

REASON AND SENTIMENT IN HUME'S MORAL PHILOSOPHY

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David Hume has been commonly thought to either have advocated some type of naturalistic theory of ethics or to have been an early precursor of the emotive theory of ethics. While I will not argue against the possibility of making a case for a naturalistic interpretation, I will maintain that certain important stretches of Hume's ethical writings require, or at least strongly suggest, an emotive interpretation. I will then try to show that the type of emotivism espoused by Hume is not very different from a nonrelativistic theory of ethics. My case will be made out, in the main, by considering what Hume has to say in Book III, Part I of the *Treatise* and in the first appendix to the second *Enquiry*.

The famous passage in Book III of the *Treatise* on "is" and "ought" is the passage that is usually cited as the principal piece of evidence that Hume could not have been a naturalist. Proponents of the naturalistic interpretation, agreeing that the passage is critical, have tried to construe its meaning in such a way as to show that Hume is saying nothing there that is incompatible with naturalism. I quote the passage:

"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 should be observ'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 others, which are entirely different from it."¹

A frequent exegesis of the passage is that Hume means that nonmoral premises cannot entail a moral conclusion; the peculiar inference is then made that Hume cannot be a naturalist. I say the inference is peculiar, because even if Hume were saying that there can be no entailment relation between factual and moral statements, he would still be entitled to the appellation of a naturalist, if he were prepared to assert that moral conclusions could be drawn by means of experimental reasoning. Obviously, for the inference to be drawn that Hume is not a naturalist, the argument must be regarded as enthymatic, the suppressed premise being the premise that Hume believed that conclusions drawn from experimental reasoning cannot be relied upon. The premise is false. While it is true that in his "refutation" of induction he seems to have assumed that unless induction

can be shown to be valid that it is defective, this is not his usual attitude. His pages are filled with conclusions drawn from experimental reasoning, and he even goes so far as to say that only this kind of reasoning can be the "guide of life."² The passage, then, can be taken as evidence that Hume is not a naturalist only if it can be shown that Hume is saying that factual statements are logically irrelevant to moral conclusions.

One of the authors who claims that Hume is an exponent of an interest theory of ethics is A. C. MacIntyre. In his article, "Hume on 'Is' and 'Ought,'" MacIntyre makes two principal points.³ (1) "Deduction" for Hume means inference, not entailment. (2) Hume does not intend to claim that correct inferences from factual to moral statements cannot be made, but only that at least one premise must refer to human interests, needs or desires. It seems to be quite certain that MacIntyre is right in his first contention and wrong in his second.

The reason why many writers must have thought that Hume meant to say that moral conclusions cannot be deduced from factual premises is that Hume actually uses the word, "deductions," in the last sentence of the quoted passage. This is misleading. MacIntyre points out that his Oxford English Dictionary informs him that "deduction" was used in the eighteenth century to refer to inference of any kind. (Parenthetically, this is the meaning that the term still has in common speech.) But a better procedure would be to collect samples of Hume's own uses of the term. It would be a tiresome research in which the researcher would get no help from the Selby-Bigge Index. It is my impression that Hume uses the term in diverse and inconsistent ways. Certainly, he does not *always* use the term to mean entailment, as for instance in this example: "In every criminal trial the first object of the prisoner is to disprove the facts alleged—It is confessedly by deductions of the understanding that this first point is ascertained—."⁴ Disproving the facts is obviously an exercise in experimental reasoning. However, I think it is probable that Hume sometimes does use the term, "deduce," to mean deduce in our sense.

A still better method of discovering Hume's real meaning would be to consult the whole section in which the passage appears. That this is a likely method would appear from the fact that the passage itself is an afterthought to an argument that has been concluded in the preceding paragraph. What is said in the quoted passage is apparently offered as an additional piece of evidence for the soundness of the conclusion that he has already drawn. A further advantage of the method is that even if it does not illuminate what Hume means in the celebrated passage, it should at least serve to clarify what his thoughts were about the role that reason plays in the making of moral distinctions. Indeed, it is somewhat surprising, considering the less than central location that the passage has, that

it should have been of such outstanding importance in the exegesis of Hume's ethical writings.

If the entire section is looked at, rather than the isolated passage alone, it is about as clear as anything can be that moral judgments are not inferences of any sort, deductive or inductive. The very title of the section, "Moral distinctions not Deriv'd from Reason," is strongly suggestive. And the following passage would seem to be almost conclusive: "Since morals, therefore, have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows that they cannot be deriv'd from reason; and that because reason alone, as we have already prov'd, can never have any such influence. Morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions. Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular. The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason."⁵ Of course, Hume is notoriously ambiguous in his use of the term, "reason," but the evidence is quite strong that in this section he is not using "reason" in the meaning of demonstration. The only thing favoring that interpretation is that Hume begins the section by attacking those moral philosophers who had believed that morality could be demonstrated. But everything else is against the interpretation. For one thing, near the beginning of the section, he defines what he is going to mean by "reason." "Reason," he says there, "is the discovery of truth or falsehood. Truth or falsehood consists in an agreement or disagreement either to the real relations of ideas, or to real existence and matter of fact."⁶ For another thing, the architecture of the whole section is in accord with the inclusive interpretation of "reason." Hume begins the section by showing that morality cannot be demonstrated and ends it by showing the futility of inductive moves. This completes Hume's proof that morality cannot be "deduced" (i.e., inferred).

Hume was an inconsistent writer, and besides that, I suspect that he changed his mind from time to time, which is no sin. However, the emotive foundation of his system was no mere "flash in the pan." He comes back to it again in the second *Enquiry*, where his exposition of the emotive system is much more complete than in the *Treatise*. This fact has been overlooked, I believe, because of the tendency of researchers to concentrate upon the *Treatise* in preference to the *Enquiries*. The parts of the *Enquiry* that are especially relevant are Section I and Appendix I.

Hume begins Section I by asking a question which he does not get around to fully answering until he comes to Appendix I. He evidently thinks that the question is of transcendent importance, since he calls it a question concerning the "foundation of morals." He wants to know whether morals "be derived from Reason, or from Sentiment," or stated in another way, "whether like all sound judgments of truth and falsehood,

they should be the same to every rational intelligent being; or whether, like the perception of beauty and deformity, they be founded entirely on the particular fabric and constitution of the human species."⁷ He will later conclude in Appendix I that (1) morality is a decision that sentiment makes and (2) morals, like beauty and deformity, are based upon the nature of the human species, and might be different for some other species.

The ground plan of the Appendix can be quickly summarized. Hume begins by admitting that reason has a considerable role to play in matters of morals, because it is only by means of reason that the tendencies of actions can be determined; his next step, however, is to show that it is sentiment that determines whether these tendencies are good or bad. The body of the Appendix is devoted to proving that neither demonstrative nor experimental reasoning can take this last step. Hume concludes by identifying the moral decision with the last step, which is made by sentiment. Hume himself puts it this way: "But after every circumstance, every relation is known, the understanding has no further room to operate, nor any object on which it could employ itself. The approbation or blame which then ensues, cannot be the work of the judgment, but of the heart; and is not a speculative proposition or affirmation, but an active feeling or sentiment."⁸

Although the case for an emotivist interpretation of Hume has been completed, it would be misleading to stop here. Emotivism is associated with skepticism, but Hume was not a skeptic either in morals or in criticism. While he recognized that every culture has its Neros, he believed that the majority of people in every culture have the same basic moral and aesthetic sentiments. At the very beginning of the second *Enquiry* he announces that his purpose will be to discover what is common to the estimable qualities of men, on the one hand, and to the blameable qualities, on the other, and by that means arrive at "those universal principles, from which all censure or approbation are ultimately derived."⁹ Likewise, criticism endeavors to make general observations "concerning what has been universally found to please in all countries and in all ages."¹⁰ Even in the *Treatise*, where Hume is thought to be his most skeptical, we find him saying "In what sense we can talk either of a *right* or a *wrong* taste in morals, eloquence, or beauty, shall be consider'd afterwards. In the mean time, it may be observ'd, that there is such an uniformity in the *general* sentiments of mankind, as to render such questions of but small importance."¹¹

Hume's emotivist theory of ethics is not, practically speaking, very different from a nonrelativistic naturalist theory. (In what follows, I am stretching Hume's meaning a little.) To see this, suppose some object A

would be universally approved as the best object in the circumstances, and that X, among the available alternatives, is the best means of obtaining A. The naturalist might claim that "X ought to be done" is just another way of saying "X is the most efficient way of producing A," and that it would be a contradiction for a person to agree that X is the most efficient means while denying that X ought to be done. The Humean emotivist would not see the matter in this light, but he would certainly agree that X should be done, and if he said otherwise, though he would not be lying exactly, he would at least be pretending that he had a feeling which he did not have. The same point, or a closely related point, can be put in another way. Under Humean emotivism primary ethical disagreement could not occur anymore than in naturalism. But secondary ethical disagreement, described loosely as disagreement about means-ends, could occur in either emotivism or nonrelativistic naturalism. Since secondary ethical disagreement is also factual disagreement, some emotivists seem to have been reluctant to count it as ethical disagreement. But since this type of factual disagreement (once consensus upon ends is reached) is automatically disagreement about values, I have no hesitation whatsoever in describing it as secondary ethical disagreement.

NOTES

¹David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1888), pp. 469-70.

²Hume, "An Abstract of a Treatise of Human Nature," *Essays in Philosophy*, ed. Houston Peterson (New York: Pocket Library, 1959), p. 18.

³A. C. MacIntyre, "Hume on 'Is' and 'Ought,'" *Hume: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. V. C. Chappell (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1966), pp. 240-64.

⁴Hume, *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1902), p. 171.

⁵*Treatise*, p. 457.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 458.

⁷*Enquiries*, p. 170.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 290.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 174.

¹⁰Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," *The Philosophy of David Hume*, ed. V. C. Chappell (New York: The Modern Library, 1963), p. 485.

¹¹*Treatise*, p. 547.

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