

**Philosophy 174**  
**Notes on Hume's *Treatise*, Book 3, Part 3**  
***Of the other virtues and vices***  
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**Section 1, *Of the origin of natural virtues and vices***

This section will explain the causes of those virtues which do not arise from the artifice of human beings and are called “natural” in that sense. (But see the other senses discussed at the end of 3.1.2.)

Pleasure and pain are the chief springs of human action, whose immediate effects are the direct passions of will, desire/aversion, joy/grief, and hope/fear (3.2.1), the latter three of which are dictated by epistemic considerations. These passions remain when we consider their source in relation to ourselves or other people, and the indirect passions of pride/humility and love/hatred arise alongside them.

Moral distinctions are based on feelings of pleasure and displeasure, and when considering qualities in ourselves or some other person, those qualities giving, on reflection, satisfaction are considered virtuous and those provoking uneasiness are considered vicious. Because of the fact that pride/humility result from finding virtuous/vicious qualities to ourselves and love/hatred from finding them in others, virtue is “equivalent” to “the power of producing love or pride,” and vice is “equivalent” to “the power of producing humility or hatred.” This allows us to judge a quality of the mind virtuous when it induces pride/love and vicious when it induces humility/hatred.

We also judge actions as being virtuous or vicious, but only in a derivative way, as a sign of some durable quality of a mind. But those which do not proceed from such a durable quality of a mind do not produce any of the indirect passions, so by the above equivalence, they are not, strictly speaking virtuous or vicious. It was argued in 3.2.1 that only the quality or character lying behind the action is durable enough to produce the requisite indirect passion; single actions cannot do so.

To discover the causes of morality and the production of the indirect passions of love and hatred arising from the mental qualities of others, we must re-visit what has been shown earlier, taking “the matter pretty deep.”

We begin with “the nature and force of *sympathy*,” which is explained as in 2.1.11. Sympathy is the production of a passion in our minds which duplicates that of another person, by way of a causal inference from outward signs that indicates the presence of the passion in the person.

Sympathy is the source of “very much” of our sentiments of beauty and deformity. We regard objects as beautiful when they please their owner, due to their advantage to him. Sympathy produces the pleasure in our own minds. Utility accounts for our feeling of the beauty of useful objects, even most works of art and products of nature.

There is a close analogy between the feeling of beauty rendered by consideration of useful things and of vice by damaging things, and the feelings of justice and injustice in persons, as this virtue and vice have their origin in their effects on the well-being of society. And since the well-being of others produces a passion in us only by sympathy, the sentiments toward these artificial virtues (as well as others treated in Part 2) are based on sympathy as well, as with the case of beauty and deformity.

The widespread prevalence of sympathy and its central role with respect to beauty and the artificial virtues suggests that it should play a role in the generation of the natural virtues as well. This is for the same reason, that the natural virtues are to the good of humankind. This is found to be the case, in that what we naturally approve or disapprove of are qualities that tend toward or away from the human good. If the principle of sympathy can explain this and the other phenomena, we need look no further for a cause, as philosophy requires that we not seek causes beyond those that are necessary.

A number of natural virtues are denominated “social virtues” exactly because of their tendency to promote the good of society. These are: “meekness, beneficence, charity, generosity, clemency, moderation, and equity.” Some philosophers have taken this fact too far, claiming that all moral distinctions are produced by conditioning by politicians and education, taming the wild passions of humans and making them fit for society, “by the notions of honor and shame.” But this claim is contradicted by experience. First, there are some virtues and vices that have nothing to do with the public good, and second, that unless the virtue of honor and vice of shame, etc. arise naturally, the politicians’ exhortations that behaving one way is praiseworthy and another way blameworthy would be meaningless, as was already shown at 3.2.2.25. Nonetheless, this illustrates that many of our moral sentiments arise from considerations of social utility, and this can happen only on the basis of sympathy, which is the principle that takes us beyond our own narrow interests.

Now we are in a position to demarcate the natural from the artificial virtues. The good arising from the natural virtues applies to every act, say, all acts of benevolence. But the good arising from the artificial virtues does not apply to every act based on them. An act from justice may bring harm on an deserving person or aid to an undeserving, or even dangerous, person. This takes place because the good of justice is the good of society as a whole, which is why the virtue was established artificially. And again, the preference for the good of society arises only from sympathy, which provides a natural basis for the approval of justice.

The hypothesis that what distinguishes natural from artificial virtues lies in the particularity of the former and the generality of the latter is made more probable by “several circumstances.” The imagination is more strongly affected by particular cases than by more general considerations, and as a result, the sentiments are more strongly affected by the particular than by the general. But this is exactly the case with the natural and artificial virtues. We find that acts of beneficence, for example, redound directly to the deserving persons to whom they benefit, while acts of justice are not set up to benefit the individual in particular cases, but to aid the well-being of society in general. It is more natural, then, to think that the “tendencies” of the virtue generosity to benefit a deserving individual will give rise to a sentiment of approval of it than to think that the “tendencies” of the virtue of justice to benefit society will give rise approval of it. But the “tendencies” of generosity can explain the “tendencies” of virtue (since society is composed of individuals), and if one explanation can be given, we should not look for any further explanations.

Now Hume considers two objections to his system. The first lies in the fact that sympathy is quite variable, and if moral judgments are based on sympathy, they must be just as variable. The variation is largely based on contiguity: our sympathy decreases with distance, yet our moral judgments remain constant over distance.

The response to this first objection consists of two parts. The first is to admit that the passions are more strongly affected by those nearby than by those who are far away, while our moral evaluations remain the same, and that the variation in the affections is explained by sympathy. But any other explanation of the variation faces the same problem, so it is not unique to Hume’s account based on sympathy. The second is that it is easy to account for the disparity between our immediate feelings and our moral judgments (but it requires the introduction of an entirely new element into the system). Because of the fluctuation in our relations with other people, we would not have a consistent way to deal with them unless we are to adopt more steady and general points of view, “and arrive at a more *stable* judgment

of things.” We then place ourselves within those points of view in our thoughts, regardless of our current situation. Hume here invokes an analogy with judgments of beauty. Although a face appears more beautiful close-up, we do not think that the position of the countenance relative to us affects its beauty.

Granted, there is variation in our sentiments resulting from our situation, but this does not prevent us from correcting them from a general point of view, as when we regard the virtues of a servant as lesser than a great patriot of ancient history. This kind of correction is required for all use of language in communicating our sentiments.

The way we correct our sentiments toward others is described generally. First, we take out of consideration the physical and social relations of the person to us. Then, we overlook our own interests. And finally, we discount to some degree the natural selfishness of humans.

Of course, these corrections are far from universal, and we often do not make corrections due to differences in relations or interests. Here, there is a kind of opposition between the judgments of our reason and our particular passions. The key is that we can judge by reflection how our passions would be aroused in us in different circumstances. And we make this judgment because we actually find ourselves in many different circumstances, with sentiments we find difficult to reconcile. The only way we can do this is by sympathy with others who are related to the person in question. This does not, to be sure, incite equally strong passions, but it conforms to our “calm and gentle principles,” which in turn are responsible for our judgment.

The second objection to the system is now considered. Our sentiments of approval for the “social virtues” stem from their beneficial effects for society. But in many cases, a person in possession of certain qualities of mind is powerless to put them into action. Yet despite this incapacity, we are still willing to say that the person has the “social virtue,” say when the person is generous but poor. “Virtue in rags is still virtue.” The objection is that this cannot be accounted for by sympathy, for there are no pleasurable effects in others from actions of the impotent person to transfer to ourselves. Only when an act is effective in producing goodness can sympathy be triggered.

The answer to this objection begins with a return to the analogy between sentiments of virtue and sentiments of beauty due to utility. We regard an object as beautiful because of its potential for use, regardless of whether its potential is ever realized, such as when a well-designed house is never occupied. The passion is strong, even if it does not attain the liveliness of a belief, as would be the case if its potential were to be fulfilled. So when

something is “fitted” to cause a certain end, it is esteemed for that fittingness even if the end never becomes “completed.” Here Hume invokes general rules, which “create a species of probability” which will guide our judgment to some extent but always influence the imagination. (In the example of the house, we may judge it to be of no use, given the information we have, yet we imagine its being used. This is a kind of probability, an expectation of its actually bringing benefit in most cases.)

The variation in the strength of our sentiments brought about by the completion of its effect does not result in a variation in the esteem we give to an object. This is due to corrections that we make to the correlation between the two. These corrections are not always effective in checking our passions, but they are enough to keep our “abstract notions” of value from going astray, and they are the only thing we consider when we make general judgments about virtue and vice.

Another possible objection is that on Hume’s system, sympathy is supposed to extend even to remote persons, while, to explain justice, he observes that our generosity is naturally limited generally to members of our own circle. In fact, one may have sympathy for someone nearby who is in pain without feeling the need to do anything to help alleviate it. The difference is that while sympathy affects our imagination (by creating a new passion), it only gives rise to action when it would “touch the heart” (resulting in a generous action). The example of this difference is one in which a view of a tottering building triggers a sentiment of fear (that does not touch the heart), while standing under an unstable wall does touch the heart and engenders a feeling of fear that is very different from that felt by a mere observer. The imagination “adheres to” the general view of things (the tottering building) and distinguishes it from the view from a particular circumstance (the danger from a failing wall).

In an apparent illustration of the distinction between a general view and particular circumstance, Hume considers the fact that people are praised both for their tendencies to do good for society and for their qualities that serve their own interests. But there is one circumstance by which the socially beneficial qualities do not realize anything beneficial to anyone (“making a figure in life”): laziness (“indolence”). Since inactivity is by choice, one could say that it serves the lazy person’s interests. But the person is still blamed for it (according to the general view of things). It is not that the person lacks the ability to do beneficial things, so indolence can be used as an excuse for those wishing to defend his general character. And he may claim it to be a virtue, in that it frees him for higher callings. Now take an incompetent person, whose character, on a general view, comes off badly. Here circumstance cannot be used as a defense.

Hume's account of the direct virtues would hold up even if the only valuable virtues were conceded to be the social ones. But it does even better if the same principle that explains the attribution of social virtues also is the only one that explains the virtues conducive to one's own interests. An example is the agreeableness of the companionship of a person, a stranger, of no great social virtue, but possessed of qualities that do great service to his interests. This agreeableness is explained by sympathy. When qualities appear that tend to promote the happiness of another, I respond by feeling a pleasure myself, referring to him, thereby loving and esteeming him.

Another virtue (as it were) of Hume's theory is that it allows him to explain a phenomenon he claims to find in humans: that the same qualities produce both love of another and pride in one's self, or hatred of another and humility in one's self. Once again, the explanation is in terms of sympathy, where we transfer the sentiments of another person to the self, or *vice-versa*. If a person is observed to have disagreeable habits, we wish not to have them in ourselves, and if one candidly observes that his habits are disagreeable to others, he would condemn them in himself. This applies both to "characters and manners" and to "the most minute circumstances," as when we are upset when we see someone with a violent cough. Sympathy, and sympathy alone, can explain these reactions, by the free movement of the imagination from the view of another to the view of one's self. In fact, the influence is so strong that we sometimes come to dislike a useful quality in ourselves because others dislike it, even if we don't care whether they do.

There are two main theories of morality based on sentiment (as reason has been shown not to be the basis of moral distinctions). One kind of sentiment is a consequence of the mere appearance of an agreeable quality, while the other is a consequence of the beneficial effects of that quality on the happiness of people. Hume's view is that these two are inter-mixed, as with sentiments of beauty, but he regards the latter "tendencies of action [to] have by far the greatest influence, and determine all the great lines of duty." Examples of the former are such qualities as "wit, and a certain easy and disengaged behavior," which are immediately agreeable to us, such as to produce "love and esteem." Some of these qualities must be deemed original and inexplicable further, while others may rest on more general principles.

Qualities of mind may be immediately agreeable or disagreeable to ourselves or to others, and this agreeableness is a feeling that constitutes the two passions and hence the virtue or vice.

Sympathy is the only way that we can account for the fact that we have a sentiment of praise for someone whose immediately agreeable qualities are known only to others, or only to himself.

The penultimate paragraph summarizes the section. We call virtuous all qualities of the mind that produce pleasure on the view of them and vicious all those that produce pain on such a view. There is a matrix of four different sources of pleasure, with one axis being a quality that is useful to society and what is useful to the person with the quality, and the other being what is agreeable to others and what is agreeable to the person with the quality. Hume notes that it is surprising that the person making the assessment makes no appearance in the matrix. The reason is the relativity of the situations of the assessors and the need to step away from it to assume a neutral point of view. The only disinterested parties with respect to the assessor are the person whose qualities are at issue and those standing in some relation to that person. Our view of these persons is more faint than the strong view we have of ourselves, but this faintness is made up for by the fact that the former is “more constant and universal,” and thus more suitable for “speculation” regarding virtue.

The final point in this section has to do with “the good or ill desert of virtue or vice.”. Hume takes what is deserved to be “an evident consequence of the sentiments of pleasure or uneasiness.” Pleasure referred to another produces the sentiment of love, and pain the sentiment of hatred. The original constitution of the human being transposes these into benevolence or anger, “that is, with a desire of making happy the person we love, and miserable the person we hate.” This transition of sentiments was treated in 2.2.6.

## **Section 2, *Of greatness of mind***

The “general system of morals” is illustrated by its application to “particular instances of virtues and vices,” tracing their “merit or demerit” to the four sources described in the first section. The first topic is the “just proportion” or excess of the passions of pride and humility, which are esteemed virtuous or vicious, respectively. This is ascribed to “the immediate agreeableness and disagreeableness of a quality to others, without reflection on the tendency of that quality.” Here the principles of sympathy and comparison are invoked. Those, including ourselves, who have excessive pride induce uneasiness in others, but properly valuing ourselves is not only pleasurable but useful, in that “fortune favours the bold and enterprising; and nothing inspires us with more boldness than a good opinion of ourselves.” Moreover, it is agreeable to ourselves, just as modesty is disagreeable to ourselves. Still, general rules of good breeding dictate that we condemn the display of these

passions. We should regulate our display of pride based on our station in life. Heroic virtue is based on the passion of a well-established self-esteem.

### **Section 3, *Of goodness and benevolence***

Qualities of a good and benevolent character, such as “*generosity, humanity, compassion, gratitude, friendship, fidelity, zeal, disinterestedness, liberality*” make a person more agreeable and more useful, as well as influencing his other qualities. These qualities are directly connected to the passion of love, which is also agreeable, while the contrary qualities are associated with hatred. Another factor is sympathy, were we find agreeable those sentiments that are similar to our own. The opposite does hold with the disagreeable passions of anger and hatred, as they are recognized as part of human nature, and are not deemed vicious unless descending to the level of cruelty. The degree of disagreeableness depends on the harm that is caused.

### **Section 4, *Of natural abilities***

The common distinction between natural abilities and moral virtues is undercut by Hume’s system, as both are “equally mental qualities,” “equally produce pleasure,” and equally tend “to procure the love and esteem of mankind.” We praise them in the same ways, and the natural abilities “give a new lustre to the other virtues.” The feeling of approval may be different, but this does not make them different species. The distinction made between natural abilities and moral virtues is not based on whether they are voluntary or not, though it does seem that moral virtues are more changeable, particularly in the face of regard and punishment. Natural abilities are praised principally for their usefulness. Qualities of mind valued for their utility are “*industry, perseverance, patience, activity, vigilance, application, constancy . . . temperance, frugality, economy, resolution.*” Good humor is agreeable, though not in itself valuable. Another virtue is cleanliness, as is agreeableness and handsomeness, decorum and memory. Finally, importance and weight elevate our esteem for people possessed of those qualities, as they have important consequences for many people.

### **Section 5, *Of some farther reflections concerning natural virtues***

The indirect passions, pride and humility, love and hatred, “are excited by any advantages or disadvantages of the *mind, body, or fortune,*” each of which produces a pleasure or pain distinct from the passion itself. The virtue or vice of a quality of the mind is the pleasure or pain it produces, and the resulting approval or blame is simply a fainter version of



pride/humility and love/hatred. The description of the four sources of these pleasures and pains is corroborated by our reactions to the advantages and disadvantages of the body and one's fortunes. Utility clearly produces pleasure, and it is shown that this corresponds to qualities of the body. Women are attracted to men whose bodies show promise of giving sexual pleasure, even if they would never engage with them, just because of that ability. They gain pleasure from sympathy with those that do so engage. We are pleased by other bodily features that are symptoms of vitality because of their utility and by sympathy engage in the pleasure of the person with those features. We also are pleased directly with such features as health and displeased with infirmity. As for fortune, it has already been explained that we approve of people who are well-off because of the pleasure we take in the possessions themselves, the hope of their generously sharing some of them with us, and sympathy with their pride. It is sympathy which plays the predominant role. A final note is that there is great variation in the ways our passions arise, "the flexibility of our sentiments." Although our reactions to things of the same kind tend to be the same, there is a different feeling associated with things of different kinds. Sympathy and utility are the source of approval of "a convenient house and a virtuous character," but the feeling is quite different in the two cases.

### **Section 6, *Conclusion of this book***

Hume summarizes his findings, showing the central role, as "the chief source of moral distinctions," played by sympathy, even when it acts alone, as with "justice, allegiance, chastity, and good-manners." Our approval of justice depends on our regard for the public good, which can be explained only through sympathy with those remote from us. The mechanism is the same "with regard to all the other virtues," in that we have sentiments reflecting those who benefit from their qualities. Useful qualities of the mind are thought to be virtuous simply because of their utility. This shows again the power of sympathy. The virtue of utility is that it provides means to a desired end, and the means are valued only to the extent that the ends are valued as well. But the ends of strangers concern us only through sympathy, so on this basis we approve as virtues qualities that are useful to society or to the person possessing them. "These form the most considerable part of morality." Book III concludes with the observation that the agreeableness of virtue and disagreeableness of vice are mirrored in the agreeableness of the sources of virtue and disagreeableness of those of vice. This advantage does not hold for those who ground our appraisals of virtue and vice entirely upon instinct. The relevant instinct is the role of "an extensive sympathy with mankind," which is something "great and good." Although justice is an artificial virtue at the outset, humans later naturally develop a moral approval of it. And although artificial, justice is as durable as any property of human nature. Moreover,

there is a connection between virtue and happiness, through the pleasurable praise we receive when behaving virtuously. Conversely, breach of social virtue brings about unhappiness, both because of the reactions of others and because of the dissatisfaction with ourselves that we feel. Hume will not pursue this hint about practical morality any further, as his goal is to show in great detail how the moral sentiments arise. In this way he is like an anatomist, whose drawings are not themselves beautiful but are very helpful to the artist.