time, become a familiar acquaintance. Besides, every particular man has a peculiar position with regard to others; and 'tis impossible we cou'd ever converse together on any reasonable terms, were each of us to consider characters and persons, only as they appear from his particular point of view. In order, therefore, to prevent those continual *contradictions*, and arrive at a more *stable* judgment of things, we fix on some *steady* and *general* points of view. (T,III,III,I,pp.581-582)

The first thing to notice about this passage is that it supports the arguments of the preceding chapter. This passage reinforces the claim that Hume does not allow moral judgments to be based solely on an individual's peculiar feelings; instead, one must adopt a general point of view.

The passage also indicates the reason for adopting a general point of view. It is employed so that contradictions can be avoided and stable judgments reached. If one considered a character only from one's own point of view, one's judgment would often contradict the judgment that another person makes from his or her point of view. Moreover, this sort of idiosyncratic judgment would make conversation between people impossible. Thus, one must correct the momentary appearances of

one's own point of view by adopting a general, stable point of view. Hume states:

Such corrections are common with regard to all the senses; and indeed '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. (T,III,-III,I,p.582)

The general point of view that one adopts is the point of view of the persons affected by the character being praised or blamed. The general point of view requires that one overlooks one's own particular interests in order to arrive at a stable judgment with which others may concur. Hume states:

Now, in judging of characters, the only interest or pleasure, which appears the same to every spectator, is that of the person himself, whose character is examin'd; or that of persons, who have a connexion with him. And tho' such interests and pleasures touch us more faintly than our own, yet being more constant and universal, they counter-balance [sic] the latter even in practice, and are alone admitted in speculation as the standard of virtue and morality. (T,III,III,I,p.591)

By adopting a general point of view, one can arrive at a stable judgment that is not so affected by the variations of individual points of view. Moreover, it is only the judgments that are arrived at by adopting a general point of view that are capable of providing a moral standard.

The notion of a general point of view is meant to counter the objection that since judgments of esteem are stable, they cannot proceed from the mechanism of sympathy. The general point of view counters the objection because one can arrive at a stable judgment by sympathizing with the feelings of the persons affected by a character. Hume admits that one's sympathy with the persons affected by a character may not be as lively as one's sympathy with one's friends and acquaint-

ances. Nevertheless, Hume claims:

But being equally conformable to our calm and general principles, 'tis said to have an equal authority over our reason, and to command our judgment and opinion. We blame equally a bad action, which we read of in history, with one perform'd in our neighbourhood t'other day: The meaning of which is, that we know from reflexion, that the former action wou'd excite as strong sentiments of disapprobation as the latter, were it plac'd in the same position. (T,III,III,I,p.584)

The intensity of sympathy will vary due to variations in contiguity and resemblance.

However, reflection will allow one to neglect these differences and form a more stable, "calm" judgment (T,III,III,III,p.603).

Hume considers another possible objection to his theory. One may object that a character is esteemed even if it is prevented from having beneficial effects. The esteem, therefore, cannot proceed from sympathy because there is no one affected by this character with whom one can sympathize. Hence, one may claim:

Sympathy interests us in the good of mankind; and if sympathy were the source of our esteem for virtue, that sentiment of approbation cou'd only take place, where the virtue actually attain'd its end, and was beneficial to mankind. Where it fails of its end, 'tis only an imperfect means; and therefore can never acquire any merit from that end. (T,III,III,I,p.584)

J. L. Mackie claims that Hume's response to this objection is "...no more than a restatement of the problem".⁹⁸ For Hume claims:

...where any object, in all its parts, is fitted to attain any agreeable end, it naturally gives us pleasure, and is esteem'd beautiful, even tho' some external circumstances be wanting to render it altogether effectual. 'Tis sufficient if every thing be compleat in the object itself. (T,III,-III,I,p.584)

⁹⁸J. L. Mackie, Hume's Moral Theory (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980) 124.

Mackie argues that the projectionist theory is a "more explanatory" response to the objection.⁹⁹ It was argued in the preceding chapter that the projectionist interpretation of Hume is mistaken. However, what is important to notice here is that had Mackie recognized that Hume's response is not a mere restatement of the problem, he might also have recognized the implausibility of the projectionist interpretation. For Hume relies on the notion of general rules to reply to the objection, and the notion of general rules does not support a projectionist, or any other subjectivist, interpretation.

In order to reach an adequate understanding of Hume's reliance on general rules in his moral theory, it will be beneficial to begin by examining his discussions of the general rules in earlier portions of the *Treatise*. Such an examination will make it more difficult to accept Selby-Bigge's claim that: "How these corrective [general] rules are obtained he does not explain in the *Treatise*, and indeed they seem to work in a circle with sympathy."¹⁰⁰

In the *Treatise*, one of Hume's earliest discussions of general rules occurs in Book I in a section which examines unphilosophical probability. Hume states: "A fourth unphilosophical species of probability is that deriv'd from *general rules*, which we rashly form to ourselves, and which are the source of what we properly call PREJUDICE" (T,I,III,XIII,p.146). He provides an example of this sort of rule:

⁹⁹Mackie, Hume's Moral 124.

¹⁰⁰L. A. Selby-Bigge, introduction, Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals, 1777. by David Hume. Edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge. Third Edition by P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) xxix.

An *Irishman* cannot have wit, and a *Frenchman* cannot have solidity; for which reason, tho' the conversation of the former in any instance be visibly very agreeable, and of the latter very judicious, we have entertain'd such a prejudice against them, that they must be dunces or fops in spite of sense and reason. (T,I,III,XIII,pp.146-147)

This sort of rule is the result of a generalizing tendency of the imagination.

These rules may operate even in cases where they conflict with present observations and experience. Hume explains how this is possible:

Our judgments concerning cause and effect are deriv'd from habit and experience; and when we have been accustom'd to see one object united to another, our imagination passes from the first to the second, by a natural transition, which precedes reflection, and which cannot be prevented by it. Now 'tis the nature of custom not only to operate with its full force, when objects are presented, that are exactly the same with those to which we have been accustom'd; but also to operate in an inferior degree, when we discover such as are similar; and tho' the habit loses somewhat of its force by every difference, yet 'tis seldom entirely destroy'd, where any considerable circumstances remain the same. (T,I,III,XIII,p.147)

Thus, due to the influence of custom or habit, the imagination extends its judgments to resembling circumstances. For example, after forming the opinion that Irishmen are witless on the basis of numerous observations, the imagination will extend this verdict even to an Irishman who happens to be quite agreeable.

Hume's discussion of general rules is complicated by the fact that he uses the term 'general rules' in two distinct senses. The first sense refers to the tendency of the imagination to generalize as discussed above; for the sake of clarity, this sense will be referred to as the 'general rules of the imagination'. It is important to notice that Hume considers these rules to be a frequent source of error. He states: "Human nature is very subject to errors of this kind..." (T,I,III,XIII,p.147).

The term 'general rules' is also used by Hume to refer to what may be called, following Thomas K. Hearn, "reflective rules".¹⁰¹ Reflective general rules are concerned with avoiding errors due to the imagination's propensity to generalize.

Hume states:

We shall afterwards take notice of some general rules, by which we ought to regulate our conduct concerning causes and effects; and these rules are form'd on the nature of our understanding, and on our experience of its operations in the judgments we form concerning objects. By them we learn to distinguish the accidental circumstances from the efficacious causes; and when we find that an effect can be produc'd without the concurrence of any particular circumstance, we conclude that that circumstance makes not a part of the efficacious cause, however frequently conjoin'd with it. (T,I,III,XIII,p.149)

Thus, the reflective rules, or the rules of the understanding, allow one to distinguish between accidental circumstances and efficacious causes. The accidental circumstances affect the imagination because of their frequent conjunction with the efficacious causes. However, the reflective rules allow the understanding to correct this generalizing propensity.

Hume explains how the reflective rules correct the rules of the imagination.

He states:

But when we take a review of this act of mind [the imagination's tendency to generalize], and compare it with the more general and authentic operations of the understanding, we find it to be of an irregular nature, and destructive of all the most establish'd principles of reasonings; which is the cause of our rejecting it. This is a second influence of general rules, and implies the condemnation of the former. (T,I,III,XIII,p.150)

¹⁰¹Thomas K. Hearn, "'General Rules' in Hume's *Treatise*," Journal of the History of Philosophy 8.4 (October 1970): 410, n.8.

When one notices the mind's propensity to generalize, one recognizes that it is often a destructive tendency. Therefore, one employs reflective general rules to correct this source of error.

Hearn correctly argues that:

It is in this reflex activity of mind wherein our cognitive activities themselves are scrutinized that the origin of reflective rules is to be located. For the outcome of this reflection is the formation of rules by the use of which the correction occurs.¹⁰²

This makes it quite difficult to accept Selby-Bigge's claim that Hume does not explain how one obtains corrective rules. For the corrective rules are arrived at by the operations of the understanding. Furthermore, if one examines this early discussion of general rules, it is evident that the general rules do not need to "work in circle with sympathy". For both sorts of general rules are explained without reliance on the mechanism of sympathy.

The role of general rules in Hume's moral theory is, however, related to the discussion about the mechanism of sympathy. For general rules are appealed to in order to respond to a possible objection to Hume's reliance on the mechanism of sympathy. The objection, it will be recalled, is that one rightly esteems a character even though accidental circumstances may prevent it from having any beneficial effects with which one can sympathize. In other words: "Virtue in rags is still virtue; and the love, which it procures, attends a man into a dungeon or desert [sic], where the virtue can no longer be exerted in action, and is lost to all the world" (T,III,-

¹⁰²Hearn, "General Rules' in Hume's *Treatise*" 412-413.

III,I,p.584).

Hume responds to the objection by claiming that it is sufficient for esteem that every thing is complete in the object, even though circumstances may prevent the object from being effectual. The reason for this is that:

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 circumstances wanting to render the cause a compleat one. *General rules* create a species of probability, which sometimes influences the judgment, and always the imagination. (T,III,III,I,p.585)

Hence, the imagination generalizes from instances in which a character of a particular sort has beneficial effects, to resembling instances where this sort of character is prevented from having beneficial effects. Because of the frequent conjunction of this sort of character with beneficial effects, one even esteems a character of this sort that is prevented from being efficacious. This generalizing tendency of the imagination is just as Hume described it in Book I with one important exception; in the realm of moral action this tendency is not necessarily a source of error. Rather, it is a helpful tendency; for it allows one to sympathize with a character that is prevented from achieving its beneficial effects.

The fact that Hume does not consider the rules of the imagination to produce error in the moral sphere, does not mean that he has abandoned the reflective rules. In the above quoted passage, he states that general rules sometimes influence the judgment; this is a reference to the reflective rules. Reflective rules are here required to correct for variations in sympathy. For sympathy is stronger in cases where a character actually is efficacious, than in cases where a character is prevented

from achieving beneficial effects. Hume states:

We are more affected by it [a case in which the character is efficacious]; and yet we do not say that it is more virtuous, or that we esteem it more. We know, that an alteration of fortune may render the benevolent disposition entirely impotent; and therefore we separate, as much as possible, the fortune from the disposition. The case is the same, as when we correct the different sentiments of virtue, which proceed from its different distances from ourselves. (T,III,III,I,-p.585)

Hence, both reflective general rules and the general point of view are necessary correctives to variations in sympathy.

The above quoted passage from Hume claims that one must separate "as much as possible" the fortune from the disposition. This indicates that Hume is not advocating that moral agents perform an impossible task; moral agents can only be required to do the best they can. Moreover, there are times when a person will not follow his or her corrected judgments. Hume acknowledges that:

The passions do not always follow our corrections; but these corrections serve sufficiently to regulate our abstract notions, and are alone regarded, when we pronounce in general concerning the degrees of vice and virtue. (T,III,III,I,p.585)

Hence, even though one does not always follow one's corrected judgments, it is still necessary for one to adopt a general point of view and employ general rules in order to make stable moral judgments.

In a similar recognition of the occasional discrepancies between one's immediate passions and one's reflective judgment, Hume explicitly recognizes that reason has a function in morality. He states:

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. (T,III,III,I,p.583)

This is an important passage for it provides further support for the arguments of the first chapter that contended that reason does have a role in morality. Moreover, Hume continues to explain how reason functions in morality. He asserts:

This language will be easily understood, if we consider what we formerly said concerning that *reason*, which is able to oppose our passion; and which we have found to be nothing but a general calm determination of the passions, founded on some distant view or reflexion. (T,III,III,I,p.583)

Hence, reason is operative when one adopts a general point of view or employs general rules. This is not, however, to agree with the rationalists. Hume is still claiming that the sentiments are the source of moral distinctions. The point is only that reason is often needed to "pave the way" for the moral sentiments (EM,I,p.173).

By use of both the general point of view and general rules, it is possible to form a general standard of approval and disapproval. This standard enables one's own judgments to be more stable over time, and it enables one to make judgments that are more consistent with the judgments of other persons. Hume states:

The intercourse of sentiments, therefore, in society and conversation, makes us form some general inalterable standard, by which we may approve or disapprove of characters and manners. And tho' the *heart* does not always take part with those general notions, or regulate its love and hatred by them, yet are they sufficient for discourse, and serve all our purposes in company, in the pulpit, on [sic] the theatre, and in the schools. (T,III,III,III,p.603)

In the *Enquiry of Morals*, Hume also develops the notion of a general standard of approval and disapproval. This discussion does not differ in any very significant manner from Hume's discussion in the *Treatise*. Therefore, it will not be necessary

to examine the *Enquiry of Morals* in great detail. Instead, attention may be focused on particular instances in which the *Enquiry of Morals* clarifies Hume's views.

Mackie has argued that Hume has not adequately explained why one adopts a general point of view. Mackie states:

But in all cases we choose 'some common point of view'; that is how we are able to reach agreement in our moral judgments and sentiments, and our ability to do this rests ultimately on a natural principle of sympathy. We need not deny that sympathy plays some part here; but I have argued that it cannot, by itself, provide a sufficient explanation... of our taking this common point of view....¹⁰³

This suggestion is rather curious, for it seems to reverse the roles of sympathy and the common point of view. One does not "choose 'some common point of view'" by sympathy. Rather, one adopts a common point of view so that one can sympathize with the persons affected by a particular character. Moreover, Hume does not claim that sympathy is a sufficient explanation of our taking the common point of view. In fact, the explanation is alluded to, but not developed, in Mackie's passage. The explanation is the desire for stable moral judgments.

In the *Enquiry of Morals*, Hume explains that the general moral standard allows one to make a "correction of appearances" (EM,V,II,p.228). This correction is required if one is to make stable judgments that avoid error and inconsistency. However, one may ask: "But why should we be interested in avoiding error and inconsistency?"¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³Mackie, Hume's Moral 125.

¹⁰⁴A. E. Pitson, "Projectionism, Realism, and Hume's Moral Sense Theory," Hume Studies 15.1 (April 1989): 85.

The answer to this question depends on the recognition that human beings are social beings (EU,I,p.8). Hume suggests that:

A perfect solitude is, perhaps, the greatest punishment we can suffer.... He [a person reduced to solitude] will still be miserable, till you give him some one person at least, with whom he may share his happiness, and whose esteem and friendship he may enjoy. (T,II,II,V,p.363)¹⁰⁵

Once it is appreciated that human beings are social beings, one can understand the desire to make stable judgments. For such judgments allow one to converse intelligibly with one's fellow human beings. Social interaction and conversation require the development of a general standard. Hume explains:

Every man's interest is peculiar to himself, and the aversions and desires, which result from it, cannot be supposed to affect others in a like degree. General language, therefore, being formed for general use, must be moulded on some more general views, and must affix the epithets of praise or blame, in conformity to sentiments, which arise from the general interests of the community. (EM,V,II,p.228)

Hence, when one adopts a more general view, one can sympathize with those affected by a particular character. Since this sympathy is not based on one's own interests, it produces judgments which one may discuss with others. Moreover, judgments made from a general point of view are judgments which others are likely to agree with. The general standard allows human beings to fulfil their desire for social interaction.

It has already been indicated that Hume does not claim that one always follows his or her impartial reasonings. One could simply take this to be a failure on the part of human beings. Hume, however, makes the interesting point that it is

¹⁰⁵The same point is made in the *Enquiry of Morals*. See (EM,V,II,p.220).

not necessarily a failure. In the *Enquiry of Morals*, he argues:

It is wisely ordained by nature, that private connexions should commonly prevail over universal views and considerations; otherwise our affections and actions would be dissipated and lost, for want of a proper limited object. Thus a small benefit done to ourselves, or our near friends, excites more lively sentiments of love and approbation than a great benefit done to a distant commonwealth. (EM,V,-II,p.229,n.1)

Radical impartiality would be ineffectual, for as Dorothy Coleman explains:

"...impartial motives are too weak, pallid, and diffuse to generate effective moral concern."¹⁰⁶ Hume expresses a similar view in the *Treatise* when he argues that regard to the public interest cannot be the motive to perform just actions. He states:

That is a motive too remote and too sublime to affect the generality of mankind, and operate with any force in actions so contrary to private interest as are frequently those of justice and common honesty. (T,III,II,I,p.481)

This leads to the question, how impartial should one be? Hume's response is that one must consider the usual force of the passions. He states:

...we always consider the *natural* and *usual* force of the passions, when we determine concerning vice and virtue; and if the passions depart very much from the common measures on either side, they are always disapprov'd as vicious. (T,III,II,I,p.483)

Thus, one must attempt to reach a balance between partiality and impartiality, for too much of either is considered vicious. Hume provides an example:

This we may observe in our common judgments concerning actions, where we blame a person who either centers all his affections in his family, or is so regardless of them, as, in any opposition of interest, to give the preference to a stranger, or mere chance acquaintance.

¹⁰⁶Dorothy Coleman, "Partiality in Hume's Moral Theory," Journal of Value Inquiry 26 (1992): 97.

(T,III,II,II,pp.488-489)

Coleman points out that there is an obvious and rather serious objection to the suggestion that one should consider the usual force of the passions. She cautions that: "...it simply does not follow that because something is common or usual that it is good. To point out that a practice is common is not to address the appropriateness of that practice."¹⁰⁷ Fortunately, Hume has a way to address this objection.

Hume can argue that the appropriateness of partiality can be examined from the impartial point of view. This interpretation is supported in the *Treatise*:

And we may observe in general, that if we can find any quality in a person, which renders him incommodious to those, who live and converse with him, we always allow it to be fault or blemish, without any further examination.... We consider him with all his relations in society; and love or hate him, according as he affects those, who have any immediate intercourse with him.... This is the ultimate test of merit and virtue. (T,III,III,IV,p.606)

Hence, one impartially evaluates the character of a person by considering that person's partial relationships.

Coleman also argues that partiality is impartially justified. She states:

To show that the common practice is appropriate requires evaluating the practice from an impartial point of view according to which one considers the *general tendencies* of the practices. This impartial point of view must take into account that human beings are naturally partial creatures and that while partiality is necessary for virtue, it can also impede virtue.¹⁰⁸

In fact, Hume advocates this in the passage in which he claims that it is "wisely

¹⁰⁷Coleman, "Partiality" 99.

¹⁰⁸Coleman, "Partiality" 101.

ordained by nature" that private considerations commonly prevail over the universal view. He states: "But still we know here, as in all the senses, to correct these inequalities by reflection, and retain a general standard of vice and virtue, founded chiefly on general usefulness" (EM,V,II,p.229,n.1). Partiality is an important component of morality. However, one must impartially reflect on it and correct its inequalities in order to prevent partiality from impeding virtue.

There is an interpretation of Hume's notion of a general standard of approval that claims that this standard is entirely causal. For Hume has claimed that:

'Tis only when a character is considered in general, without reference to our particular interest, that it *causes* such a feeling or sentiment, as denominates it morally good or evil. (*Italics added.*) (T,III,I,II,p.472)

Hence, the general standard specifies the conditions necessary for the experience of moral approval and disapproval. However, if this is understood to be the sole function of the standard, there is an unwelcome consequence for Hume's theory.

Philip Mercer claims: "According to Hume, approval is necessarily objective and there is no room in his concept for the possibility of 'unjustified approval'."¹⁰⁹

Mercer continues:

...according to Hume, approval and disapproval are necessarily based on an impartial and general contemplation of persons and their actions; and since this is by definition a viewpoint from which *everyone* would have to agree if placed in it, there can be no room for a situation where one person approves of X whilst another disapproves, or vice versa. Ultimately, then, Hume commits himself to the position of denying the possibility of real moral disagreement.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹Philip Mercer, Sympathy and Ethics (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972) 62.

¹¹⁰Mercer, Sympathy 65.

It is certainly true that Hume considered adopting a general viewpoint and employing general rules to be requisite conditions for the possibility of experiencing moral sentiments. However, they are not only causal conditions. They also, as was suggested earlier, serve a corrective function. Hearn correctly points out that they:

...cease to be merely causal, but are also corrective in that they provide the norms against which our sentiments must be tested if they are to be rational, i.e., if they are to be calm passions, based on survey and reflection.¹¹¹

Mercer's interpretation cannot account for the corrective function, for he has claimed that Hume has no room for 'unjustified approval'. Hearn explains the difficulty:

In that case, of course, Hume's talk about 'correcting' our sentiments is impossible to account for, since approval and disapproval would, from the nature of the case, never require correction.¹¹²

Furthermore, Mercer's entirely causal interpretation claims that everyone would have to agree if placed in the objective standpoint; for once the objective standpoint is adopted, the particular moral sentiment would necessarily follow. However, Hume has argued that the passions do not always follow our corrections (T,III,III,I,p.585). It is possible that moral sentiment will not necessarily follow. Therefore, the entirely causal interpretation is not sufficiently complex to capture Hume's analysis.

Hume's notion of adopting a general point of view has led many commentators to consider the possibility that Hume holds an 'ideal spectator theory'. The

¹¹¹Thomas K. Hearn, "General Rules and the Moral Sentiments in Hume's *Treatise*," *Review of Metaphysics* 30 (1976): 66.

¹¹²Hearn, "General Rules and the Moral Sentiments" 66.

difficulty with these considerations is that far too often the term is being used in different ways.

One may use the term 'ideal spectator theory' to refer to the theory that moral judgments are not about the moral sentiments of actual people; rather they are about the moral sentiments of a perfectly impartial spectator. Rachael Kydd argues for such an interpretation of Hume. Kydd states:

...goodness is defined by him not in terms of the feelings of approval which it actually arouses, but in terms of the feelings which it would arouse in a perfectly disinterested spectator who formed a perfect idea of it. And it may be that nobody has ever formed a perfectly adequate idea of an object irrespective of its relation to him, and hence that nobody has ever as yet been right in thinking that any object is good. In fact in order to know that an object is good the knower would need to be omniscient, for he would need perfect insight into the nature of the object and all its effects. Hence what we or even the majority of people think to be a good object of approval need not necessarily be one.¹¹³

Hearn correctly argues that the consequence of this interpretation is that: "Since no actual observer is ever able to meet those qualifications, no actual value judgment can be justified."¹¹⁴ But clearly Hume believes that actual human beings make and are justified in making value judgments. If Hume did not believe this, there would be no sense in his explaining how one is to correct one's passions. A perfectly omniscient observer who forms a perfect idea would not need to make corrections.

There is another way that the term 'ideal spectator theory' has been used to

¹¹³Rachael M. Kydd, Reason and Conduct in Hume's Treatise (London: Oxford University Press, 1946): 175-176.

¹¹⁴Hearn, "General Rules and the Moral Sentiments" 69.

describe Hume's theory. Ronald Glossop has, for example, claimed:

The qualified or ideal spectator theory seems to reflect a most important aspect of Hume's theory, that the spectator mentioned in his definition is not just any actual spectator, but must be qualified- he must be fully informed....¹¹⁵

In this sense the term is applicable to Hume's theory. For the general point of view and general rules are indicative of what is necessary for a spectator to make a qualified moral judgment.

David Norton also seems to use the term in this way. For he states: "It is only characters and actions to which we give a general or disinterested regard that can evoke the kind of sentiment that leads us to say that actions are morally good or evil."¹¹⁶ In a footnote to this sentence, Norton then refers to "...Hume's insistence that we must be ideal spectators...."¹¹⁷ Moreover, Norton does reject Kydd's insistence that the Humean moral spectator is omniscient.¹¹⁸ Hence, the appropriateness of describing Hume's theory as an 'ideal spectator theory' depends upon how one is using the term. It is only appropriate to the extent that one recognizes that Hume believes that the moral spectator is an actual spectator. Hume is not suggesting that there is a hypothetical ideal agent, but he is suggesting that the

¹¹⁵Ronald J. Glossop, "The Nature of Hume's Ethics," Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 27 (1966-1967): 532.

¹¹⁶David Fate Norton, "Hume's Common Sense Morality," Canadian Journal of Philosophy 5.4 (December 1975): 528.

¹¹⁷Norton, "Hume's Common" 528, n.4.

¹¹⁸David Fate Norton, David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982) 127, n.32.

spectator must be qualified.

Mercer and Jonathan Harrison interpret the adoption of a general point of view as "equivalent to *knowing how one would feel if one were impartial*."¹¹⁹ One of the problems with this interpretation is that it seems to imply that the spectator must be omniscient. Impartiality again seems to be considered a hypothetical ideal that one thinks about, rather than something an actual spectator may attain.

The interpretations of Mercer and Harrison seem to make it unnecessary for the spectator actually to feel sympathy. Walter Brand is quite persuasive on this point. Brand argues:

According to such accounts, sympathizing with non-existent feelings involves *thinking of*, or conceiving, the sympathy that would be felt had the benevolent disposition actually benefitted someone.... But in simply thinking about sympathetic feelings, one leaves out of the account the sympathetic feelings themselves, and such feelings occurring at the level of immediate and unreflective sympathy, always survive the reflective process of discriminating the features of causes.¹²⁰

The last sentence in Brand's passage recalls the notion of general rules. The imagination has a propensity to generalize; the general rules of the imagination allow one to pass easily from a cause to an effect, even in cases where the cause is not complete (T,III,III,I,p.585). Reflective general rules may then correct the sympathy that results from this tendency of the imagination. The unreflective sympathetic feelings must survive the process of correction, for otherwise it would make no sense

¹¹⁹Mercer, Sympathy 69. See also Jonathan Harrison, Hume's Moral Epistemology (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976) 109.

¹²⁰Walter Brand, Hume's Theory of Moral Judgment: A Study in the Unity of A Treatise of Human Nature (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992) 125.

for Hume to claim that sometimes our passions do not follow our corrections.

Moreover, as Brand argues:

One is not aware of the persistent inference from imagination *despite* the more reasonable judgment from understanding. One cannot be in a position to believe what feeling one would have without having made the reflection and without having learned the difference, that is, without having experienced the feeling itself.¹²¹

Hence, when one adopts a general point of view, one must actually feel and not merely think about what one would feel if one were impartial. The general point of view is not, to borrow Henry Aiken's phrase, an "ideal philosophical experiment".¹²²

C. D. Broad offers an interpretation of Hume's moral theory that leads to some curious consequences. Broad argues:

But Hume's theory is that "x is good" means that the contemplation of x will call forth an emotion of approval in all or most men on all or most occasions. Such statements as this can be argued about and supported or refuted by observation and collection of statistics. On Hume's theory a man might quite well make the judgment x is good, though the contemplation of x evoked in him at the time no emotion at all or an emotion of disapproval.¹²³

According to Broad all moral disputes could, on Hume's view, be settled by collecting statistics of how people actually feel.¹²⁴ Carole Stewart provides a similar interpretation of Hume; however, Stewart also draws out an interesting consequence

¹²¹Brand, Hume's Theory 125-126.

¹²²Henry David Aiken, "The Originality of Hume's Theory of Obligation," Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 42 (1981-1982): 383.

¹²³C. D. Broad, Five Types of Ethical Theory (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul LTD., 1951) 85.

¹²⁴Broad, Five Types 115.

of this view. Stewart argues:

An interesting aspect of this notion is the implied conservatism in morality which can be seen in it. That which is properly regarded as moral approval, in Hume's system, is basically that which is normally so regarded, by the majority of people. The moral reformer ought therefore to be disapproved of, simply because he is a *reformer*, and is thus necessarily not advocating the usual.¹²⁵

One of the difficulties with the interpretations of Broad and Stewart is that they do not provide references to indicate where they find Hume supporting this view. Nonetheless, it is possible to consider the appropriateness of attributing to Hume the view that moral judgments are about the moral approval and disapproval of the majority.

The crucial difficulty with this interpretation is that it allows that one may make a moral judgment without a moral sentiment or even with a moral sentiment contrary to one's judgment. One supposedly judges that 'x is good' because the majority of people approve of it, regardless of whether or not one approves of it oneself. This, however, makes one's own moral sentiments irrelevant when making a moral judgment. There is no reason to believe that Hume advocated this; in fact, there is good reason to suspect that he did not. For one thing, it makes the Hume's entire discussion of correcting one's sentiments beside the point. The only thing of real importance is that the majority of people approve or disapprove of something, and this can be discerned without one's correcting, or even having, a sentiment. If

¹²⁵Carole Stewart, "The Moral Point of View," *Philosophy* 51 (1976): 184. See also Alasdair MacIntyre who argues that Hume's conservatism reflects a prejudice in favour of the Hanoverian ruling elite of which Hume was a part. (Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984] 231.)

this was Hume's view, then it is not possible to explain the amount of attention he pays to discussing how one corrects one's sentiments in order to arrive at a stable moral judgment.

Perhaps the view that Hume would necessarily disapprove of a moral reformer, is related to Hume's contention that one should consider the natural and usual force of the passions when distinguishing virtue and vice. Hence, one could argue that the moral reformer is disapproved of because his or her passions are not usual or natural. However, as was argued above, the natural and usual force of the passions may be impartially evaluated with regard to their appropriateness. Therefore, one could approve of the moral reformer even though the reformer is not advocating the usual. As Páll Árdal argues: "But surely one could think that one was both in the minority and in the right in one's evaluations: one might think that other people were morally immature, or perverse in their moral judgments."¹²⁶ Hence, Hume does not give authority to the majority, simply because it is the majority.

The denial that the majority is the final arbiter is not meant to suggest that there is widespread disagreement about morality. Hume does believe that there is "uniformity in the *general* sentiments of mankind" (T,III,II,VIII,p.547,n.1). Hence, it is most likely that agreement will be reached when one adopts a general point of view and employs general rules. Nevertheless, it is possible that agreement may not

¹²⁶Páll S. Árdal, *Passion and Value in Hume's Treatise* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1966) 192.

be reached in particular instances. However, as Hearn explains:

...there may be cases where we cannot *in fact* determine which party to the dispute is in error, but *in principle* we can so decide. According to the impartial spectator view, we cannot even in principle decide whether one or both parties to a disagreement are in error, since *ex hypothesi* we cannot know what a perfectly impartial spectator would approve.¹²⁷

Hence, a moral judgment may be mistaken, but in principle, at least, the mistake may be discovered and corrected.

In the preceding chapter, it was argued that the various subjectivist interpretations are mistaken. The examination of Hume's notions of a general point of view and general rules supports this argument; for these notions provide an objective standard against which one's subjective sentiments may be corrected. Hume claims that sympathy is the chief source of moral distinctions. However, it is also clear that, according to Hume, one's immediate unreflective sympathetic feelings must be corrected. Moreover, this process of correction requires not only feeling, but also reason. It is only when one adopts a general point of view and reasons with general rules, that one is able to reach stable moral judgments that allow one to converse and agree with fellow human beings. This allows human beings to avoid the punishment of solitude.

¹²⁷Hearn, "General Rules and the Moral Sentiments" 71. It should be noted that Hearn is using the term 'impartial spectator view' in the sense that the spectator is an ideal, hypothetical spectator.

Conclusion

A detailed study of Hume's moral theory reveals that his analysis is much more subtle than is commonly supposed. It has been shown that his theory is not a simplistic rejection of reason and objectivity in morality. Rather, it is an innovative attempt to achieve a balanced moral theory. The ethical rationalists argue that moral distinctions, like mathematical propositions, can be discovered by reason alone. Hume's critique of the rationalist position does not entail a complete rejection of the role of reason in morality. Hume recognizes that reason is involved in moral judgments. In moral judgments, reason must pave the way; for reason discerns the relevant facts of a state of affairs that is to be morally evaluated. Moreover, through the use of reflective general rules, reason is also involved in correcting errors that may be made by a moral agent.

Hume's criticism of the rationalists is directed at their assertion that it is reason alone that discovers moral distinctions. Hume, unlike the rationalists, also recognizes that the passions or sentiments are involved. A moral distinction arrived at by reason alone has no influence on actions; one's sentiments must be involved for a moral distinction to be efficacious. He makes the point eloquently:

Virtue, placed at... a distance, is like a fixed star, which, though to the eye of reason it may appear as luminous as the sun in his meridian, is so infinitely removed as to affect the senses, neither with light nor

heat. Bring this virtue nearer, by our acquaintance or connexion with the persons, or even by an eloquent recital of the case; our hearts are immediately caught, our sympathy enlivened, and our cool approbation converted into the warmest sentiments of friendship and regard. (EM,V,II,p.230)

Hume's emphasis on the role of the sentiments in morality does not commit him to a theory of ethical subjectivism. Moral judgments are not simply statements about or expressions of an individual's feelings. Moreover, moral judgments are not the result of fictitiously projecting non-existent qualities onto characters and actions. For Hume, moral distinctions are real; to deny this, according to Hume, is to be a "disingenuous disputant".

The sentiments involved when one makes a moral judgment are not simply the feelings that one happens to have on consideration of a particular character or action. Instead, one must sympathize with the feelings of the persons affected by the character or action; one must adopt a general point of view in order to arrive at a stable moral judgment. This point of view is not an ideal hypothetical perspective; it is the point of view of an actual moral subject. Moreover, when one adopts an impartial general point of view, one recognizes that a certain amount of partiality is a virtuous characteristic of a moral agent. Hume points out that the ultimate test of a virtuous character is how that character affects the persons most closely related to it.

A general standard of approval allows human beings to reach stable moral judgments with which other human beings may concur. The standard of approval is arrived at by adopting a general point of view and following general rules; these

allow one to correct the momentary appearances of things. There may in fact be cases in which the moral judgments of different people do not agree; nevertheless, it is in principle possible to resolve such disagreements. Hume recognizes that the moral judgments arrived at by employing the methods of the general standard, do not always regulate one's conduct. However, the objective standard is necessary for intelligible discourse. Without the standard, human beings would be isolated in their own idiosyncratic points of view.

It has been demonstrated that Hume does not adopt an either/or approach to the traditional dichotomies of reason/passion, objectivity/subjectivity, and impartiality/partiality. Instead, Hume recognizes that both elements of the dichotomies are necessary for moral life. This is often missed by interpreters who concentrate solely on isolated passages from Hume's works, and this leads to inaccurate criticisms of Hume's moral theory.

Once Hume's moral theory is genuinely understood, it becomes evident that the theory could be a useful starting point for further research. In contemporary ethical debates there is an increasing recognition that dichotomous thinking is not useful for developing a satisfactory ethical theory. Hume's analysis therefore seems capable of providing important clues for achieving a balanced theory. His emphasis on the role of the sentiments and sympathy could be explored further to contribute to contemporary considerations of an ethic of caring. Moreover, since Hume does not simplistically deny the importance of reason and objectivity, his theory would be a fruitful starting point for such considerations. A moral theory must recognize the

importance of both reason and sentiment. As Hume says: "In vain would we exalt the one by depreciating the other" (EU,I,p.10).

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