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## *Introduction*

### **1. THE BUSINESS OF MORAL PHILOSOPHY AND THE QUESTION, “WHY BE MORAL?”**

#### **1.1. According to Plato and Aristotle**

These ancient philosophers viewed moral philosophy as serving practical ends and thought of themselves as involved in an activity that, if well conducted, would lead to theories and conclusions, which, if appreciated, would help people to be better and happier. For them, the end of moral philosophy was not merely to understand morality and goodness but primarily to show people how to be good and happy. This viewpoint is explicit in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: “the end of this kind of study is not knowledge but action” (I, 3, 1095a6). It is also evident in the problem set by Glaucon and Adeimantus that drove Plato’s ethical/political masterpiece. The first question for Plato and Aristotle, out of which all others addressed in their moral philosophies flowed, was: “How is a person to live—in what would a happy life consist?”

Convinced that living and faring well—*eudaimonia* (happiness, in most translations)—entails being just and virtuous, Plato and Aristotle sought to understand justice and virtue, their details, and the connection with happiness: Plato wanted to prove the connection, while Aristotle wanted to detail it. Being philosophers, they can sometimes go into arcane theoretical issues and are carried along in their inquiries by a desire to understand that is not

subservient to practical purposes. But their official and sometimes declared view was that their business was primarily *practical*. Their end again was not merely to understand *eudaimonia*—their term for the good and happy life in which a person lives and fares well—but to help us to achieve it. Making plain the *connection* between justice and virtue, and happiness, Plato had Socrates say that “the life of justice [is] the better and happier life ... is no light matter” (*Republic* 352d). It goes to the first *practical* question: “What is the right way to live?” (*Republic* 352d). Aristotle thought that making plain virtue’s *involvement* in *eudaimonia*, and spelling out the virtues involved in it, could help us to be better and happier.

## 1.2. According to Hume

Hume, the modern philosopher, saw the business of moral philosophy very differently. He saw it as primarily a *theoretical*, not a practical, discipline. Its end, he supposed, is to *understand* morality, not to promote it or facilitate it. As a generous and kind human being, he too wished to be helpful and to make people better and happier, and he was persuaded that moral philosophy is at least *consistent* with this end, since the truth about virtue recommends it to people as a condition for their well-being. However, he did not think that moral philosophy, by its proper style and methods, was particularly *suited* to improve not only minds, but also hearts, and thereby our lives. Although happily it can serve this end, it does so only incidentally, and not especially well.

## 1.3. The First Question—Why Be Moral?—of the Ancients Was the Last Question for Hume

The idea of personal happiness, of a fulfilling life, was central in Greek moral philosophy, and Greek moral philosophizing was driven by the practical question, “How are we to live?” This is not so in modern moral philosophy nor in Hume’s moral philosophizing. The idea of personal happiness and the question of how we are to be and to live—and whether part of the answer is that to be happy we had best be virtuous and live virtuously—make their first appearances in Hume’s books only at the very ends of the main texts. The idea of “the *happiness* ... of virtue” is addressed in the last paragraph of the “Conclusion of this book,” Section VI, Book III of the *Treatise* (T620). And it is said, in “Conclusions,” Section IX, Part II, of the *Second Enquiry*, that “there remains nothing but briefly to consider our interested *obligation* to [virtue], and whether every man, who has any regard to his own happiness and welfare will not best find his account” in it (E279).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Book III of the *Treatise* is followed by an appendix. In it, Hume offers amendments to correct several errors and infelicitous expressions in Book I that he is anxious to acknowledge. In this appendix, he also confesses that on reflection he finds himself in a quandary in Book I regarding *personal identity* that he cannot resolve. Section IX, “Conclusion,” in the *Second Enquiry*, Part II (E278–284), is followed by four appendices (E285–323), after which comes “A Dialogue” (E324–343).

In these places Hume addresses the questions of why we should be virtuous and moral, and how these qualities of mind are essential to our well-being and happiness and, in particular, to our "peace and inward satisfaction" (T620) and "the invaluable enjoyment of a character, with [ourselves] at least" (E283). But his discussions, while important and interesting, are brief and presented as endnotes, which his theoretical investigations of virtue and morality happily ground. In the *Second Enquiry* he devotes some space to explain that being just and kind is essential to peace of mind and self-esteem, and so to happiness, but he does not pursue these matters or go into the theory of conscience that, in the context of his theories of the "progress of human sentiments" (T500), his acute remarks can suggest.

Beyond delivering the news that it is good to be moral, that a person can feel better about himself for it, and briefly indicating reasons for homilies drawn from his philosophy of morality, Hume does not try to *persuade* his readers for their own good of these truths. In the *Treatise*, he stresses that this is work for other books, for books not of philosophy, but of poetry, history, and fiction, books in which the important rewards of virtue, and the penalties of vice, are not briefly indicated, but elaborated and vividly portrayed, so that the vicious may effectively see what they are missing, and the virtuous what they are enjoying lest they be tempted by "toys and geegaws" (E283) to compromise. After reflecting briefly on the relevance of virtue to happiness, and on aspects of virtue and, in particular, of justice, for any moderately well-informed and reflective person, Hume writes in the *Treatise*: "But I forbear insisting on this subject. Such reflections require a work apart, very different from the genius of the present. The anatomist ought never to emulate the painter" (T620).

He then, in the very last sentences of Book III, reminds readers of the work's theoretical character, while observing that even so it may be found not to be entirely devoid of practical value. "An anatomist, however, is admirably fitted to give advice to a painter. ... And thus the most abstract speculations concerning human nature, however cold and unentertaining, become subservient to *practical morality*, and may render this latter science more correct in its precepts and more persuasive in its exhortations" (T621). His own main business and talent was "more the speculative, than the practical part of morals" (E177–178).

The anatomist ought never to emulate the painter, *unless*, Hume would concede, he *is* a painter as well as an anatomist. Hume could have observed that the genius of Plato's *Republic* is more expansive than his own works, extending as it does not only to the forms of justice and injustice, as construed by Plato, but beyond to vivid depictions of their realities in souls and lives. That great man, Hume might modestly have observed, was an anatomist *and* a painter.

## 2. HUME'S QUESTIONS IN MORAL PHILOSOPHY AND HIS ANSWERS—IN BRIEF

### 2.1. Questions that Go to the Nature of Morality

**2.1.1. Moral distinctions: metaphysics.** For one thing, Hume wants to understand what moral distinctions, especially those concerning virtues and vices, *come to in reality*, remarking that “[t]hose who have denied the reality of moral distinctions may be ranked among the [entirely] disingenuous disputants” (E169). He asks what it *is* for a quality of mind or character (trait) *to be* a virtue, or a vice; he asks what *kind* of fact this is. Is it, for example, a *fully objective* fact that *honesty* and *considerateness* are virtues, and that *dishonesty* and *malevolence* are vices? Or are qualities of mind and character merely possible objects of favor and disfavor, approval and disapproval, which, according to their directions, create “out of whole cloth” their virtuousness or viciousness?

Hume’s position is that there are, sure enough, facts of virtue, but that these are *neither* entirely objective mind-independent realities or facts of how character traits stand in nature quite independently of their effects on minds that contemplate them, *nor* merely facts regarding which character traits and qualities of mind happen to be generally favored or disfavored, approved of or disapproved of. Hume maintains that virtue, like beauty, is only *somewhat* in the eye of the beholder: for a quality of mind to be a virtue, he hypothesizes, is for it to be the *potential* object of a particular kind of approval. Similarly for vice and this kind of disapproval. Hume’s idea is that virtuousness and viciousness are *powers* that some qualities of mind have to elicit, when considered and thought about in certain manners—kinds of approval and disapproval. For a quality of mind or character to be a virtue or vice involves something on its side and something on our side. By *their* mind-independent properties, and *our* susceptibilities and sensitivities and capacities for understanding and reflection, characters have powers to elicit approving and disapproving sentiments and are in certain ways *lovable* and *hateful*. For Hume, the case of virtue and vice is *something* like that of colors such as black and white. Colors are neither simply in a person’s mind when he or she perceives black and white objects, nor simply in these objects that are black and white. They are in reality powers that these objects have, by properties that are entirely independent of perceiving minds, to affect the minds of perceivers. According to Hume, the realities of moral distinctions are similar to those of color: as we *project* internal perceptions of color and gild or stain objects with them, so we project internal sentiments by which we distinguish good and evil and gild or stain natural objects (here qualities of minds, persons, and actions) with colors borrowed from these sentiments thereby “rais[ing] in a manner a new creation” (E294). Neither whiteness and blackness of objects nor virtuousness and viciousness of qualities of mind are fully objective; but because of a general propensity of our minds to project, onto their causes, perceptions and

sentiments that are in reality entirely internal to our minds, colors and moral qualities look and feel to us as if they were fully objective features of natural objects. It is the same in Hume's view of would-be necessary connections between objects in nature: "we consider ... the constant experienced conjunction of ... events. ... [and] as we *feel* a customary connexion between the ideas [expecting them to go together], we transfer that feeling to the objects [mistaking it for a necessary causal connexion between them as they stand in nature]; as nothing is more usual than to apply to external bodies every internal sensation, which they occasion" (E78n, *First Enquiry*). We can say that Hume's theory of virtue is a *power* theory, with an error endnote.

**2.1.2. Moral judgments: semantics and pragmatics.** Regarding the *language of morals*, Hume asks what we are *doing* when we say, in possibly heated conversation, of some *action* that it was *vicious*, of some *man* that he is *ignoble and base*, or of some *character or quality of mind* that it is *amiable and virtuous*, or *hateful and vicious*. Are we simply making true or false assertions? Are we simply, correctly or incorrectly, ascribing properties to various qualities of mind, and derivatively to actions and persons, when we pronounce them virtuous and vicious? Are we in our judgments of virtue and vice simply describing moral dimensions of characters or qualities of mind?

In Hume's view, there are moral facts to be stated, and moral properties and dimensions to be ascribed and described. These are *the powers* recently indicated that we can say that characters or qualities of mind have. And so one might suppose that, in his view, when we are making moral judgments, we are engaged in making statements, ascriptions, and descriptions of these facts and powers. But I interpret Hume as saying that, in our moral judgments of characters, we are *not* further describing them or stating facts about them, at least not *only* and not *primarily*. We are rather, at least primarily, engaged in *acts of approving and disapproving*, or in *expressions of approval and disapproval*, that are not simply *reports and descriptions* of our approving and disapproving attitudes; and the judgments we make are not themselves "speculative propositions" (E290) or statements of *fact* true or false (E294), although they can be warranted or unwarranted and subjects of rational dispute.

I have so far described what may be only a part of Hume's theory of moral judgments, the part that would deal with what he could term the *good sense* of moral terms. In addition to this good sense of moral judgments, there may be in his view a certain *bad sense* of fully objective moral qualities that we project as new creations. I assume that there is in his view this additional bad sense, and that Hume would say (if pressed) that moral judgments are at once acts of approval that do not aspire to truth, *and* descriptive judgments that ascribe fully objective moral qualities—judgments that aspire to truth but never attain it, since these qualities are unreal projected illusions. He does not explicitly say, but I think he should be read as thinking, that in ordinary causal, color, *and moral* judgments illusions of fully objective relations and properties are given voice, so that in our ordinary talk of colors, causes and

effects, and *morals*, we are involved in similar *errors* of objectification of what are in reality subjective sentiments of color, expectations, and favor and disfavor.

**2.1.3. Making moral distinctions: epistemology.** We now turn to questions of moral *determinations*—questions concerning how we make moral distinctions and how we determine exactly which qualities of mind are in fact virtues, that is, which qualities of mind in fact have *the power of virtue*, and which are vices. Hume asks whether reason *alone* is sufficient, and, implicitly, whether reason alone, operating quite dispassionately, is *best* for making these distinctions, when a person is doing his own moral thinking. His answer to both questions is “No.” He holds that reason *and* sentiment are involved in all ordinary determinations of moral distinctions, with sentiment having the last word. This is the way of ordinary determinations of moral distinctions, and for us it is by far the best and most reliable way. To decide whether or not a character or quality of mind has the power to elicit a certain sentiment of approval toward it, there is no better way, when a person is doing his own thinking, than to run an experiment in his own person, in which this person thinks about the character and its consequences, and sees how he feels about them, and thus it!

## 2.2. Questions that Go to the Substance of Morality

Hume wants to understand the nature of morality and the metaphysics of moral distinctions, especially of virtue and vice, the semantics and pragmatics of moral language in which moral distinctions are affirmed, and the epistemology of these distinctions. In addition, he wants to understand in a general and systematic way the “geography” of morals, especially of virtue and vice.

We know well enough which characters and qualities of mind are virtues and which are vices. We know well enough which characters and qualities of mind have the powers to elicit, in the manner of virtues and vices, approval and disapproval. Language provides a sufficient guide in its batteries of *good words* and *bad words*. For example, *kind* is a *good* word, a word of praise, and *dishonesty* is a *bad* word, a word of condemnation. This is the best possible evidence for kindness and dishonesty actually having the powers of virtue and vice, respectively. What Hume seeks in this part of his philosophy of morality are general organizing principles and common denominators of characters that are denoted by good words and bad words of every language: he is after common denominators of consensus virtues and vices of this dramatic notoriety. He seeks a “delineation or definition of Personal Merit” (E277) as marked by the good words and the consensus virtues they name. Attending to the qualities of mind that are by common consensus virtues and vices, Hume seeks *general* principles for what *makes* them virtues and vices, that is, for what gives them the *powers* of virtue and vice. He seeks a general account of what it is about qualities of mind that are virtues and vices by common consent that

*elicit*, when they are properly scrutinized, sentiments of moral approval and disapproval.

It could have been that virtues, and only virtues, among qualities of mind, are named by three-syllable English words. But that merely accidental common denominator would not be what *made* these qualities of mind virtues and admirable. It would not be what elicited that approval, or something that had anything to do with that. And so it would be very far from the kind of common denominator Hume seeks. The common denominator of virtue-making properties that he finds is that virtues are one and all qualities of mind that are *useful and/or agreeable to their owners and/or their associates*. His is a kind of *utilitarian* theory of virtues.

Hume does not make a project of delineating and defining not only *virtuous and vicious characters*, but also *right and wrong actions*, the actions that virtuous people seek to do and avoid, although a view of some interest on these matters is implicit in a very important detail of his theories of virtue, and of the virtues. The detail concerns the distinctive *species* of utility that attend the virtues of justice, such as veracity and fidelity to promises, and the virtues of benevolence, such as considerateness and generosity: metaphorically (and leaving *much* to be said and explained), the benevolence of persons contributes to the happiness and prosperity of humankind independently, as stones piled one on another make a wall, whereas the justice of persons contributes interdependently, as assembled stones do if they make a vault. The view regarding right actions that this detail projects (again leaving much to be said) is a kind of *rule utilitarianism* according to which it is right, barring extraordinary circumstances, to obey socially useful, actually established, general rules of *justice* and, subject to satisfying their demands in a case, to maximize public utility and to do what would be best for all who would be affected.

### 2.3. The Question, “Why Be Moral?”

Hume does get to the question with which the Greeks began. He says in his *Treatise* that “[t]he same system [that explains the nature and principles of virtue] may help us to form a just notion of the *happiness* as well as the *dignity* of virtue” (T620); in the *Second Enquiry*, Hume sketches the case for “our interested *obligation* to [virtue]” (E278), with special attention to the difficulty posed by justice “where a man, taking things in a certain light, may often seem to be a loser by his integrity” (E282).

### 2.4. Under the Rubrics Metaethical and Normative

The first questions of Section 2.1 concerning moral distinctions, judgments, and determinations are metaphysical, semantical, and epistemological questions that go to deep and general questions of philosophy. They are, in terms of present-day jargon, *metaethical* questions. Hume’s answers in this area combine elements of Naturalism, Expressivism, and Projective Error theory: in broad



strokes, there is something here for everyone, including even Nonnatural Realists such as Plato and G. E. Moore, although they might not like what they find. The questions of Section 2.2 that seek delineations or definitions of the substance of morality are, in present-day jargon, *normative* questions. Hume's answers here, his delineation of the virtues, and his implicit general determination of right actions, are utilitarian. Hume's metaethical and normative theories cohere to make an integrated theory of morality. In particular, his independently evidenced utilitarian delineation of Personal Merit is predicted and explained by his metaphysics of virtue and is thus, in turn, evidence for this metaphysics. The last questions of Section 2.3 of profound *practical* import are neither metaethical nor normative according to the usual understanding of these terms. They are not metaethical because they are practical, and the metaethical is confined in philosophical usage to theoretical matters.

### 3. COMING CHAPTERS

Chapters II and III are about the realities of morality, our determinations of moral distinctions, and its language. These chapters relate and explore Hume's metaphysical, epistemological, and semantical and logical views of moral matters.

Chapter IV is about a particular kind of evidence for the metaphysics of Chapter II. The evidence consists of biases almost everyone can discover in their moral views, biases *toward* human beings that are predicted and explained by a theory that incorporates human sentiments into the realities of morality as Hume's humanist metaphysics of morality does. Whereas "the life of a man is of no greater importance to the universe than that of an oyster" ("On Suicide," Hume, 1993, p. 319), it is naturally of greatest importance to humans, and thus of great importance morally according to that metaphysics of morality.

Chapters V and VI go into Hume's utilitarian theories of the virtues, and the utilitarian theory of right action that I project for him. Chapter V assembles the main evidence that Hume develops for his metaphysics of morals.

Complexity enters at many points in Hume's system, given his view of "that species of utility which attends this virtue [justice]" (E285). Whereas benevolence and its subdivisions—gentleness, kindness, and the rest—make for general happiness as stones heaped one upon another make a wall, with each act of benevolence contributing independently, justice and its subdivisions—honesty regarding property, truthfulness, fidelity to promises, and the rest—make for general happiness more as assembled stones make a vault, with contributions of acts of justice being interdependent, or (better) only *by their numbers*. Chapter VII studies the distinction between the utilities of benevolence and justice that Hume struggles to make and separates it from other distinctions with which he sometimes confuses it. Chapter VIII maintains the logical possibility of schemes of justice of the special vault-like utility that



Hume ascribes to justice. Chapter IX is about Hume's theory of the real possibility of schemes of justice. It is about how they come to be and are maintained, given their peculiar utility, whereby participation in these schemes, considered distributively or individually, is pernicious in every respect and of both public and private *disutility*.

Chapter X explains Hume's subtle address to the question, "Why be moral?" While outside their usual agenda, modern moral philosophers do sometimes get to it. Hume, arguably the first modern moral philosopher, and the greatest, got to it. That was easier for him than it is for many, since he took as the primary subject matter of morals not actions, right and wrong, nor states of affairs, good and bad, but characters, virtuous and vicious. Hume's elaborations of what it is *to be* moral, to be *a person of virtue*, naturally raises the question, as it did for Plato, of *why* one should be this kind of person, and what *interest* one has in being such a person. He asks whether "a man ... [who] has full power of modelling his own disposition ... would choose for the foundation of his happiness and enjoyment" (E281–282) every *virtue* including *justice*, which in his view is the only sticking point; and he undertakes to deliver a positive answer from the perspective provided by his theory. Hume thinks he can say why it is in a person's interest to be just: he thinks he can say why exceptionless honesty is, for a person's happiness, the best *character*, even though "taking things from a certain light. ... that *honesty is the best policy*, may be a good general rule, but is liable to many exceptions; and he, it may perhaps be thought, conducts himself with most wisdom, who observes the general rule, and takes advantage of all the exceptions of all exceptions" (E282–283). The problem to be managed is that "a sensible knave, in particular incidents, may think that an act of iniquity or infidelity will make a considerable addition to his fortune, without causing any considerable breach in the social union and confederacy" (E282).

The *problem* is that, given that species of utility that attends justice, particular acts of iniquity or infidelity need *not* cause any considerable breach in the social union and confederacy. Hume deals with this problem to his, and to my, satisfaction.

