Philosophy 174
Notes on Hume's *Treatise*, Book 3, Part 1
Of virtue and vice in general
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Section 1, *Moral distinctions not deriv'd from reason*

The present account of morality depends on results from the first two books and in turn corroborates them.

Judgments distinguishing good from evil, i.e., expressing approval or disapproval, are perceptions, as are all actions of the mind. Are such perceptions ideas or impressions?

Many philosophers and divines have held that "there are eternal fitnesses and unfitnesses of things, which are the same to every rational being that considers them." In this sense, they claim that virtue is conformity to reason, and they hold that virtue is discovered through ideas, and the juxtaposition and comparison of them by the mind.

The whole point of morality is to "influence our passions and actions" rather than merely to formulate moral judgments. But it was shown in 2.3.3 that reason alone cannot influence our passions and actions. One argument from that section was that reason involves the real agreement and disagreement of ideas or the real existence of matters of fact represented by ideas, and that the passions do not represent anything.

Actions are laudable blamable, but are neither reasonable nor unreasonable.

There follows a long passage concerning the claim that there is an indirect way in which a judgment may cause an action in such a way that it is "contrary to reason" in an unphilosophical sense. It had been argued that the only way judgments enter into actions are by informing us of the existence of an object proper to a passion or by showing us how to get what we want and avoid what we do not want. And these judgments may be false, but these are only mistakes of fact, not of morality.

Another problem is that if moral distinctions are to be based on judgments, external circumstances will be irrelevant to the moral character of what is judged: it is the same whether the object of the judgment is an apple or a kingdom.

So-called “mistakes of right” cannot be the basis of moral turpitude, since they presuppose that there already is a fact of the matter about what is right. On the other hand, one may make a mistake of right irresponsibly and thus be, in a secondary sense, guilty of moral impropriety.
So far, the discussion has been over whether our own judgments of reason are the source of moral distinctions. There is a long discussion of a view of Wollaston that the source of moral distinctions is judgments made by another person that are caused by the actions we perform. Hume finds this view to be entirely inadequate, as our actions may give rise to many false judgments that have nothing to do with the morality of an action, as when someone mistakes an immoral act on my part to be a perfectly innocent one.

In sum, while reason may be an indirect cause of an action by prompting a passion or directing one (revealing an object of the passion or showing how to obtain or avoid it), such a judgment is not a cause of morality or immorality, and it is worse for judgments that are caused by our actions.

Now attention shifts to the view that morality is based on eternal and immutable fitnesses and unfitness of things, which it is claimed is revealed to reason. Here, Hume’s Fork comes into play. This reasoning must be either demonstrative or causal. It is not demonstrative, because such reasoning is confined to four relations of ideas—resemblance, contrariety, degrees in quality, and proportions in quantity or number—none of which has anything to do with morality. Hume challenges his opponent to find another kind of relation of ideas that could be the basis of demonstration of morality.

A further difficulty with this system lies in the fact that it would have to satisfy two conditions. The first is that the moral relations of ideas would have to be confined to those between an internal act and something external to the mind. It cannot be an internal relation on pain of our being guilty of crimes against ourselves. And it cannot be an external relation on pain of making moral judgments about external objects themselves. The problem is that there seems to be no principled way to describe a relation between an internal act (or passion) and an external object which does not apply to the other two kinds of relations.

The second condition would be even more difficult to fulfill, in that the eternal and immutable relations are supposed to impose obligations on all rational beings, which requires that their effects on all rational beings be the same, no matter how different these minds might be. There are two problems. One has already been noted: relations of ideas do

not produce actions of the will. The second is that there is no real causal connection that would bind the two together, as everything that exists is loose and independent of everything else.

Two examples are given. In the first, actions leading to the death of a human's parent are considered immoral, but those of an oak tree's so doing are not, yet the relations are the same. In the second, incest is immoral for humans but not for other animals, yet again, the relations are the same. It may be replied that humans are endowed with reason, which allows them to discover the immorality, which in turn produces the immorality when they act contrary to what they have discovered, while animals lacking reason do not recognize that it is wrong. This response begs the question, however. If the immorality of the action is based on recognition of the immorality thereof, then the immorality must already have existed, so that the act could not have been the cause of the immorality. Discovery of immorality only augments it, but it does not produce it.

The other prong of Hume's fork is causal reasoning. We cannot discover from the qualities of an action, say a willful murder, that it is vicious. All that is ever discovered is "certain passions, motives, volitions, and thoughts." The only way vice can be found is when the action meets with our disapproval. This is, indeed, a matter of fact, "but it is the object of feeling, not of reason." This feeling is similar to the sensible impressions of color, odor, etc., which modern philosophers have declared to be subjective. Although this discovery is theoretically important, it does not affect our behavior, which after all is based on our feelings of approval and disapproval.

Section 1 ends with the famous observation that writers on morality have been guilty of sliding insidiously from declarations of fact to those of value. This move from *is* to *ought* should be explained, but it "seems altogether inconceivable" how it could be if there is supposed to be some deduction from one to another. The conclusion is that "the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on relations of objects, nor is perceived by reason."

Section 2. ***Moral distinctions deriv'd from a moral sense***

Now that it has been shown that the discovery of the moral distinction between virtue and vice does not arise from ideas, it is concluded that it must arise from impressions. As a result, "morality is to be more felt than judged of" (1). The feeling may be very calm and in this way be confused with an idea, in that humans are very susceptible to confusing what is closely resembling.

It is not difficult to discover the nature of the feelings: those related to virtue are pleasing and those related to vice are displeasing. This is confirmed by our experience at every moment.
The task, then, is to show the principles which give rise to these disparate feelings. "In giving a reason, therefore, for the pleasure or uneasiness, we sufficiently explain vice or virtue" (3). Having a sense of virtue and vice is simply to feel in one way or the other. This is the same as with beauty, taste, and sensations.

Now an argument from a previous section is recalled. It was claimed there that if morality is based on reason, it would apply to inanimate objects. This seeming can be turned into an objection to the present system, in that inanimate objects give rise to feelings of pleasure and displeasure that cannot be called moral sentiments.

The first response is that there are different kinds of feelings of pleasure and displeasure which only remotely resemble one another. A feeling of moral approbation is very different from the feeling of approval of the nose of a fine wine. A further difference is that many sentiments resulting from human actions are not accompanied by praise or condemnation, and some go in the opposite direction. One feels pain as the result of the good qualities of an enemy but may still praise them. There is a conflict here between our interests and our morals, which may lead us to condemn the enemy, but the two sentiments can be prised apart from each other by someone with the right appreciation.

The second response appeals to the account of the indirect passions, which are excited by virtue and vice but not by feelings induced by inanimate objects. Hume notes that this may be "the most considerable effect that virtue and vice have upon the human mind" (5).

The objection having been rebutted, Hume turns to the general question of the origins of the moral sentiments. He first rejects the proposal that they are one and all products of a distinct "*original* quality and *primary* constitution" (6). The problem is that there are too many of them, and they do not appear in humans at an early age. So we should turn our eye instead to "some more general principles, upon which all our notions of morals are founded" (6).

The second question raised by the search for the origins of the moral sentiments is whether they are to be found in nature or elsewhere. The answer depends on the sense of 'natural' that is to be applied to the question.

If the natural is distinguished from the miraculous, there is no real difference between the question of the origin of moral sentiments from that of any other non-miraculous phenomenon. If it is to be distinguished from what is unusual, then the answer is difficult, due to the vagueness of the terms 'usual' and 'unusual,' which lack a precise standard of delineation. Much depends on the quantity and nature of the observations we make of phenomena, but it seems that the moral sentiments are as usual as anything might be, since they seem to be shared universally. It is almost impossible to remove or destroy them short of disease or insanity, so deeply are they rooted in our constitution. If it is to be distinguished from the artificial, the answer will have to await the examination of particular types of moral sentiments.

But one thing in common with all these distinct notions of what is natural is that virtue is not to be equated with the natural and vice with the unnatural. Virtue and vice equally are not miraculous, virtue, or at least heroic virtue, may be relatively rare, and virtuous and vicious acts are all artificial, given that they involve "a certain design and intention" (10).

The section is concluded with the return to the claim that on this system, all that remains to be done is to answer "this simple question, *Why any action or sentiment upon the general view or survey, gives us a certain satisfaction or uneasiness*," which can be addressed without recourse to "any incomprehensible relations and qualities, which never did exist in nature, nor even in our imagination, by any clear and distinct conception" (11).