Voluntarism and virtue in Hume's moral philosophy

Enrico Galvagni

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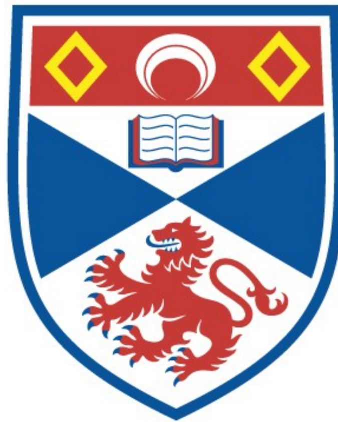

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Und jedem Anfang wohnt ein Zauber inne,

Der uns beschützt und der uns hilft, zu leben.

H. Hesse

Abstract

The nature of morality and its foundations are prominent subjects of debate in the history of early modern ethics. A standard characterisation of the early eighteenth-century dispute opposes moral rationalism to moral sentimentalism. On the one hand, rationalists take morality to be mind-independent and founded on reason. On the other, sentimentalists argue that moral properties are ultimately constituted by human sentiments. Voluntarism is a third significant option that takes morality to be founded on God's will. While today we have lost sight of voluntarism as a prominent metaethical position in the history of philosophy, this was a popular doctrine in early modern Europe. In this dissertation, I explore David Hume's sentimentalist moral philosophy in its conceptual connections with voluntarism. I argue that, despite noticeable differences, voluntarism and sentimentalism share several commitments and presuppositions. Examining Hume's ethics against the voluntarist background helps us to shed new light on his much-studied account of virtue.

In chapter 1, I introduce Hume's views on moral virtue and five interpretations about its foundation. In chapter 2, I revive a marginalised interpretation by showcasing the substantial similarities between voluntarist accounts of the foundation of morality and Hume's thought. In chapters 3 and 4, I delve into affinities of sentimentalism and voluntarism by comparing Hume's moral philosophy to William King's and Francis Hutcheson's. In chapter 5, I show that because of its anti-rationalist and secular features, in Hume's view, conflict cannot be ironed out by appealing to anything but human nature. I exemplify this with an analysis of envy's troubling effects and find a solution in the virtue of decency. In chapter 6, I delve deeper into this virtue detailing how it presents a powerful challenge to existing interpretations of Hume's ethics as a form of motive-based virtue ethics.

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PREFACE

Some of the material included in this dissertation has appeared in print.

- Chapter 3 includes material published in Galvagni, Enrico (2024) “William King on Election, Reason, and Desire: A Reply to Kenneth Pearce,” in *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 32 (1): 194-206.
- Chapter 6 is based on my paper Galvagni, Enrico (2022) “Secret Sentiments: Hume on Pride, Decency and Virtue,” in *Hume Studies*, 47 (1): 131-155.

ABBREVIATIONS

DAVID HUME

[T] *A Treatise of Human Nature* [1739/40] (ed.) L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975

[L] *A Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Edinburgh: Containing Some Observations on A Specimen of the Principles concerning Religion and Morality, said to be maintain'd in a Book lately publish'd, intituled, A Treatise of Human Nature, &c. Edinburgh* [1745] in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, (eds.) D. F. Norton and M. J. Norton, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

[EHU] *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, [1748] in *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, (ed.) L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.

[EPM] *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, [1751] in *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, (ed.) L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.

[NHR] *The Natural History of Religion*, [1757] in *A Dissertation on the Passions and The Natural History of Religion*, (ed.) Tom L. Beauchamp, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007.

[D] *A Dissertation on the Passions*, [1757] in *A Dissertation on the Passions and The Natural History of Religion*, (ed.) Tom L. Beauchamp, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007.

[E] *Essays: Moral, Political, Literary*, [1777] (ed.) Eugene F. Miller, Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985.

[H] *The History of England*, [1754/1761] (ed.) William B. Todd, Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1983.

[DNR] *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, [1777] (ed.) Dorothy Coleman, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

[HL] *The Letters of David Hume*, (ed.) J.Y.T. Greig, 2 volumes, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932.

[MOL] *My Own Life*, in HL, vol. 1, pp. 1–7.

Francis Hutcheson

[Inquiry] *An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, [1726] (ed.) Wolfgang Leidhold, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2004.

[Illustrations] *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections, with Illustrations on the Moral Sense*, [1742] (ed.) Aaron Garret, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002.

[Letters] *Correspondence and Occasional Writings*, (eds.) M. A. Stewart and James Moore, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2022.

[Met] *Logic, Metaphysics, and the Natural Sociability of Mankind*, (eds.) James Moore and Michael Silverthorne, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2006.

William King

[DOM] *De Origine Mali*. London: Benj. Tooke, 1702.

John Locke

[ECHU] *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, [1689] (ed.) Peter H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.

[ELN] *Essays on the Law of Nature*, in *Political Essays*, (ed.) Mark Goldie, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Samuel von Pufendorf

[LNNO] *Of the Law of Nature and Nations*, [1672] (ed. and trans.) C. H. Oldfather and W. A. Oldfather. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934

[WDM] *The Whole Duty of Man, According to the Law of Nature*, [1673] (trans.) B. Tooke, (eds.) I. Hunter and D. Saunders, Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, 2003.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT 5

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 6

PREFACE 8

ABBREVIATIONS 9

INTRODUCTION 14

CHAPTER 1: WHAT MAKES A VIRTUE? 32

1.1 VIRTUE IN HUME'S WRITINGS 32

1.2 FEELING VIRTUE 35

1.3 EXPLAINING VIRTUE 39

1.4 FIVE INTERPRETATIONS 43

1.4.1 The Traditional Interpretation 43

1.4.2 Virtue as Perfection 47

1.4.3 The Viewpoint Interpretation 49

1.4.4 The Conciliatory Reading 53

1.4.5 The Approval Interpretation 56

CHAPTER 2: RATIONALISM, VOLUNTARISM, AND HUME'S REACTION 60

2.1 DEBATING MORALITY 60

2.2 MORAL RATIONALISM 62

2.2.1 Hume's Attack of Rationalist Moral Relations 65

2.3 MORAL VOLUNTARISM 70

2.3.1 Pufendorf and Three Tenets of Voluntarism 72

2.3.2 Locke's Subscription to the Three Tenets 78

2.4 HUME'S SECULAR ALTERNATIVE 82

2.4.1 Hume's Subscription to the Three Tenets 82

2.4.2 Support for the Approval Interpretation 89

CHAPTER 3: CREATING VALUE THROUGH THE MIND 94
3.1 A FORGOTTEN VOLUNTARIST 94
3.2 KING ON ELECTION, VALUE, AND DESIRE 97
3.2.1 Election, Determination, Desire 101
3.3 DIVINE ELECTIONS AND HUMAN NATURE 105
3.3.1 King's Moral Voluntarism 107
3.4 HUME ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF VALUE 110
3.4.1 Ironing Out Free Will and God 111
3.4.2 Desire, Sentiments, Values 112
3.4.3 From Voluntarism to Sentimentalism 115

CHAPTER 4: SENTIMENTALISM AND THE FOUNDATION OF MORALITY 117
4.1 A NEW MORAL THEORY? 117
4.2 HUTCHESON AND THE CHARGE OF ARBITRARINESS 120
4.2.1 Hutcheson's Sentimentalism 121
4.2.2 Burnet's Criticism 122
4.2.3 Balguy's Criticism 124
4.3 DIVINE BENEVOLENCE AS MORAL BEDROCK 125
4.3.1 God's Rationality in the *Inquiry* 126
4.4 TWO PROBLEMS WITH HUTCHESON'S ARGUMENT 133
4.4.1 Remnants of Voluntarism 134
4.4.2 Benevolence as a Mere Presupposition 138
4.5 EMBRACING CONTINGENCY: HUME'S SENTIMENTALISM 139
4.5.1 Hume's Secularised Ethics 140
4.5.2 Embracing Moral Contingency 145

CHAPTER 5: THE PUZZLE OF ENVY 149
5.1 HOW TO DEAL WITH MORAL PROBLEMS? 149
5.2 THE PUZZLE: NARROW CIRCLE AND ENVY 152
5.3 SYMPATHY, NARROW CIRCLE AND MORAL EVALUATION 154
5.3.1 The Role of Sympathy in Moral Evaluation 154
5.3.2 The Narrow Circle Perspective 156
5.4 COMPARISON, ENVY, AND A PROBLEMATIC CONCLUSION 161
5.4.1 Comparison and Envy 161
5.4.2 A Problematic Conclusion 166

5.5 DECENCY: A PARTIAL SOLUTION TO THE PUZZLE 167
5.5.1 Decency: A Virtue to Prevent Comparison 168
5.5.2 The Perfect Character 171

CHAPTER 6: DECENCY AS A CHALLENGE TO MOTIVE-BASED VIRTUE ETHICS 176
6.1 A CHALLENGE TO EXISTING VIRTUE ETHICAL INTERPRETATIONS 176
6.2 THE RISKS OF PRIDE 178
6.2.1 Positive Pride 179
6.2.2 Excessive Pride 181
6.2.3 Explaining the Tension: “A Disagreeable Comparison” 184
6.3 DECENCY: A VIRTUE WITHOUT VIRTUOUS MOTIVES 186
6.3.1 Modesty, Decency, Good Breeding 187
6.3.2 Decency or “A Fair Outside” 191
6.4 THE CHALLENGE TO MOTIVE-BASED VIRTUE ETHICS 196
6.4.1 Motives for Virtue? 196
6.4.2 Motives for Chastity and Justice? 197
6.4.3 Decency: Against Motive-Based Virtue Ethics 199
6.5 OBJECTIONS 202
6.4.1 All Virtues Are Mental Qualities 202
6.4.2 Motives of Benevolence 204
6.4.3 If Justice, then Decency 206
6.6 THE PRIORITY OF MORAL APPROBATION 209

CONCLUSION 211

BIBLIOGRAPHY 217

INTRODUCTION

Our perception of the past is inevitably shaped by the philosophical trends of the present. The resurgence of a concept in our intellectual landscape naturally shines a light on its examinations throughout history. Other concepts, though fascinating and largely influential in the past, remain temporarily out of sight, waiting in the shadows.

In this dissertation, I explore two themes in Hume's moral philosophy. On the one hand, the concept of *virtue* in his ethics has recently enjoyed significant consideration with a growing number of academic papers and books devoted to it.[1] On the other hand, Hume's relation to *voluntarism* has largely been overlooked and remains an underexplored theme in existing secondary literature.[2]

The different degrees of attention given to these two concepts is not surprising. The raising popularity of virtue ethical approaches to normative questions in today's academic sphere continues to shape the way we look at his philosophy. Indeed, Hume uses the word 'virtue' hundreds of times throughout his published writings. He devotes abundant space for discussion of various "characters and mental qualities" (T 3.3.1.9, 577) and their importance for ethics and societal life.

[1] This emphasis on virtue has generated both studies of Hume's account of specific virtues and attempts to modernise his virtue ethics. Among the first group, we can find important books (e.g., Cohon 2008); an increasing number of papers (many of which I discuss in chapter 1 of this dissertation); as well as chapters in edited volumes devoted to virtue ethics (e.g., Russell 2013; Swanton 2014; Taylor 2015). Among the modernisation of Hume's account of virtue, one can find (Greco 2012; Frykholm 2015; Swanton 2015; 2021).

[2] Some notable exceptions are (Buckle 1991; Forbes 1975; Haakonssen 1996; Harris 2019). All of them, however, focus their analysis of Hume in relation to natural law on the virtue of justice (or on the artificial virtues). The scope of my study, as it will become apparent, includes Hume's account of morality *tout court*.

In stark contrast to this frequent discussion, the word 'voluntarism' was not in use in the eighteenth century, and Hume rarely mentions the voluntarist thought that morality stems from God's commands. Nonetheless, voluntarist ideas remained influential in his century and, I shall argue, in his work. My dissertation aims to tackle the lack of attention given to this topic by shedding light on important yet overlooked affinities bridging Hume's moral philosophy and moral voluntarism. But first things first, what is voluntarism?

In its basic signification within the context of the history of ethics, voluntarism is the idea that moral good and evil depend on God's will (*voluntas* in Latin). Through his free will, God imposes a law onto the realm of nature which makes certain actions morally good or binding and others morally bad or prohibited. Voluntarism, in this context, is the variant of natural law theory which took God's authoritative commands expressed through his will to be essential to the creation of morality and its binding force. Prior to the imposition of such a command there simply cannot be anything moral or immoral. Moral properties, values, and obligations are brought into existence by a free act of God's mind.

To the present-day reader of Hume, voluntarism may appear like a distant, outdated position. Today, it is hardly examined by historians of philosophy and mostly ignored by moral philosophers. This way of thinking about morality and its foundation has been eliminated from most accounts of the history of philosophy to such an extent that we have lost sight of it. These ideas, however, were extremely influential in Europe between the second half of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century.[3]

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[3] A few studies qualify as exceptions to this claim. Jerome B. Schneewind's "Voluntarism and the Foundations of Ethics" (1996) clearly takes voluntarism as a serious topic in the history of ethics. So does the forthcoming edited volume *Varieties of Voluntarism in Medieval and Early Modern Philosophy* (eds.) Jörn Müller and Sonja Schierbaum.

For someone like Hume, natural law theory—including its voluntarist stream—would have appeared to be a prominent feature of the intellectual landscape. By studying the contours of this theory, I argue, we can obtain a more in depth understanding of Hume's moral philosophy.

One of the most influential forms of voluntarism was proposed by Samuel von Pufendorf (1632–1694) in his *De Jure Naturae et Gentium* in 1672. In addition to disciples and admirers, this work gave rise to an avalanche of critical responses. One of the most significant critics, Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz (1646–1716), put the debate on the foundation of morality ignited by Pufendorf in the clearest terms in his *Meditations on the common concept of justice* by restating a famous dilemma from Plato's *Euthyphro*:[4]

> It is generally agreed that whatever God wills is good and just. But there remains the question whether it is good and just because God wills it or whether God wills it because it is good and just; in other words, whether justice and goodness are arbitrary or whether they belong to the necessary and eternal truths about the nature of things (Leibniz [1702-3] 1972: 45)

In Leibniz's view, voluntarists such as Pufendorf (as well as his most prominent followers including Thomasius, Crusius, Barbeyrac, and many others) subscribe to the former opinion. They mistakenly make justice and goodness arbitrary. The other horn of the dilemma, embraced by Leibniz himself, consists of the idea that goodness is based on necessary and eternal truths.[5] According to him, as stated in his *Opinions on the principles of Pufendorf*, "[n]either the norm of conduct itself, nor the essence of the just, depends on [God's] free decision, but rather on eternal truths, objects of the divine intellect" (Leibniz [1796] 1972: 71). Between the second half of the seventeenth century and the

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[4] Plato's version, which refers to piety rather than goodness, reads: "Is the pious (τὸ ὅσιον) being loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is being loved by the gods" (1997: 10a).

[5] These truths, for Leibniz, "have the same kind of absolute necessity as the truths of logic and mathematics" (Antognazza 2009: 428). As he says in opposition to Pufendorf, "justice follows certain rules of equality and of proportion [which are] no less founded in the immutable nature of things, and in the divine ideas, than are the principles or arithmetic and geometry" (Leibniz [1706] 1972: 71).

first decade of the eighteenth century, these are the terms of the discussion on the foundation of morality: either moral properties exist in the fabric of reality and are, therefore, independent of God's mental states, or they are a creation of God's free choice prior to which nothing can be morally good or bad.[6]

Another dispute of this kind sprang from the publication of William King's (1650–1729) *De Origine Mali* (1702), a book that was translated into English in 1731 to become one of "the most influential ... of eighteenth-century theodicies" (Lovejoy 1936: 212). In this work, King squarely situates himself on the voluntarist side of the debate by stating that the "divine election [God's free will] … is not determined by the goodness of things, but the goodness and fitness (*bonitas & convenientia*) of things arise from the election" (DOM, 5.1.4.17, 126). For King morality is constituted by divine free will. In an appendix to his *Theodicy* (1710), Leibniz provided a powerful attack against King's voluntarist ideas. His criticism rests on the principle of sufficient reason: if there is no moral goodness prior to the determination of God's will, it means that there is no reason why God wills X rather than Y.[7] But maintaining that God acts for no reason is absurd. Like in the earlier controversy with Pufendorf, the debate is about the foundations of morality: on the one hand is Leibniz's intellectualist view that morality exists as a matter of eternal truths independent of anyone's choices and desires; on the other hand, the voluntarist position that sees God's unbounded will as the source of all moral value.

These debates were well-known and influential in their time. While the details are much more complicated than I have reconstructed in this brief overview, what is at stake is simple: what constitutes morality and its legitimate binding force? What is it that makes

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[6] The disagreement between Pufendorf and Leibniz is only one example Another notable case which took place in the final decades of the seventeenth century is the dispute between voluntarist Christian Thomasius (1655-1728) and his opponent Valentin Alberti (1635–1697). On this debate, see (Ahnert 2006: 88-93).

[7] On this debate between Leibniz and King, see also (Greenberg 2008) as well as part of chapter 3 in this dissertation.

some things good and other evil? Two sharply distinct answers could be given to these questions: *either* morality exists as a matter of eternal truths independent from the acts of God's mind and is binding because it is rational, *or* it exists in virtue of God's authoritative will and must be followed because of its authority.

One could speculate on the reasons why voluntarism was later written out of the history of philosophy, with the unfortunate consequence that these debates are now often ignored by students of early modern philosophy. It is not my task to reconstruct the historiographical misfortunes of voluntarism. What it is important to notice is that this debate does not completely disappear in later decades of the eighteenth century. Rather, it dissociates itself from the terms of natural jurisprudence and evolves into a dispute between supporters of moral sentimentalism and their rationalist opponents. Debates as to whether natural law reflects the immutable order of things, or the authoritative will of a superior, evolve into disputes about whether morality exists because of immutable moral relations or because of acts of the human mind. A brief example may be useful to illustrate this point before a more substantial discussion in later chapters.

In the 1720s, Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746) began to argue in favour of a new moral theory. He developed the view that the existence of morality depends on human reactions elicited via an internal moral sense: some "actions have to men an *immediate goodness*" which we can judge of "by a *superior sense*" (*Inquiry*, 88). Morality is not something that exists independently of human sentiments, rather what is good and what is bad are determined by our emotional reactions. This theory, which may appear substantially different from the voluntarist ideas sketched above, raised the immediate opposition of rationalist thinkers, who often adopted the same criticisms developed against voluntarism by their predecessors. Interestingly, some of these critics, identified

critical similarities between the novel sentimentalist theory and more established voluntarist ideas.

An important case in point is John Balguy's (1686–1748) attack, a criticism that reiterated the remarks that Leibniz moved against Pufendorf and King. Voluntarism, in the rationalist's eye, is problematic because it makes morality arbitrary, contingent, and unsupported by reason. Balguy, similarly points out these problems when it comes to sentimentalist theories:

> it seems an insuperable Difficulty in our Author's [Hutcheson's] Scheme, that Virtue appears in it to be of an arbitrary and positive Nature; as entirely depending upon Instincts, that might originally have been otherwise, or even contrary to what they now are; and may at any time be alter'd, or inverted, if the Creator pleases. (Balguy 1728: 7-8)

The echo of Leibniz's attack against Pufendorf reverberates in this passage. In the same way in which Leibniz criticised voluntarism, Balguy reprimands Hutcheson's sentimentalism for depriving morality of a rational bedrock and, consequently, turning it into something arbitrary.

Hutcheson's reaction to the attack, instead of dispelling the accusations by taking the distance from voluntarism, reveals the deep proximity of his sentimentalism to that theory. Hutcheson's response to Balguy consists in the introduction of a theological element at the foundation of his account of morality: morality is *not* arbitrary because it depends on our moral sense, which is given by a benevolent God. By appealing to God, and to his benevolence to reject the charge or arbitrariness, Hutcheson hopes to create a *justification* for the otherwise contingent moral sense. What is used to make morality not only binding but also fundamentally justified is the appeal to God. In doing so, however, Hutcheson excludes reason from the foundation of morality. By remitting the foundation

of ethics to a non-rational faculty of God's mind, a voluntarist aspect reemerges in Hutcheson's sentimentalism.[8]

Like Leibniz did against King, Balguy responds by appealing to the principle of sufficient reason to further resist his opponent's view: "If no Reason can be given why the Deity should be *benevolently disposed*, and yet we suppose him to be so; will it not follow, that he is influenced and acted by a blind unaccountable Impulse?" (Balguy 1728: 10).[9] The accusation here is that invoking God's benevolence at the foundation of morality without adopting a reason-based conception of morality is not different from believing that morality is determined by God's arbitrary will.[10] Well into the eighteenth century, albeit covered by a different façade, the opposition of rationalist and voluntarist ideas about the foundation of morality remained alive.

In this dissertation, it is my goal to argue that this background is relevant for our understanding of Hume's moral philosophy and that his position about the foundations of morality reflects important elements of the voluntarist tradition. Hume's moral sentimentalism can be seen as recasting some central claims of voluntarist ethics in a secular form. By highlighting the way in which sentimentalism shares some important aspects of voluntarism and is entangled in similar debates against rationalist arguments, we see that there is some baseline continuity between these two positions.

Both views differentiate between a moralis*ing* element and a moralis*ed* one, which acquires moral relevance due to the former. In tandem, both voluntarism and sentimentalism need to come to terms with the inability of human reason to provide

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[8] It is true that, to Hutcheson's eyes, the differences between sentimentalism and voluntarism may seem to be much more important than the affinities. Nonetheless, the similarities between sentimentalism and voluntarism remain and are worth investigating.

[9] Balguy explicitly mentions "Mr. Leibniz" when making this criticism (Balguy 1728: 10).

[10] For Hutcheson's response to this point, see my discussion in chapter 4.

bedrock moral justification. With these similarities in view, Hume may almost appear a dissident exponent of the voluntarist tradition.

Of course, unlike voluntarist thinkers, Hume does not take God's commands to be the moralising element that generates morality. In this respect, the well-known and popular picture of Hume as a naturalist and secular philosopher constructing an ethics around the concept of virtue remains true. Yet, one can think of an important aspect of his view on the foundation of morality as a form of *secular voluntarism*. Without going so far as to say that Hume is indeed a voluntarist who has rejected God as the lawgiver, I nonetheless explore the affinities between his thought and voluntarist ideas, in the attempt to show how the historical context and previous anti-rationalist arguments are integrated and developed within his sentimentalism.

This is an especially interesting task given that existing secondary literature on Hume often completely ignores voluntarism. It is not uncommon to stumble upon descriptions of Hume's context that do not even consider putting voluntarism on the map. Charlotte Brown, for instance, in an influential chapter writes that "[b]y the time Hume wrote the *Treatise of Human Nature* … there were only two possibilities for Hume to consider—rationalism or sentimentalism" (Brown 2008: 219). Hume himself can be seen as responsible for this oversimplification of the debate. In the second *Enquiry* he refers to "a controversy started of late … concerning the general foundation of morals; whether they be derived from reason, or from sentiment" (EPM 1.3, 170).

Maybe due to Hume's way of framing the debate, moral sentimentalism is often presented as the only alternative to rationalism (Baier 2013; Driver 2013; Garrett 2015). The fact that Hume identifies a new controversy between rationalism and sentimentalism, however, does not erase its connection to the older conflict between rationalism and

voluntarism. While voluntarism may not look like a viable metaethical position to philosophers today, things were different in Hume's time. The idea of morality being ultimately grounded in God's commands was much more common: an opinion supported by "the greatest part of our latter Moralists" (*Inquiry*, 86), to put it with Hutcheson's words. Hume shows himself to be aware of this position. In the moral *Enquiry*, he affirms that the standard of morals, "arising from the internal frame and constitution of animals, is ultimately derived from that Supreme Will, which bestowed on each being its peculiar nature, and arranged the several classes and orders of existence" (EPM App1.21, 294). This affirmation should be weighed against many others and does not imply that Hume is committed to the idea that God's will is at the foundation of morality.[11] Nonetheless, it allows us to see that he was aware of voluntarism as a prominent position about the ultimate foundation of morality.

A few rare interpreters do recognise that in Hume's time voluntarism remained a prominent moral position. Rachel Cohon identifies voluntarism as a lively alternative to rationalist and sentimentalist attempts to account for "the source or foundation of moral norms" (Cohon 2018). Darío Perinetti recognises that "[t]he British moralists were in constant conversation with [the natural law] tradition and their stances in ethics have a clear reference to the foundation-debate in natural law theory" (Perinetti: 2013: 336). In his picture, Perinetti situates Hume as mediating between the intellectualist tradition of natural law (that takes nature to be organised by eternal truths) and the voluntarist one (that sees the arbitrary decision of a supreme authority as setting the moral standard). For Hume, "virtue and vice are neither purely natural nor purely conventional," rather "they

[11] Indeed, as I show in chapter 4, this quote can be reconciled with Hume's secular approach to morality. However, it represents an important and explicit awareness of the proximity between voluntarism and sentimentalism.

express some basic features of human nature as they develop in time and in social life" (Perinetti 2013: 362). These remarks, however, remain marginal.

The connection between Hume's conception of justice and natural law tradition is developed in a few important texts in the existing literature. Duncan Forbes, after affirming that "no threads are ever cleanly snapped in the history of ideas" (Forbes 1975: 7), argues that Hume's attempt to ground his account of justice on human nature is what "Pufendorf and the natural law theorists had in their various ways done" (Forbes 1975: 69). Stephen Buckle argues that on Hume's "account of justice is … thoroughly in tune with the natural jurists" (Buckle 1991: 287). Knud Haakonssen elaborates the connection between Natural law and Hume's moral philosophy by affirming that while the former "invoked what we may call the 'internalization' of God's will, in order to account for obligation, Hume suggests that we internalize a social 'will'" (Haakonssen 1996: 109). These accounts are illuminating but focus only on the subset of virtues that Hume calls 'artificial', and on the virtue of justice in particular. They do not extend to Hume's conception of the foundation of morality *tout court*.

The similarities that exist between Hume's sentimentalism and ethical voluntarism have been noticed, although only in passing, by influential scholars such as Jerome Schneewind and Rachel Cohon. Schneewind, for instance, suggests a point of convergence between Pufendorf and Hume: "Pufendorf held that God's will, and ours, could impose moral entities onto a world of force and motion. Hume holds that it is not our will but our distinctive moral taste that is thus productive" (Schneewind 1998: 361). Despite the difference in the faculty that is responsible for the production of moral properties, Hume and Pufendorf recognise the need of a new creation to moralise nature. Rachel Cohon briefly suggests that the debate on the foundation of morality that engaged Hutcheson and Hume—the dispute as to whether "moral goodness depends for its

existence on human psychological reactions" (Cohon 2008: 99)—used to be a "vehement disagreement" already "prior to Hutcheson and Hume, in debates about moral voluntarism of various kinds" (Cohon 2008: 99). These hints, however, have not been developed. In the current literature there is no serious exploration of the similarities and historical connections between Hume's account of the foundation of morality (rather than his account of justice) and voluntarist thinkers within the natural law tradition.

This dissertation aims to address this lack of attention given to the affinities that exist between moral voluntarism as articulated by influential early modern thinkers such as Pufendorf, Locke, and King, and the sentimentalist positions articulated in Hutcheson's and especially Hume's philosophy. I do not contend that Hume should *not* be thought of as a sentimentalist. Rather, I argue that in order to understand and appreciate his sentimentalism and his conception of virtue we need to recognise the elements that he inherits from voluntarist theories.

If one wishes to stress the gap that separates a secular, virtue-centred moral philosophy from the law-based voluntarist conception, Hume will appear to be a radically different thinker. In this light, he seems the proposer of a naturalistic ethics of virtue that has nothing to share with natural law theories, especially in their voluntarist variants. The opposition is, strictly speaking, true: as Terence Irwin puts it, "sentimentalism, as defended by Hutcheson and Hume, oppose[s] theological voluntarism" (Irwin 2008: 212). However, this does not imply a lack of similarities between the two traditions.

Sentimentalist philosophies in eighteenth-century Britain aimed to oppose and replace natural law theories, especially in their voluntarist strands, as theories of the foundation of morality. Nonetheless, the effort of replacing something is often combined with the need of fulfilling, at least partially, the functions of what is replaced.

Sentimentalist theories wanted to present an alternative to moral rationalism. As such, they needed to find ways to reject the existence of mind-independent moral truths. In the attempt to do so, I argue, sentimentalists adopted important ideas from the voluntarist tradition that they hoped to replace as the main anti-rationalist view of morality.

What do we achieve by reading Hume's moral philosophy in this way?

First, contextualising his moral philosophy in this way allows us to provide an informed answer to the question of why Hume seems to adopt two different definitions of virtue. Considering the parallel with voluntarism, it emerges that anti-rationalist accounts of morality take normative concepts to require both a moralis*ing* and a moralis*ed* element. These two, in turn, map onto Hume's apparent two definitions of virtue.

Second, we gain insight into how Hume explains the fact that morality has a distinctive normative force. What is morally good is not something that leaves us indifferent. While not everything moral generates an obligation, it at least creates a recommendation to do what is good and to avoid what is bad. Thinking of Hume in relation to voluntarism helps us to clarify how this distinctive feature of morality—the fact that what is moral ought to be done—can be reconciled with his commitment to the idea that the world is inhabited by entities that are, in themselves, morally neutral.[12]

In order to explain how morality can exist in a world inhabited by initially neutral entities, voluntarists such as Pufendorf, Locke, and King appealed to the authoritative element of the divine law or free will that works as an externally imposed standard. A law of this kind is absent from Hume's philosophy. Nonetheless, his explanation of ethics still requires a moralis*ing* element to account for the existence of distinct moral phenomena

[12] This can provide us with an explanation of how Hume accounts for normativity that is more accurate and more historically informed that some competing interpretations such as (Baier 1991) and (Korsgaard 1994).

in a world inhabited by natural and initially morally neutral objects. The comparison with voluntarism allows us to see that this moralis*ing* element, in order to be effective, needs to stem from an authoritative source. This source, I will argue, is found by Hume in "the general opinion of mankind" rather than in God's divine command. This need of an authoritative moralis*ing* element to reconcile the neutrality of nature with the existence of morality is brought to light when Hume is read in relation to his voluntarist predecessors.

Finally, a further benefit is that reading Hume against the voluntarist background allows us to fully reveal an important innovative element of his ethics: the fact that it embraces the contingency of human moral practices. Unlike the rationalist, Hume does not posit eternal truths to justify what is morally good and what is not. The adoption of an anti-rationalist account, however, is not paired in his philosophy with the introduction of a divine justificatory element as in voluntarism or Hutcheson's sentimentalism. The result is that morality is conceptualised in Hume as a human practice that emerges from sentiments and does not admit any justification external to psychological functions. There is nothing metaphysically necessary about our moral sentiments and reactions. All that we know and feel about moral goodness and badness could have been otherwise. This aspect of Hume's ethics is not new but can be further illuminated by an improved understanding of the historical context, revealing that the rejection of rationalist moral ontology is not a mere commonality between sentimentalism and voluntarism. Rather, the former inherits several arguments and core commitments from the latter and exposes itself to many of the same objections. Sentimentalism is grafted onto a voluntarist trunk.

The dissertation comprises six chapters.

Chapter 1 introduces the central role that virtue plays in Hume's practical philosophy. On the one hand, Hume stresses the importance of "the possession of mental qualities, useful or agreeable to the person himself or to others" (EPM 9.1, 268). On the other hand, he embraces the "hypothesis" that "defines virtue to be whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation" (EPM App1.10, 289). This apparent double definition of virtue gave rise to a series of interpretations that I review and analyse in the chapter. After highlighting some problems with many of these interpretations, I support and develop what I call 'the approval interpretation'. On my reading, what makes a character trait virtuous is ultimately the fact that *a vast number of people feel moral approbation upon the contemplation of it*.

Chapter 2 provides support for the approval interpretation advanced in the previous chapter. I move here from a review of present-day interpretations of Hume's philosophy to an overview of his historical context, aimed at showcasing important similarities with voluntarist thinkers such as Samuel von Pufendorf (1632–1694) and John Locke (1632–1704). I argue that given his contemporary understanding of morality, Hume's anti-rationalism requires that virtue includes both a moralis*ing* element of approbation and a moralis*ed* element that is approved of. The moralis*ing* element, in turn, to perform its function requires an authoritative source. Rather than finding this element in God, Hume sees it in society stemming from the "general opinion of mankind" (T 3.2.9.4, 552). By introducing these elements in his discussion, Hume effectively develops a metaethical account that has strong affinities with moral voluntarism. With this contextual understanding in mind, we can make sense of Hume's apparent double definition of virtue and provide support for the approval interpretation.

Chapter 3 develops this newly found voluntarist aspect of Hume's moral philosophy in relation to William King (1650–1729). The proposer of an influential form

of voluntarism, King is mentioned by Hume multiple times in his memoranda. This chapter explores King's account of value, according to which certain beings (including both God and human beings) have a faculty of 'election' that generates particular desires. These desires, in turn, are responsible for the fact that certain initially morally neutral objects become morally valuable. This form of voluntarism, strongly criticised by Leibniz on the basis of the principle of sufficient reason, is similar to Hume's account of the construction of value also explored in this chapter. In spite of two important differences to King's account (the lack of a divine element and the rejection of election as a mental faculty), Hume, like the voluntarist, also maintains that value is generated by a non-rational act of the mind, rather than reason.

Chapter 4 further confirms the affinities between Hume's moral philosophy and voluntarism by reconstructing an eighteenth-century debate about the foundation of moral sentimentalism. The chapter analyses Francis Hutcheson's (1694–1746) moral theory and the rationalist objection that, by making morality contingent upon sentiments, he deprives ethics of a necessary metaphysical justification. To save his theory from such attacks, Hutcheson introduces a theological element at the foundation of morality: the benevolent nature of God is a justification for the otherwise arbitrary moral sentiments. By remitting the foundation of ethics to a non-rational faculty of God's mind, a voluntarist aspect of Hutcheson's sentimentalism becomes prominent. Hume, unlike Hutcheson, does not invoke God at the foundation of morality. Nonetheless, his explanation of ethics similarly appeals to a non-rational faculty of the mind: the ability to feel moral sentiments.

Collectively, the first four chapters aim to establish that Hume's sentimentalism is closer to voluntarist ethical thought than has been previously recognised. While Hume does not invoke either divine law or free will in his explanation of morality, his ethics remains remarkably close to voluntarism in its unwillingness (or inability) to provide a

necessary justification for the way morality is. Morality stems from an authoritative element that dictates what is morally good and what is not while also deflecting rational scrutiny.

With this understanding of his moral philosophy in view, the final two chapters of the dissertation analyse the innovative way in which Hume reshapes the notion of virtue and its role in human moral practices. Chapter 5 explores a potential problem for Hume's moral sentimentalism. Once we are left with an ethics grounded on sentiments and with no metaphysical foundation, there is no external moral standard to appeal to in order to criticise certain practices. This chapter, by developing the idea that Hume's preferred standpoint for moral evaluation is based on sympathy with a person's circle of influence, explores a difficulty for his moral sentimentalism. According to his ethics, in order to morally evaluate a person P, we have to sympathise with the people influenced by P's behaviour. If P generates painful emotions (such as envy) around her, sympathy will make us feel a painful moral disapprobation and, consequently, we will judge of P as morally bad in virtue of her being envied. This, however, is puzzling and appears problematic: we are forced to judge a seemingly excellent person as morally bad because others envy her success. The secular and emotion-based nature of Hume's ethics requires us to search for a possible solution in social interactions and human sentiments themselves, rather than in any presumed objective or external standard. By doing so, the chapter unearths an effective, if partial, solution to the problem in the virtue of 'decency', the character trait that prevents painful social comparison. On the basis of Hume's proposal, because envy is painful to the envier, the person who is envied can be criticised for her lack of the virtue of decency, which would at least partially mitigate the envy around her. This partial solution reveals that a secular and sentimentalist ethics like Hume's must at times be faced with the troubles generated by unruly passions and it may

not always be able to iron out all problems. By recognizing that morality is constituted by sentiments in a way that ultimately does not allow for any religious or rational justification, Hume claims that what is virtuous and what is vicious can be determined only by empirical observation of human emotions and interactions. This reveals a wide-ranging moral pluralism along with some rarely discussed virtues.

Chapter 6 concludes the dissertation by further analysing the neglected virtue of decency, the quality of character that regulates the display of pride. This notion, I argue, can be used to show that Hume's pluralism about virtue—the fact that we approve of a plurality of features rather than one aspect of virtue—is incompatible with a popular virtue ethical interpretation of his thought. His well-established claim that pride can be both positive and negative, I maintain, can be explained in consequentialist terms: pride can be good when it generates pleasure in the proud person but is bad when it creates pain in other by comparison. This, in turn, allows me to argue that decency is a virtue in which the underlying motives for action are not morally relevant: decency is morally good simply because it prevents painful comparison. No appeal to underlying mental states or intentions is needed. Decency, therefore, offers a challenge to interpretations of Hume that read him as saying that *every* virtuous action must derive its virtuousness from virtuous motives. This virtue, conceived by Hume as a form of modesty that is limited merely to "a fair outside" (T 3.3.2.10, 598), challenges the idea that every virtue requires internal virtuous motives. By interpreting Hume's criterion for a character trait to be a virtue in voluntarist terms (as anything that is moralis*ed* by sentiments of approbation) we can make sense of the textual evidence for decency being a virtue: we approve of decency even when morally good intentions or motives are not present. What makes it a virtue is the fact that we approve of it, rather than any objective feature of it as a character trait.

As to my method, in the following pages I rarely claim the existence of direct influence between Hume and voluntarist thinkers. There is no decisive evidence that Hume read Pufendorf in detail, that he ruminated on Locke's account of moral relations, or that he had an in-depth understanding of King's voluntarist proposal. Although Hume knew all these authors and mentions their names multiple times in his published and unpublished writings, in many cases a direct connection between the development of Hume's ideas and their texts cannot be established. My approach is rather an attempt to bring to light the similarities between these authors' metaethics and Hume's own views.

Delving into the points of convergence helps us to clarify aspects of Hume's moral philosophy that are often overlooked or misunderstood. These include, for instance, his much-debated double definition of virtue and the role of motives in his account of character evaluation. An exploration of background ideas and debates about the foundation of morality benefits our understating of these central features of Hume's account of virtue. By providing such an exploration, my dissertation sheds new light on Hume's ethical thought. Consequently, it places us in the position to rethink some of the interpretative proposals in current Hume scholarship and to correct some recent misconceptions of his seminal moral philosophy.

CHAPTER 1: WHAT MAKES A VIRTUE?

"Every one consulted his Fancy in erecting Schemes of Virtue & of Happiness, without regarding human Nature, upon which every moral Conclusion must depend."

Hume, *Letter to a Physician*

1.1 VIRTUE IN HUME'S WRITINGS

Virtue is a central concept in Hume's moral philosophy. Together with vice as its counterpart, virtue is discussed at length in his work and permeates virtually every aspect of his thought on the practical dimension of human life. From the early *Treatise of Human Nature* to the *History of England*, Hume reveals a strong interest in character and character traits—which he usually calls 'qualities of the mind'—as central ethical concepts.[13]

Two out of three books of the *Treatise* (1739/40) include substantial discussions of virtues and vices. In Book 2, *Of the Passions*, Hume devotes several pages to their examination in relation to pride and humility.[14] In Book 3, *Of Morals*, the focus on virtue

[13] This interest is manifested also in some of Hume's most personal work, from an early letter to a physician, to his autobiographic *My Own Life*, penned a few months before his death in 1776. In this text, Hume is careful to pass on to posterity a description of his own temperament.
[14] Book 2, part 1, sect. 7: "Of vice and virtue".

becomes even more prominent.[15] An analysis of the virtues, vices and character evaluation occupies one third of Hume's early philosophical work and adds up to no less than two-hundred pages.

This emphasis remains central in Hume's *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), where he explores the "proper representations of the deformity of vice and beauty of virtue" (EPM 1.7, 172), discussing benevolence, justice, good-manners, politeness, cheerfulness, courage, tranquillity, benevolence, delicacy, discretion, industry, frugality, strength of mind, and many others.

Aretaic language is abundant also in Hume's essays.[16] An important number of his *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary* include substantial discussions of virtues and vices. Just a few examples: Hume analyses courage in "Of National Characters" (1748), modesty in "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences" (1742), compassion in "Of Tragedy" (1757), justice in "Of the Origin of Government" (1777), industry in his *Political Discourses* (1752). Appeals to the concepts of benevolence, gratitude, generosity, prudence and many others are common throughout the essays.[17]

Hume's interest in virtues, vices, and character extends beyond his philosophical production. His *History of England* (1754–1762) presents frequent discussion of historical figures and their characters. The observation and discussion of specific traits is here richer than ever. Alfred the Great is lauded for his "civil and … military virtues" and is said to be "the model of that perfect character, which, under the denomination of a sage or wise man, philosophers have been fond of delineating" (H 2.27). Henry VIII is

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[15] Book 3 is composed of three parts: "Vice and Virtue in general" (part 1), "justice and injustice" (part 2), as well as "other virtues and vices" (part 3).

[16] Aretaic terms are those that describe virtue(s) and vice(s) as well as excellences of character, morally relevant motives, etc.

[17] Virtue as one of the central themes of Hume's *Essays* emerges also from Margaret Watkins' systematic study of the essays (Watkins 2018).

described in all of his "character of violence and caprice, by which his life had been so much distinguished" (H 33.45). Elizabeth I, as most human beings, is said to have been somewhere in between opposing extremes of virtue and vice: "[h]er heroism was exempt from temerity, her frugality from avarice, her friendship from partiality" but she was not immune to "the rivalship of beauty, the desire of admiration, the jealousy of love, and the sallies of anger" (H 44.61).

These are but a few examples to illustrate that virtues and vices are ubiquitous in Hume's reflections of the ethical, societal, and political aspects of human life. Given this emphasis on aretaic concepts, it is not surprising to remark that Hume does not only describe and analyse individual traits, but also attempts to build a systematic account of virtue as part of his "science of man" (T 0.6, xvi). This chapter aims to retrace the contours of Hume's views on virtue. Section 1.2 is devoted to analysing Hume's account of how virtue comes into existence, namely via particular feelings of pleasure and pain. Section 1.3 continues my analysis by discussing the way in which Hume thinks we can discover the causes of such pleasure and pain and how he categorises them. This yields a well-known fourfold distinction: (1) utility to oneself; (2) utility to others; (3) agreeableness to oneself; and (4) agreeableness to others are the four categories of qualities that cause morally relevant pleasure. Section 1.4 provides a discussion of five possible lines of interpretation of his account of what makes a character trait a virtue. After detailing problems with various readings, I express my support in favour of what I call the "approval interpretation", according to which what makes a character trait virtuous or vicious is the approval that it receives.

1.2 FEELING VIRTUE

In Book 3 of the *Treatise*, Hume provides us with an in-depth account of virtue. After arguing at length against the view that "virtue is nothing but a conformity to reason" (T 3.1.1.4, 456), in section 2 of part 1 he proposes a different way of understanding virtue.[18]

Hume's discussion starts from an epistemological perspective. He notices that the *impressions* of pleasure and pain (rather than *ideas* and their relations determined by reason) are essential for us to find out what is good and what is bad:

> since vice and virtue are not discoverable merely by reason, or the comparison of ideas, it must be by means of some impression or sentiment they occasion, that we are able to mark the difference betwixt them. (T 3.1.2.1, 470)

Hume is here invoking a central distinction in his philosophy, one that he proposed in Book 1 between impressions and ideas.[19] Impressions are "[t]hose perceptions, which enter with most force and violence" in the mind and include "all our sensations, passions and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul" (T 1.1.1.1, 1). Ideas, on the other hand, are "faint images of these in thinking and reasoning" (T 1.1.1.1, 1). Because for Hume every perception in the mind must be either an impression or an idea, he asserts in Book 3 that "the exclusion of the one [idea] is a convincing argument for the other [impression]" (T 3.1.2.1, 470) as a source of "[o]ur decisions concerning moral rectitude and depravity" (T 3.1.2.1, 470). Since Hume believes he has demonstrated that morality cannot be a matter of ideas (in section 1 of Book 3), he proclaims (at the beginning of section 2) a memorable verdict: "Morality … is more properly felt than judg'd of" (T

[18] Some important arguments that Hume uses against moral rationalism are discussed in chapter 2 of this dissertation.
[19] Book 3 of the *Treatise* was published separately from the previous two books. In the Advertisement to it, Hume stresses this distinction as one of the essential points that the reader should be familiar with to understand his moral philosophy. Even if Book 3 is "in some measure independent of the other two" books (Adv., 454), the distinction between impressions and ideas remains key.

3.1.2.1, 470). The relevant feeling, "the distinguishing impressions, by which moral good or evil is known" are for Hume "nothing but *particular* pains or pleasures" (T 3.1.2.3, 471). The distinction between what is morally good and what is morally bad is something that we grasp via special impressions of pain and pleasure.

Hume's thesis, however, is not merely epistemological: it is not simply the case that we *discover* independently existing moral properties via our pain and pleasure. Rather, our sentiments *constitute* moral qualities.[20] This is so because impressions, unlike ideas, do not represent or track anything other than themselves. For instance, while the idea of a pineapple *represents* that fruit, the impression of pleasure that one feels when tasting a juicy pineapple does not represent anything at all. Ideas are 'images' of something else, impressions lack this representational function. They are, as Hume puts it in Book 2 when discussing passions, a matter of "original existence" and do not contain "any representative quality, which renders [them] a copy of any other existence or modification" (T 2.3.3.5, 415).

By asserting that "decision[s] concerning moral rectitude and depravity" (T 3.1.2.1, 470) are impressions rather than ideas, Hume also holds that morality is a *creation* of our mental life rather than a *representation* of some independently existing thing. With a famous metaphor from the moral *Enquiry*, we can say that morality is "a new creation" (EPM App 1.21, 294) brought into being by the "gilding or staining [of] all natural objects with the colours, borrowed from internal sentiment" (EPM App1.21, 294). Less metaphorically, in the *Treatise* Hume writes that "[t]o 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 3.1.2.3, 471).

[20] A few interpreters see Hume as a moral realist and would, therefore, disagree with the claim that moral qualities are *constituted* by sentiments (e.g., Norton 1985, Swain 1992). I discuss these positions below.

In the clearest possible terms: “The pain or pleasure, which arises from the general survey or view of any action or quality of the *mind*, constitutes its vice or virtue” (T 3.3.5.1, 614). Virtue is *felt* into existence.

This claim is, of course, open to interpretation. Presumably, Hume does not mean to say that virtues *are* sentiments or individual reactions. It is not the case that anyone’s idiosyncratic feeling makes up, by itself, the morality or immorality of an action. Nonetheless, it is hard to determine what is the best understanding of Hume’s account of the nature of virtue. Possible readings can be placed on a spectrum, from subjectivism to moral realism.

David Wiggins has argued that Hume is a subjectivist about morality, but a “sensible” one. “Hume’s subjectivism” is not one that declares that “all sentiment is right because sentiment has reference to nothing beyond itself” (Wiggins 1987: 191). Rather, the sensible subjectivist maintains that “x is good if and only if x is the sort of thing that calls forth or makes appropriate a certain sentiment of approbation *given the range of propensities that we actually have to respond in this or that way*” (Wiggins 1987: 206). Given how people usually respond in specific situations, certain sentiments can be said to be appropriate in certain circumstances. For instance, “what is wrong with cruelty is … that it is not such as to call forth liking given our *actual* collectively scrutinized responses” (Wiggins 1987: 210).

An alternative reading of the nature of moral properties is proposed by John Mackie who understands Hume as saying that “the sentiments of each person both modify and reinforce those of others” and hence “the supposedly objective moral features” in which most people believe “aid and reflect this communication of sentiments” (Mackie 1980: 72). While this belief in objective features is “false” because, properly speaking,

they are only "fictitious" properties, ethics as a system flourishes because it "serves a social function" (Mackie 1980: 72). Mackie finds it plausible to attribute to Hume an "objectification theory" (Mackie 1980: 72) according to which moral properties are not objective but they are treated and judged of *as if* they were.[21]

In contrast to these readings, David Fate Norton and Corliss Swain go all the way to realism. Norton, in a paper programmatically entitled "Hume's Moral Ontology", explains that "moral qualities are not merely sentiments but, rather, the objective correlates of sentiment" (Norton 1985: 191). Swain reinforces the point arguing that on Hume's view, "virtues and vices are qualities of persons which are made known to us by means of the moral sentiments, but which are nonetheless different from these sentiments" (Swain 1992: 466). While both Norton and Swain admit the importance of moral sentiments to *recognise* what is virtuous, they believe that Hume subscribes to the independent existence of moral properties, including virtuousness and viciousness.

The debate about where to situate Hume's moral philosophy on the spectrum from "subjectivism" to "moral realism" is a controversy that goes beyond the scope of my discussion and that cannot be adjudicated without a systematic review of what each interpreter means by these labels. The realist interpretation is meant to provide an alternative to "anti-realist distortions of Hume's moral theory" which mistakenly claim that "virtue and vice are simply the moral sentiments themselves, and that Hume is the paradigm eighteenth century non-cognitivist" (Norton 1985: 202). Interpreters such as Wiggins and Mackie, however, agree that for Hume the individual sentiments of individual moral agents, by themselves, are not enough to constitute virtue. Even on the sensible subjectivist or the objectification readings, an element of social agreement is

[21] Mackie famously develops describes this objectification theory as an error theory according to which all moral judgments are false (Mackie 1980).

required: individual emotional responses should be "collectively scrutinized" (Wiggins 1987: 210); one's sentiments must be reinforced by "those of others" (Mackie 1980: 72). There is no need to read Hume as a realist in moral ontology to escape the hyper-subjectivist reading that Norton and Swain want to refuse.

1.3 EXPLAINING VIRTUE

Once we have established that virtue and vice are felt into existence via certain impressions of pleasure and pain, we are left, Hume believes, with one simple question to lead our moral investigation: why do certain things generate those "*particular* pains or pleasures" (T 3.1.2.3, 471) that are relevant to the feeling of virtuousness and viciousness? In Hume's words:

> virtue is distinguished by the pleasure, and vice by the pain, that any action, sentiment or character gives us by the mere view and contemplation. This decision is very commodious; because it reduces us to this simple question, *Why any action or sentiment upon the general view or survey, gives a certain satisfaction or uneasiness*, in order to shew the origin of its moral rectitude or depravity … (T 3.1.2.11, 475-6)

The moral philosopher—or, more appropriately, the "anatomist" (T 3.3.6.6, 621) of human nature—must carry out an empirical investigation about which things produce morally relevant pleasure and figure out what are the identifiable patterns at play. What the anatomist is after is not individual agents' reactions, but rather a widespread "general view".

This is a question that, once answered, allows us to reach a satisfying explanation for virtue and vice. As Hume puts it: "An action, or sentiment, or character is virtuous or

vicious; why? because its view causes a pleasure or uneasiness of a particular kind. In giving a reason, therefore, for the pleasure or uneasiness, we sufficiently explain the vice or virtue" (T 3.1.2.3, 471). Following this paragraph, the remaining two parts of Book 3 of the *Treatise* attempt to explain how it happens that certain things produce morally relevant pleasure and others pain.

Hume's method here consists in an examination of various natural facts followed by an attempt to systematise these observations and elaborate common principles.[22] The result of Hume's investigation is well-known: based on the central ability to sympathise with each other, Hume observes that we feel moral pleasure upon the contemplation of mental qualities that are either useful or agreeable to oneself or to others.[23] This conclusion is given in its clearest form towards the end of T 3.3.1 where Hume, taking a "general review" (T 3.3.1.30, 590) of his account, affirms:

> Every quality of the mind is denominated virtuous, which gives pleasure by the mere survey; as every quality, which produces pain, is call'd vicious. This pleasure and this pain may arise from four different sources. For we reap a pleasure from the view of a character, which is naturally fitted to be useful to others, or to the person himself, or which is agreeable to others, or to the person himself. (T 3.3.1.30, 591)

This passage summarises Hume's long discussion which starts with the affirmation that "whatever mental quality in ourselves or others gives us a satisfaction, by the survey or reflection, is of course virtuous" (T 3.3.1.3, 574-5) and attempts to identify the qualities that we approve of.

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[22] Hsueh Qu has recently provided an elaborate reconstruction of this method. According to his view, Hume analyses "instances of normative judgements, searching for the common circumstances attending them" (Qu 2016: 287). As part of his philosophical and empirical investigation, he "systematizes the circumstances attending our normative judgements in order to derive general principles, going from unsystematic pre-philosophical normative judgements to reflective normative judgements" (Qu 2016: 287).

[23] I analyse the role of sympathy in Hume's moral philosophy more in depth in chapter 5.

Similarly, in the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hume pursues his aim of clarifying what virtue is with "a very simple method" (EPM 1.10, 173) based on empirical observation. He says:

> we shall analyze that complication of mental qualities, which form what, in common life, we call Personal Merit: We shall consider every attribute of the mind, which renders a man an object either of esteem and affection … The only object of reasoning is to discover the circumstances on both sides, which are common to these qualities; to observe that particular in which the estimable qualities agree on the one hand, and the blameable on the other; and thence to reach the foundation of ethics, and find those universal principles, from which all censure or approbation is ultimately derived. (EPM 1.10, 173-4)

By the end of the *Enquiry*, through the application of "the experimental method" (EPM 1.10, 174), Hume declares *both* that (1) "the definition of virtue" is that of "*a quality of the mind agreeable to or approved of by every one, who considers or contemplates it*" (EPM 8.n50, 261; see also App1.10, 289) as well as that (2) "personal merit consists altogether in the possession of mental qualities, *useful* or *agreeable* to the *person himself* or to *others*" (EPM 9.1, 268). As "naturally as a shadow is cast by the sun, or an image is reflected upon water" (EPM 9.1, 268), Hume states, "[w]hatever is valuable in any kind, … naturally classes itself under the division of *useful* or *agreeable*, the *utile* or the *dulce* … with regard either to the *person himself* or to *others*" (EPM 9.1, 268). A virtue, in this respect, is a character trait that produces utility or agreeableness to its possessor or to others.[24]

[24] It is worth noting here that there is ongoing debate about the ontology and epistemology of character traits in Hume's philosophy. Given some of his remarks on the self as a "bundle or collection of different perceptions" (T 1.4.6.4, 252), it is puzzling that Hume appeals to virtues, vices and character as the main objects of moral evaluation. Various interpretations have been proposed (e.g., McIntyre 1990; Ainslie 2007). I do not get into this discussion here: Hume clearly talks of mental qualities as object of moral approbation and disapprobation. This allows me to bracket the question of how these qualities are identified within one's character, and rather focus on the question of what makes a certain quality virtuous or vicious.

This double aspect of virtue—as emerging from (1) and (2)—is not something that Hume identifies as a problem. He is confident that what people generally approve of is useful or agreeable, and, consequently, virtue can be thought of in both ways. This account, however, is not immune from tensions. What are we to think when entire communities or large groups of people feel moral approbation for traits that are neither useful nor agreeable? Should we take them to be virtuous because they receive approbation? Or should we rather disregard our feelings because we know that the approved traits do not produce useful or agreeable consequences?[25]

These questions are not asked out of mere curiosity. Rather, they point to a real possibility as Hume recognises in the case of "[c]elibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, solitude, and the whole train of monkish virtues" (EPM 9.3, 270). These traits receive at least some approval in society but are "rejected by men of sense" (EPM 9.3, 270).

Another interesting case of a conflict between approbation and the generation of utility or agreeableness is that of "[h]eroism, or military glory" (T 3.3.2.15, 600), a trait that is often detrimental, but at the same time is taken to be a virtue and "admir'd by the generality of mankind" (T 3.3.2.15, 600). Even if military glory causes in the world "infinite confusions and disorder" Hume admits that "when we fix our view on the person himself, who is the author of all this mischief, there is something so dazzling in his character, the mere contemplation of it so elevates the mind, that we cannot refuse it our admiration" (T 3.3.2.15, 601).[26]

[25] Another possible way of phrasing this tension is put by Hans Lottenbach as a dilemma: "[e]ither the approbation for 'useless,' 'disagreeable' or even 'monkish' virtues is not really a moral approbation, or the claim that moral approbation arises from useful and agreeable qualities is false" (Lottenbach 1996: 369).
[26] Luxury may be taken as a similar case: whether a disposition to desire and enjoy riches and the comfort they afford is good or bad was the subject of a long-lasting debate in the eighteenth century that opposed,

What standard should we use to evaluate whether traits like these are vices or virtues? Should we rely on their negative consequences and classify them as vices? Or should we rather acknowledge the approval that they generate and conceptualise them as virtues?

1.4 FIVE INTERPRETATIONS

The mention of these two aspects of virtue—the fact that (1) it generates approbation *and* that (2) it can be identified with useful and agreeable qualities of character—has yielded conflicting answers to the following question: *on Hume's view, what makes it so that a certain character trait or mental quality is a virtue?* Five main interpretations have been proposed to answer this question.[27] In the rest of the chapter, I explore and review them. I point out various problems of the first four interpretations, and uphold the final one: the approval interpretation.

1.4.1 The Traditional Interpretation

Several influential scholars have interpreted utility and agreeableness as the standard of virtue. On this view, what makes a character trait a virtue is the fact that it falls into *at*

in Hume's words "libertine principles" and "men of severe morals" (E 269). This debate, however, very often was a disagreement about *facts* rather than values. Both in Britain and in continental Europe, the real disagreement was often on whether luxury is indeed useful or not (cf. Berry 1994; Galvagni 2020a).

[27] Some of these interpretations are phrased by their proponents as attempts to find out Hume's "standard of virtue". This phrase, however, is ambiguous. Hume uses it one single time, in T 3.3.1.30, where he talks of "the standard of virtue and morality" (T 3.3.1.30, 591). Another time Hume talks of "standard of merit and demerit" (T 3.3.1.18, 583). Some interpreters take Hume's "standard of virtue" to mean "an adequate account of moral judgment" (Ben-Moshe 2020: 432). Others, like (Taylor 2002), do not explain what they understand under the phrase "standard of virtue". As (Reed 2012) notices, Hume "employs several different understandings of the term standard. He sometimes uses it … to mean something that decides evaluative controversies or disputes. At other times, though, he uses 'standard' in a broad sense to indicate some necessary feature of evaluating or a standpoint required for judging" (41). In order to avoid misunderstanding, it is worth specifying that in the following I am interested in Hume's account of *what makes a character trait a virtue*.

least one of four categories: what is (i) useful to oneself; (ii) useful to others; (iii) agreeable to oneself; or (iv) agreeable to others. This position is widely shared in the interpretation of Hume, to the point that Kate Abramson has labelled it the "traditional interpretation" (2008: 249): the reading of Hume according to which "traits qualify as Humean virtues if they satisfy a disjunctive criterion of being useful or agreeable to their possessor or others" (2008: 249). Some notable interprets of Hume along this line are Robert Shaver (1995), Rosalind Hursthouse (1999), Julia Driver (2004), and Roger Crisp (2005; 2019).[28] As put by Driver, for Hume, "[w]hat actually *makes* a trait a virtue is that it—generally speaking—leads to various goods (agreeableness and social utility more narrowly defined)" (Driver 2004: 180).

This interpretation can be called "traditional" not only because it has been popular in recent scholarship but also because it emerged as a reaction to the publication of Hume's texts. James Balfour (1705–1795), for instance, seems to read Hume in this way in his *Delineation of the Nature and Obligation of Morality* (1753). According to Balfour, Hume's "most essential error" and "fundamental mistake" is that "he has misunderstood the proper nature of virtue" (Balfour [1753] in Fieser 2005: 84). Rather than recognising the *honestum*—the good in itself—Hume sees virtue as "the possession of such qualities as are useful or agreeable to ourselves or others" (Balfour [1753] in Fieser 2005: 84). Similarly, in his *Essays on the active powers of man* (1788), Thomas Reid (1710–1796) sees Hume's "theory of the nature of virtue" as one that "enlarges greatly the catalogue of moral virtues, by bringing into that catalogue every quality of mind that is useful or agreeable" (Reid [1788] in Fieser, 2005: 200).

[28] Some of these interpreters claim that indeed, agreeableness can be cashed out in terms of utility. What makes a character trait a virtue, for them, is that it is useful (Driver 2004; Crisp 2005).

In more recent times, one of the most discussed critical interpretations of Hume along these lines is in Hursthouse's influential paper "Virtue Ethics and Human Nature" (Hursthouse 1999). On her view, had we to accept "Hume's disjunctive claim" (Hursthouse 1999: 69), we would end up with "disastrous" consequences. The list of the virtues would become longer than we can reasonably accept.

From Balfour to Hursthouse, the traditional interpreters are right to lament that *if* the fourfold distinction were the standard of virtue, this would add to the list "a thousand virtues that were never once dreamt of before" (Balfour [1753] in Fieser, 2005: 91) or "yield many inconsistent or inconclusive results" (Hursthouse 1999: 71).[29] This potential problem, however, stems from overlooking the progression of Hume's moral analysis. As we saw in the previous sections, Hume settles on utility and agreeableness as the qualities that usually generate approval (according to the empirical observation of human nature). Nonetheless, he does not say, nor would he allow, that *anything* that is useful or agreeable is indeed virtuous. He only explains that the pleasure of approbation "may arise from four different sources" (T 3.3.1.30, 591). This does not imply that utility and agreeableness alone *make* something virtuous.

To understand this point fully, it is important to distinguish between two kinds of pleasures and pains that an action or character trait can generate. On the one hand, they generate pleasure or pain based on *direct consequences*. For example, one's benevolence generates pleasure *directly* in so far as the benevolent person helps people around her. Let us call this 'direct pleasure'. On the other hand, this trait also produces pleasure *in a spectator* who, although not affected directly by the benevolence of the person, feels a

[29] For a closer analysis of Hume's early critics see (Fieser 1998). The possible problems of a list of virtues that becomes longer and longer are explored, in a present-day virtue ethical perspective, in (Russell 2009) and (Snow 2019).

pleasure "upon the survey" of her character. Let us call this 'spectatorial pleasure'. While Hume believes that spectatorial pleasure is generally produced by the observation of a character trait that is useful or agreeable to the direct beneficiary, this does not equate to the claim that direct pleasure is the feature that makes a character trait virtuous. Direct pleasure of this kind can be generated by much more than character traits. All sorts of things can be useful or agreeable, only *some* of them, however, are virtuous. It is the specific phenomenology of spectatorial pleasure that is relevant to evaluate whether something is virtuous or vicious.

To see this point more clearly, we should recall that Hume believes that "under the term *pleasure*, we comprehend sensations, which are very different from each other" (T 3.1.2.4, 472). Even if a "good composition of music and a bottle of good wine equally produce pleasure" and "their goodness is determin'd merely by the pleasure" (T 3.1.2.4, 472) there remain important differences between the two. Similarly, Hume writes:

> an inanimate object, and the character or sentiments of any person may, both of them, give satisfaction; but as the satisfaction is different, this keeps our sentiments concerning them from being confounded, and makes us ascribe virtue to the one, and not to the other. Nor is every sentiment of pleasure or pain, which arises from characters and actions, of that *peculiar* kind, which makes us praise or condemn (T 3.1.2.4, 472)

The problem with the traditional interpretation is that it takes Hume to believe that, because every virtue generates direct pleasure, the production of direct pleasure is what makes a character trait virtuous. By reading his moral philosophy in this way, these interpreters downplay Hume's emphasis on the pleasure of the spectator "*who considers or contemplates*" the trait (EPM 8, 261).

1.4.2 Virtue as Perfection

An alternative to the traditional interpretation is proposed by Kate Abramson (2008) and later developed by Erin Frykholm (2016). Abramson argues for the presence of a more restrictive condition in Hume's discussion of what makes a virtue. On her view, there is a further constraint (in addition to the production of utility or agreeableness) on Hume's account. On this reading, the "disjunctive claim" would set a *necessary* condition for something to be a virtue, but in order to find a *sufficient* condition, Abramson says, we need to look at what Hume says in the following passage:

> if there be no relation of life, in which I cou'd not wish to stand to a particular person, his character must so far be allow'd to be perfect. If he be as little wanting to himself as to others, his character is entirely perfect. This is the ultimate test of merit and virtue. (T 3.3.3.9, 606)

Abramson tries to restrict the scope of what counts as a virtue by arguing that in this passage Hume is setting "an explicitly interpersonal criterion: the issue is whether or not others are left "wanting" in some "relation of life" with the agent" (Abramson 2008: 251). This would make for a stricter criterion setting the standard of virtue in Hume's philosophy. For instance, if a trait is useful to oneself but does not respect this additional interpersonal criterion, it does not count as a virtue. Similarly, for Frykholm, "[t]he real measure of virtue, on Hume's view, is to consider a person in all her relations or associations, and consider whether anyone party to those associations would find her useful or agreeable" (Frykholm 2016: 618). Let us call this the 'virtue as perfection' interpretation.

Abramson's thesis seems to be supported by common sense. It rings true: a trait is not thought to be virtuous if it is useful to its possessor but detrimental to others.[30]

[30] Hume would agree. As I show in chapter 6, for instance, a disposition to feel proper pride is virtuous as long as it is agreeable to oneself, but vicious if makes other people feel bad by comparison.

However, there are two problems with this reading. *First*, this interpretation remains vulnerable to the objections I presented against the traditional interpretation: Hume wants us to focus on the *spectatorial* pleasure in order to see what makes a virtue. Whether someone's character leaves people around them disappointed ("wanting", T 3.3.3.9, 606) is a matter of *direct* rather than spectatorial pleasure. If Abramson were right, it would be the pain and pleasure generated by a character in her "relations of life" that constitutes virtue or vice, rather than the "pleasure, which arises from the general survey or view" (T 3.3.5.1, 614) of it. Although she recognises the "spectatorial" nature of Hume's moral theory, this element does not feature prominently in her interpretation according to which "a trait is a Humean virtue if it does not leave the agent wanting in her interactions with others" (Abramson 2008: 253).

A second problem with the virtue as perfection interpretation is that in T 3.3.3.9, Hume is not trying to give a criterion for *what makes a virtue*. He is rather describing what it means for someone to have *all* the virtues and thus a "perfect" character (T 3.3.3.9, 606). There is a notable difference between these two. Hume is very clear about the fact that most people have a mixed character (i.e., a character that is not perfect but nonetheless contains some genuine virtues). When describing Charles I in the *History of England*, Hume writes that "[t]he character of this prince, as that of most men, if not of all men, was mixed" and contained both "virtues" and "vices, or … imperfections" (H 59.134).

This means that most human beings would not pass the test of the perfect character set by T 3.3.3.9. However, this is not to say that they possess no virtue whatsoever. One could be courageous and chaste, for instance, but fall into avarice and greed. The criteria for something to be a virtue and to have a perfect character are two distinct things. The virtue as perfection interpretation fails to see this and therefore does not present a

satisfying answer to the matter at hand that, even by Abramson's admission, was "the question of what makes a trait a virtue or a vice" (Abramson 2008: 252).

1.4.3 The Viewpoint Interpretation

A further interpretation, widely shared among interpreters, avoids the objections that I have moved against the previous two proposals. This interpretation consists of the claim that what makes a virtue for Hume is determined by the pleasure felt *from the perspective of a specific viewpoint*. This reading is adopted by various influential scholars. For instance, Charlotte Brown (1994) argues that for Hume "[m]orality springs from our sympathetic nature when regulated by the general point of view" (Brown 1994: 28) and that "[s]ympathy, when regulated by the general point of view, creates the ideal of virtue" (Brown 1994: 31). Jacqueline Taylor interprets Hume's *Treatise* in a similar way. On her reading, Hume "locat[es] the standard of virtue in the joint responses of those with whom we sympathize when we take up the common point of view" (Taylor 2002: 50).[31] Darío Perinetti writes that "Hume defines virtue as a quality of the mind that produces pleasure in any observer that is placed in the 'common point of view'" (Perinetti 2013: 358). In other words, these interpreters claim that for Hume a character trait is a virtue when it produces pleasure in those who observe it from a specific viewpoint.[32] While this point of view requires "neither an impossible omniscience nor an angelic equi-sympathetic

[31] Taylor thinks that this is a faulty standard and criticises Hume's account by affirming that his "account of moral appraisal, insofar as it appeals to the agent's circle to provide us with a common point of view and standard of virtue, is inadequate. While the responses of an agent's circle are certainly not irrelevant to appraisal, they cannot bear the weight that Hume assigns to them in the *Treatise*" (Taylor 2002: 56).
[32] I will return to the construction and criticism of Hume's account of moral evaluation in relation to the general point of view in chapter 5.

engagement with all humanity" (Sayre-McCord 1994: 203), it is often taken to be the perspective that turns non-moral evaluations into moral sentiments.[33]

In so far as it highlights the importance of the reaction of a spectator sympathising with the agent rather than the *direct* consequences of the agent's character, this interpretation avoids the objection that I moved against the previous two proposals. Nonetheless, proposing that Hume's standard of virtue is *determined* by the approbation felt from a "general" or "common" point of view is problematic. To see why, we should consider Hume's text.

If we take a closer look at the passage in the *Treatise* where Hume introduces the notion of a "*steady* and *general*" point of view (T 3.3.1.15, 581), we realise that this comes *after* he has already argued that "whatever mental quality in ourselves or others gives us a satisfaction, by the survey or reflection, is of course virtuous" (T 3.3.1.3, 574-5).[34] He has also recognised that the production of pleasure in the form of utility or agreeableness is usually the factor that gives rise to such a satisfaction and that this process happens via sympathy: "Wherever an object has a tendency to produce pleasure in the possessor … it is sure to please the spectator, by a delicate sympathy with the possessor" (T 3.3.1.8, 576-7).[35] Before any discussion of the general point of view is introduced, Hume writes:

[33] Aside from (Brown 1994; 2001) and (Taylor 2002), other influential interpreters are Christine Korsgaard and Elizabeth Radcliffe. They argue that "our moral sentiments arise when we contemplate a person from the general point of view" (Korsgaard 1999: 4), and that "sentiments count as moral sentiments only when they are experienced from what Hume calls a 'general' or 'common' point of view" (Radcliffe 2018: 112). For further criticism of this position, see (Garrett 2001).

[34] As noted in Rachel Cohon's influential study, this notion is introduced "[i]n the Treatise, after some 125 pages about ethics" (2008: 129). Also worth noting is that "Hume himself never uses the term 'general point of view' in the singular" (2008: 132).

[35] Note that this does not contradict my previous claim that for Hume the simple production of direct pleasure is not enough to make something virtuous. In this quote, Hume is simply saying that anything that produces direct pleasure for oneself will please a spectator. Fine wine produces pleasure in the possessor, and, via sympathy, in the spectator. But wine is not virtuous. The pleasure of sympathy, much like any other pleasure, can be of very different kinds.

> When any quality, or character, has a tendency to the good of mankind, we are pleas'd with it, and approve of it; because it presents the lively idea of pleasure; which idea affects us by sympathy, and is itself a kind of pleasure. (T 3.3.1.14, 580)

These considerations, in so far as they "giv[e] a reason … for the pleasure or uneasiness" of the spectator would be enough to "sufficiently explain the vice or virtue" (T 3.1.2.3, 471). Hume's explanation of virtue could stop here, before any mention of the "*steady* and *general* points of view" (T 3.3.1.15, 581-2) or of "some common point of view" (T 3.3.1.30, 591).

It is only because "[o]ur 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" (T 3.3.1.15, 581) that taking up a shared point of view becomes important. It is meant to act simply as a corrective for the morally charged feeling of pleasure and displeasure that a spectator *already* feels. On Hume's account, the general point of view is not a viewpoint that *constitutes* morality, but rather a *corrective* mechanism that we use to avoid the distortion of time and space on our already moral sentiments.

The comparison with beauty that Hume introduces right after the only mention of the "*general* points of view" can help to see this point more clearly. Hume writes:

> In like manner, external beauty is determin'd merely by pleasure; and 'tis evident, a beautiful countenance cannot give so much pleasure, when seen at the distance of twenty paces, as when it is brought nearer us. We say not, however, that it appears to us less beautiful: Because we know what effect it will have in such a position, and by that reflection we correct its momentary appearance. (T 3.3.1.15, 582)

By taking this parallel seriously we see that the correction that obtains by changing one's point of view is not a correction that introduces any new feature for the pleasure generated

by a certain character. It is not the case that we acquire the idea of beauty based on the correction of something's momentary appearances. We already have the idea of beauty as something that generates a particular sort of pleasure. The correction is only meant to remind us that, at times, we do not have access to that pleasure because we are too far away from the beautiful object, and nonetheless, it remains capable of producing that pleasure. By judging of an object's beauty as if we were close to it, we can make the right judgments about whether it is beautiful or not. This, however, does not amount to saying that what makes an object beautiful is our judgment given *from that point of view*.

All that Hume does with the talk of general points of view, is to show that, since the range of our sentiments is limited, evaluation of distant people's characters and actions requires an imaginative process.[36] A specific point of view cannot be what makes a character trait virtuous or vicious in Hume's thought because it does not introduce any new moral element within the picture. It just allows us *not to lose* the moral sentiments when considering characters, actions and traits that are far away in space and time. The general point of view is not a perspective that *produces* moral feelings, but only one that *preserves* them across space and time, allowing us to converse about morality. For this reason, the viewpoint interpretation provides an incorrect answer to the question of what makes a character trait virtuous or vicious. To answer this question, we must look elsewhere.

[36] The same can be said of Hume's use of the phrase "common point of view": "'tis impossible men cou'd ever agree in their sentiments and judgments, unless they chose some common point of view, from which they might survey their object, and which might cause it to appear the same to all of them" (T 3.3.1.30, 591). Based on his empirical investigation, Hume believes that "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" (T 3.3.1.30, 591).

1.4.4 The Conciliatory Reading

A fourth interpretation conceived of Hume's emphasis on both the spectatorial pleasure of approbation and the direct pleasure of utility and agreeableness as two different but coextensive ways of defining virtue. This 'conciliatory reading' is proposed by Don Garrett, who maintains that Hume "offers not one but two definitions of virtue" (Garrett 1993: 179). Garrett quotes from the moral *Enquiry* what he takes to be the first definition of virtue:

> Personal Merit consists altogether in the possession of mental qualities, *useful* or *agreeable* to the *person himself* or to *others*. (EPM 9.1, 268)

The second definition takes

> virtue to be *whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation* (EPM App1.10, 289)

According to Garrett, the first of these definitions "specifies the feature of the objects (usefulness-or-agreeableness) that in fact produces the characteristic psychological effect, without specifying what that effect is" (Garrett 1993: 179). The second definition "specifies the class of objects by means of the characteristic psychological effect on observers (the sentiment of approbation), without specifying what feature of the objects actually gives rise to this effect" (Garrett 1993: 179).

On this reading, Hume would "endorse both definitions as correct" (Garrett 1993: 179) and "if Hume's theory of moral judgment is correct", the two definitions are "coextensive" (1993: 180). This is so because an 'ideal' spectator would approve of useful and agreeable traits.[37] Therefore, any trait that satisfied the fourfold distinction would also be approved and *vice versa*. Rachel Cohon seems to subscribe to a similar reading

[37] An expanded version of this interpretation is further developed in (Garrett 2015).

when she writes that even though "Hume does not understand virtuousness to be the same property as being useful or agreeable" he thinks that "the two are coextensive" (Cohon 2008: 101).

The problem with the conciliatory reading is that in the texts Hume never *defines* virtue as the possession of useful or agreeable mental qualities. As James Chamberlain has recently noted, the "idea of virtue is of traits that cause approbation, although the same traits are also understood, by causal reasoning, to be useful and agreeable ones" (Chamberlain 2020: 1064). Yet this connection is merely contingent: "one could conceive of a useless, disagreeable virtue, simply by imagining such a trait causing approbation" (Chamberlain 2020: 1064). As for Hume there is no necessary a priori connection between mental items, it is not inconceivable to think of a species of creatures in which the feeling of moral approbation is elicited by the idea of disutility or disagreeableness: "[a] creature, absolutely malicious and spiteful" which regards "with pleasure and complacency" anything that "is the source of disorder and misery in society" (EPM 5.40, 226-7).

Utility and agreeableness are the usual *causes* of direct pleasure, a pleasure that is contingently reflected through sympathy in *spectatorial* pleasure which alone constitutes virtue. Morally charged spectatorial pleasure and pain "may arise from four different sources" (T 3.3.1.30, 591). But this is *not* a *definition*. Rather, it is an empirical *explanation* of the qualities that are associated with the spectatorial pleasure, the only one that, according to Hume's text, sets the definition of virtue.

The conciliatory reading, in other words, is problematic because, upon close textual examination, Hume never *defines* virtue as a trait that is useful or agreeable. It is true that, in the moral *Enquiry*, Hume refers to "Personal Merit" as "the possession of

mental qualities, useful or agreeable to the person himself or to others" (EPM 9.1, 268). However, while many interpreters tend to conflate personal merit and virtue, this is a problematic move.[38] Hume corrected various editions of the *Enquiry* removing ambiguities and changing various instances of the expression "virtue or personal merit" into simply "personal merit". Beginning with the 1764 edition of the *Enquiry*, one that Hume judged "very correct" (HL, vol. 1, 465), the passage that read "VIRTUE or PERSONAL MERIT consists altogether in the possession of mental qualities, useful or agreeable to the person himself or to others" (Hume 1760: 169) is substituted by simply "PERSONAL MERIT consists altogether in the possession of mental qualities, useful or agreeable to the person himself or to others" (Hume 1764: 341). While changes like this may seem only marginal, they are indicative of the fact that Hume took care not to directly identify virtue with the possession of useful and agreeable mental qualities.[39] Personal merit is the feature of someone's character that produces utility and agreeableness, in order to become virtue, it needs the additional moralising element of spectatorial pleasure.

A final problem of the conciliatory reading is that it seems not to take seriously enough the fact that Hume's theory of virtue can be subject to a dilemma: since moral approval can be divorced from what is useful and agreeable (as in the case of the monkish virtues or of a "malicious and spiteful" creature), we need a criterion to specify which of the two factors (approval or utility/agreeableness) has the strongest claim in case of dispute. The final interpretation, which I find most convincing, takes a clear stance on this point.

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[38] For instance, in a recent paper James Fieser quotes from Hume's *Enquiry* and, after the phrase "Personal Merit" specifies "[i.e., virtue]" (Fieser 2021: 115-16). (Shaver 1995) explicitly conflates virtue and personal merit: "For ease, 'virtue' will continue to replace 'personal merit,' since nothing here depends on the distinction" (Shaver 1995: 323).

[39] For similar considerations see (Debes 2022).

1.4.5 The Approval Interpretation

The final line of interpretation that I want to explore here is one that sees the priority of the "satisfaction, by the survey or reflection" (T 3.3.1.3, 575) as the fundamental element that makes a character trait virtuous or vicious. This reading, although supported by the textual evidence discussed in various points above, remains marginal in current Hume scholarship. Philip Reed (2012) is one of the few interpreters that embraces this line of thought.[40] According to the approval interpretation "what makes virtues and vices what they are are the attitudes that people have toward them" (Reed 2012: 45). On this reading, "Hume does not define virtue according to a trait's tendency to the good of humankind, but rather by the pleasure or approval that it receives from observers" (Reed 2012: 45). The peculiar pleasure of moral approbation is what makes it so that a character trait becomes a virtue.

Nonetheless, as we saw above, individuals' reactions are not a stable foundation for morality. Saying that anyone's idiosyncratic feelings determine what is morally good and bad would imply a hyper-subjectivist outcome that is not in line with Hume's texts and his philosophical project. In order for something to be a virtue a "consensus" of feelings is required: approbation needs to be shared by a sufficient number of individuals.[41]

The idea of approval and a consensus of feelings as the standard of virtue for Hume is a promising reading because it allows us to keep together two essential commitments that, as we saw, emerge from his texts. On the one hand, he stressed the importance of a spectatorial view of morality where what is moral cannot be a quality or

[40] James Chamberlain also goes in this direction when he stresses that "Hume's explicit definition of virtuous traits" is based on the fact that they "cause approbation" (Chamberlain 2020: 1064).
[41] The emphasis on "consensus" is proposed by Reed as a term that capture the presence of an agreement that is either "(close to) universal, or else the majority" (Reed 2012: 46).

object dissociated from a spectator's reaction. On the other hand, Hume also acknowledges that morality is not merely a matter of individual sentiments. A standard of morality must be something *more* than individual feeling but cannot be anything else but feeling. General consensus and accord of feelings is what sets the standard of virtue.

A passage from the *Essays* can further help to identify the importance of consensus to helps to adjudicate what counts as a virtue and what does not:

> though an appeal to general opinion may justly, in the speculative sciences of metaphysics, natural philosophy, or astronomy, be deemed unfair and inconclusive, yet in all questions with regard to morals, as well as criticism, there is really no other standard, by which any controversy can ever be decided. (E 486)

As Reed already notices in his paper, this element of consensus is present in the idea of the "general opinion of mankind" (T 3.2.9.4, 552-3) or in something that is approved by a large number of people.

In addition, the approval interpretation makes sense of a series of passages in Hume that would otherwise be very puzzling. For instance, his widely overlooked affirmation that in order to decide whether an action, a sentiment, or a character trait is morally good or not, the "general opinion" of mankind is essential:

> The general opinion of mankind has some authority in all cases; but in this of morals 'tis perfectly infallible. (T 3.2.9.4, 552-3)

The very "definition of virtue" as stated in the *Enquiry* is that of "a quality of the mind agreeable to or *approved by everyone*, who considers or contemplates it" (EPM 8.1n, 261). An often overlooked passage of the first *Enquiry* reports that when "we reason concerning it [moral beauty], and endeavour to fix its standard, we regard a new fact, to wit, the general taste of mankind, or some such fact, which may be the object of reasoning and enquiry" (EHU 12.33, 165).

This element of accord in people's feelings of approval is necessary because Hume himself recognises that certain individuals have aberrant sentiments and atypical moral reactions which, nonetheless, do not endanger morality.[42] Timon of Athens and the Roman emperor Nero are examples of men whose feelings are "directly opposite to those, which prevail in the human species" (EPM 5.40, 226-7). In addition, Hume notes that "revenge or envy" may "pervert" the human "disposition" to prefer the happiness of society to its contrary. The idea that some individuals will delight in the pain of others is much more than a mere possibility.[43]

The approval interpretation eludes various criticisms and objections moved against the other readings and squares with Hume's texts better than other options. An interpretation of Hume that stresses the importance of shared moral approval for the creation of moral standards avoids the problems of objectivist readings such as the traditional interpretation and the virtue as perfection one. Further, the element of approval and general consensus are more prominent than the celebrated and much discussed general point of view.[44] Finally, unlike the conciliatory reading, the approval interpretation allows us to adjudicate cases of traits in which the approval and the consequences do not align. What makes something virtuous or vicious is the existence of a consensus of feeling.[45] Only when sentiments are shared by a large number of people

[42] While Hume seems confident that "[a]ll mankind … give [their] preference to the happiness of society" (EPM 5.40), he also admitted in a letter to Hutcheson that "nothing but Experience" should be consulted when we make claims about "Sentiments" (HL, vol. 1, 39).
[43] For a full discussion of the problems that envy may pose to moral evaluation for Hume, see chapter 6.
[44] Rachel Cohon calls it "a famous wrinkle" (Cohon 2008: 127) and rightly notices that it is mentioned one single time in Hume's entire corpus of writings.
[45] The general point of view may be seen as a tool to help shape this consensus given the limitations of the actual experience of human beings. Nonetheless, the point of view in itself does not have any normative power.

do they acquire the authority that is required to elevate them to a moral standard in their community.[46]

What remains unexplained at this point is *why* Hume believes that virtue is constituted by moral approval, and in particular, *why* a consensus of sentiments is required for a character trait to be virtuous. In the next chapter, I attempt to present a historical case to provide support for this interpretation, while also explaining why Hume's definition of virtue requires an element of approval and cannot consist merely in the direct pleasure produced by a character trait.

[46] To put the point with Reed's words: "The weight of how people generally feel is required to decide any moral evaluation that is up for dispute" (Reed 2012: 45).

Chapter 2: Rationalism, Voluntarism, and Hume's Reaction

> "every day we see beasts committing without sin deeds the performance of which by man would have involved him in the grossest misconduct; not, indeed, because the physical motions of man and of a beast differ, but because there has been imposed by law on certain actions of man a morality which is wanting in the acts of a beast."
>
> Pufendorf, *De Jure Naturae et Gentium*

2.1 Debating Morality

Two different ways of understanding morality and its foundation were common in Hume's time. On the one hand, philosophers such as Ralph Cudworth (1617-1688), Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715), Samuel Clarke (1675-1729) and William Wollaston (1659-1724), among many others, spread the view that morality depends on eternal and immutable truths that not even God can alter. On the other hand, influential thinkers such as Samuel von Pufendorf (1632-1694), John Locke (1632-1704), and William King (1650-1729) professed that morality requires the presence of a divine law or command imposed onto human subjects. The former position goes under the name of 'rationalism'. The latter is called 'voluntarism'.[47] Both views are united on the idea that morality and its binding power derive from something that is over and above human nature. For this

[47] The term voluntarism has been popularised by the work of Jerome Schneewind, including his papers "The Misfortunes of Virtue" (1990), "Voluntarism and the Foundations of Ethics" (1996) and his book *The Invention of Autonomy* (1998). While Schneewind takes Locke to be a voluntarist, some scholars disagree on this point and stress the presence of non-voluntarist aspects of Locke's thought. As I will show below, there are undeniable connections between Locke and voluntarist accounts of ethics.

reason, David Hume is often seen as a far cry from both theories. Not only does Hume offer powerful arguments against moral rationalism, but he also develops a secular ethics that does not appeal to God and his laws as the foundation of morality.

For good reasons, Hume is taken to belong to the sentimentalist tradition, which was inaugurated by Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury, and refined by Francis Hutcheson. Nonetheless, evaluating Hume's position in relation to rationalism and voluntarism will prove to be a valuable way to better understand his moral philosophy. While I do not intend to downplay the important differences between voluntarism and Hume's sentimentalism, in this chapter, I show that several central claims of Hume's moral theory are illuminated by a comparison with the voluntarist tradition.

The chapter is structured as follows. Section 2.2 introduces some central ideas of moral rationalism and Hume's attacks against them. Section 2.3 reconstructs the main tenets of voluntarist metaethics based on ideas presented by Pufendorf and Locke. With these in the background, section 2.4 presents Hume's anti-rationalist moral philosophy as structurally similar to voluntarist views, whose elements he recasts in a natural and secular shape. The affinities between Hume's ethics and voluntarism help to support the approval interpretation proposed at the end of the chapter 1. In short, the reasoning is the following: sentimentalism, like voluntarism, rejects the idea that morality stems from eternal and necessary relations of ideas or that moral values are mind-independent and exist out there in the world. Because of this, sentimentalism needs to introduce a moralis*ing* element in order to explain where morality comes from. While voluntarism found that element in the divine law, sentimentalism finds it in shared moral approval. The only interpretation of Hume's account of virtue that presents a serious explanation of such a source is the "approval interpretation".

2.2 Moral Rationalism

According to moral rationalism, morality is founded on reason alone. Whether something is morally good or bad is determined by reason. The contingencies of human life, including desires, feelings, and emotional reactions do not affect morality more than they affect mathematical or geometrical truths. On the rationalist view, what is good and right is mind-independent, immutable, and necessary. Not unlike Platonic ideas, moral properties and values are supposed to exist over and above—or at least independent of—the natural world that we inhabit. They are conceived of as self-standing, immutable and eternal to such an extent that not even God would be able to alter them.[48]

The rationalist tradition can be considered to go all the way back to Plato's ethics.[49] Hume, however, seems to consider it a modern phenomenon. In a footnote to the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals,* he writes that "the first that started this abstract theory of morals" which "excludes all sentiment, and pretends to found every thing on reason" was "Father Malebranche" (EPM 3.34, 197). This theory "has not wanted followers in this philosophic age" (EPM 3.34, 197).

Two of such followers are targeted directly by Hume. In *A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh*, penned five years after the publication of Book 3 of the *Treatise*, Hume elaborates on his earlier moral philosophy. He explicitly identifies his philosophical opponents as "*Clark* and *Woolaston*" who maintained "the eternal Difference of Right and Wrong" by arguing that "the Propositions of Morality were of

[48] The genealogy of this view is reconstructed in (Gill 2006). In Gill's picture, in the first half of the 17th century the so-called Cambridge Platonists started to develop a view of morality that saw moral truth as self-sustained and independent from God.
[49] See, for instance, (Antognazza 2013).

the same Nature with the Truths of Mathematicks and the abstract Sciences, the Objects *merely* of Reason, not the *Feelings* of our internal *Tastes* and *Sentiments*." (L 429-30)

In the preface of his *Discourse Concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion* (1706), Clarke is clear about the nature of his commitments: "there is such a thing as Fitness and Unfitness, Eternally, Necessarily, and Unchangeably, in the Nature and Reason of Things" (1706, unnumbered page). His point is clearly phrased in opposition to voluntarism: what is important to stress for him is that relations of fitness or lack thereof exist "[a]ntecedently to Will and to all Positive or Arbitrary Appointment whatsoever" (1706, unnumbered page). Not even the will of God could change these eternal, necessary and unchangeable moral relations.

On Clarke's account it is not the will of God that determines what is moral. Rather, what is moral determines the will of God:

> The same necessary and eternal *different Relations* that different Things bear one to another and the same consequent *Fitness* or *Unfitness* of the application of different Things or different Relations one to another, with regard to which the Will of God always and necessarily does determine itself to choose to act … *ought* likewise constantly to determine the wills of all subordinate rational Beings to govern all their Actions (1706, 5)

While Clarke allows that the will of God "determines itself", this self-determination is of a peculiar kind, since it happens "always and necessarily" in accordance with things other than itself.

Further, Clarke's stresses the mind-independent nature of morality developing an analogy with mathematical and geometrical truths. On the rationalist picture, "it is undeniably more Fit, absolutely and in the Nature of the thing itself, that all Men should indeavour [sic] to promote the *universal good and welfare of All*; than that all Men should be continually contriving the *ruin and destruction of All*" (1706: 50). It is equally "without

dispute more *Fit* and reasonable in itself, that I should *preserve the Life* of an innocent Man … than that I should suffer him to perish, or *take away his Life*, without any reason or provocation at all" (1706: 50). These moral truths are grounded in reason:

> For a Man endued with *Reason*, to deny the Truth of these Things; is the very same thing … as if a Man that understands *Geometry* or *Arithmetick*, should deny the most obvious and known *Proportions* of *Lines* or *Numbers*, and perversely contend that the *Whole* is not *equal to all its parts*, or that a *Square* is *not double* to a *Triangle* of equal base and height. (1706: 50-51)[50]

Clarke is not the only prominent rationalist named by Hume in the *Letter from a Gentleman*. The other one is William Wollaston, the author of a book entitled *Religion of Nature Delineated* (1722), where he proposes a view according to which actions can express propositions. For instance, he says, "[i]f a Body of soldiers, seeing another body approach, should fire upon them" this action would "declare that they were enemies" (1722: 6). Consequently, an action may be taken to conform with the truth or be contrary to it: "if they were not enemies, would not this military language declare what was false?" (1722: 6). On the basis of this, Wollaston goes on to argue that an action is morally good (or bad) when it expresses what is true (or false). Although different from Clarke, Wollaston's position is an unmistakable form of moral rationalism:

> "there is as certainly moral *good* and *evil* as there is *true* and *false*; and … there is as natural and immutable a difference between those as between *these*, the difference at the bottom being indeed the same" (Wollaston 1722: 15).

Like Clarke, Wollaston believes that the nature of moral good and evil is immutable and analogous to relations of truth and falsity.

These short samples should be sufficient to showcase the rationalist conviction that good and evil are mind-independent properties, grounded in eternal and necessary

[50] For a longer discussion of the analogy between morality and mathematics in Clarke see (Gill 2007).

relations. Like mathematical relations they are considered to be true or false in themselves rather than because of someone's reaction or imposition. For rationalists such as Clarke and Wollaston, morality exists in the nature of things and emerges from relations between them.[51]

2.2.1 Hume's Attack of Rationalist Moral Relations

On Hume's view, morality and its binding force (which I will sometimes refer to as 'normativity') are fully natural phenomena, explainable through empirical observations. He is very clear that he does not think morality to be something that exists independent of human reactions (including feelings, sentiments and passions). As such, he rejects the view that there are some mind-independent moral relations.

In the course of his writings, Hume presents several arguments against this rationalist conception of morality. One of his most powerful challenges to such a view is his attack against the rationalist account of moral relations. If the rationalist wants to say that morality is founded on mind-independent relations, he must provide a credible account of such relations. According to Hume's analysis in Book 1 of the *Treatise*, a comprehensive list of the *only* relations that "can be the objects of knowledge and certainty", includes four: "*resemblance*, *contrariety*, *degrees in quality*, and *proportions*

[51] To this I should add a caveat. Elizabeth Radcliffe has recently proposed a more moderate reading of the rationalist claims (Radcliffe 2018, appendix). Her reading uncovers hidden features of Clarke's position on moral motivation, but the texts and passages she uses to make her case are not likely to have been widely read in the 18th century. The picture I have sketched in my discussion reflects Hume's understanding of the rationalist views, which is relevant to the rest of the chapter. In light of Radcliffe's discussion, I do not pretend that my brief recollection of the rationalist position draws the full picture of Clarke's or Wollaston's moral accounts. However, it still represents the main tenets that were associated with rationalism in the eighteenth century and that Hume himself targets in his attacks.

in quantity or number" (T 1.3.1.2, 70). Every relation that is immutable and eternal must be one of these kinds.[52]

Rationalists take moral relations to be eternal and immutable, with no regard to experience or to the contingencies of human nature and its constitution. Hume objects that only the four relations he has identified can be taken as available options to fulfil the role of moral relation. However, these relations belong "as properly to matter, as to our actions, passions, and volitions" (T 3.1.1.19, 464). If that is true, they apply to inanimate objects and animals as well as human beings, and so they cannot be responsible for determining what is morally good and what is not. Therefore, Hume concludes that it is "unquestionable … that morality lies not in any of these relations" (T 3.1.1.19, 464).

For instance, one can remark that there is a relation of resemblance between a painting and the person painted, but how is this a *moral* relation? There is a relation of contrariety between the idea of existence and that of non-existence, but how is this a *moral* relation? If there are relations of "*resemblance*, *contrariety*, *degrees in quality*, and *proportions in quantity or number*" that do not have moral relevance (and surely there are), morality cannot depend on those relations only. In other words, *either* the rationalists are wrong and morality consists of more than immutable and eternal relations between objects or concepts; *or* they have to provide a fifth kind of relation that is not vulnerable to this criticism.

Hume's challenge to the rationalists is, therefore, for them to come up with alternative relations that "can be the objects of knowledge and certainty" (T 1.3.1.2, 70)

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[52] Three additional kinds of relation, on Hume's view, are variable and not susceptible of certainty: identity, relations of space and time, and causation. They are, therefore, not suitable to be taken as the foundation of morality in the rationalist view. This list is explicitly repeated by Hume in Book 3: "If you assert, that vice and virtue consist in relations susceptible of certainty and demonstration, you must confine yourself to those *four* relations, which alone admit of that degree of evidence ... *Resemblance*, *contrariety*, *degrees in quality*, and *proportions in quantity and number*" (T 3.1.1.19, 464).

and that meet two conditions required for relations to be able to ground morality. These two conditions are the following:

(1) *Relevance condition*: "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 3.1.1.20, 464-65)

(2) *Influence condition:* "We must also point out the connexion betwixt the [moral] 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." (T 3.1.1.22, 465)

Condition (1) states that moral relations must necessarily be relations between "internal actions" such as intentions, desires, etc. and "external objects", namely objects that are not in the mind in which those intentions, desires, etc. are held. Hume offers two reasons for the *relevance condition*: (i) "if [moral] relations cou'd belong to internal actions consider'd singly, it wou'd follow, that we might be guilty of crimes in ourselves, and independent of our situation, with respect to the universe"; and (ii) "if these moral relations cou'd be apply'd to external objects, it wou'd follow, that even inanimate beings wou'd be susceptible of moral beauty and deformity" (T 3.1.1.19, 465). If an account of moral relations does not respect the *relevance condition* it incurs in two absurdities: it allows for the possibility that (i) human beings can be morally guilty without any regard to anything external to their mind; and (ii) inanimate objects can be moral or immoral. Both of these are, for Hume, absurd. Hence, the relevance condition applies.

Condition (2), which I have called the influence condition, emerges from the fact that the rationalists want moral relations to be not only "eternal and immutable … when consider'd by every rational creature" but also such that "their *effects* are … necessarily the same" (T 3.1.1.22, 465). According to the rationalist "they have no less, or rather a greater, influence in directing the will of the deity, than in governing the rational and virtuous of our own species" (T 3.1.1.20, 465). As we saw, Clarke explicitly stated that the will of God is always determining itself to conform with pre-existing relations of fitness and unfitness. Hume's statement on the *influence condition* presents the idea that, because of their own commitments, rationalists have to provide an account of moral relations which necessarily influence not only human beings and their actions but also God's will.

Hume believes that the rationalist cannot accommodate either the *relevance condition* or the *influence condition*. He makes this point clearly when he writes that:

> it will be impossible to fulfil the *first* condition required to the system of eternal rational measures of right and wrong; because it is impossible to shew those relations, upon which such a distinction may be founded: And 'tis as impossible to fulfil the *second* condition; because we cannot prove *a priori*, that these relations, if they really existed and were perceiv'd, wou'd be universally forcible and obligatory. (T 3.1.1.23, 466)

Neither of the two conditions can be satisfied. Concerning the first, Hume believes that we cannot find any relation that meets the *relevance condition*. Resemblance, contrariety, degrees of quality and proportions of numbers are all relationships that can exist between internal mental items as well as external objects alone. None of these applies *only* to relations between an internal mental item and external actions.

Concerning the *influence condition*, Hume thinks that it is impossible to come up with an eternal, a priori relation which necessarily moves human beings' and God's will.

This is because the connection between the will and this eternal moral relation would be, at best, a causal one. But, in Hume's account, no causal relation (in this case between one's will and an eternal moral relation) can be "so necessary, that in every well-disposed mind, it must take place and have its influence" (T 3.1.1.21, 465), as the *influence condition* requires. With this argument, Hume demonstrates (to his own satisfaction) that morality cannot be a matter of immutable and eternal relations.

After his dense theoretical discussion, Hume moves on to a few examples. He considers ingratitude against one's parents, and writes: "Of all crimes that human creatures are capable of committing, the most horrid and unnatural is ingratitude, especially when it is committed against parents" (T 3.1.1.24, 466). Yet, the same relation in "an oak or elm" which produces "a sapling below it, which springing up by degrees, at last overtops and destroys the parent tree" (T 3.1.1.24, 467) is not morally bad. Similarly, Hume asks: "why incest in the human species is criminal, and why the very same action, and the same relations in animals have not the smallest moral turpitude and deformity?" (T 3.1.1.24, 467). This, on the rationalist account, is puzzling "[a]nimals are susceptible of the same relations, with respect to each other, as the human species, and therefore wou'd also be susceptible of the same morality, if the essence of morality consisted in these relations" (T 3.1.1.24, 467).

With these examples, Hume offers a more tangible way of observing that morality cannot stem from relations alone.[53] Morality must come from something other than mere

[53] Hume considers a possible counter objection: one may say that something like incest is innocent in animals because they lack reason and cannot "discover its turpitude" (T 3.1.1.25, 467). On the other hand, for "man, being endow'd with that faculty [reason] … the same action [incest] instantly becomes criminal" (T 3.1.1.25, 467). Based on his counter objection, the possession of reason is the factor that makes incest evil in human beings. If beasts would be endowed with the same faculty, incest would be morally criminal for them too. Hume's response is that if the moral turpitude of an action is mind-independent, as the rationalist argues, it must be the case that "before reason can perceive this turpitude, the turpitude must exist" (T 3.1.1.25, 467). Lack of reason in animal can be enough to *excuse them* for not realising that their incest is morally evil, but their act would remain evil.

relations and, Hume adds, "consists not in any *matter of fact*, which can be discover'd by the understanding" (T 3.1.1.26, 468). Shortly after these passages, Hume moves on to build his own sentimentalist account of morality in the section *Moral distinctions deriv'd from a moral sense* (T 3.1.2). It may therefore seem that Hume sees no other alternative and assume that, if morality is not grounded in eternal and mind-independent moral relations, then it needs to be grounded in moral sentiments. But there is another alternative, which, albeit unpopular today, was prominent in Hume's time: moral voluntarism. In the next section, I explore this option to later showcase its similarities with Hume's sentimentalism. Three central elements of voluntarist metaethics are required for their theories to offer a strong alternative to moral rationalism. A comparison with this background will help to show how Hume's moral philosophy, equally concerned with rejecting rationalism, includes an effort to recast some central elements of voluntarist moral philosophy into a secular shape.

2.3 Moral Voluntarism

A moving scene from Shakespeare's *Othello* (Act. 4, Sc. 3) includes a dialogue about marital infidelity between two women, soon to be killed by their respective husbands. Desdemona asks Emilia whether she would ever consider being unfaithful to her husband: "Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?" (Shakespeare [1603] 2009: 99). Emilia takes the question quite literally and answers: "I would not do such a thing for a joint-ring, nor for measures of lawn, nor for gowns, petticoats, nor caps, nor any petty exhibition. But for the whole world?" (Shakespeare [1603] 2009: 99). Even acknowledging the evil nature of infidelity, her answer is *yes*: she would be unfaithful to her husband *for the whole world*. The reasoning she provides is astute: "the wrong is but

a wrong i' th' world, and having the world for your labor, 'tis a wrong in your own world, and you might quickly make it right" (Shakespeare [1603] 2009: 100). Emilia's reasoning can be seen as expressing a belief in moral voluntarism: the idea that supreme power—what she refers to as "having the world"—can alter morality and turn what is wrong into something right.

From the Latin *voluntas*, voluntarism is the nineteenth-century label used to describe the idea that, because of his omnipotence, God has the power to create and impose moral properties and values in whichever way he likes. Morality is a creation of his *will*.[54] This idea has a long history and, as an ethical position, was first articulated during the Medieval period.[55] It is with the Protestant Reformation, however, that it became a prominent stance in the intellectual landscape of early modern Europe.[56] Between the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century, two of the most notable names associated with voluntarist ideas were Samuel von Pufendorf and John Locke.[57] Their theories of natural jurisprudence were key in shaping the intellectual understanding of morality and its foundations in eighteenth-century Europe. Pufendorf, in particular, was "the most widely read of these theorists [i.e., natural law theorists], and

[54] The exact origin of the term 'voluntarism' is unknown, but as Schneewind remarks (Schneewind 1998: 8), the Oxford English Dictionary reports that the term has been in use since the nineteenth century.
[55] A useful introduction to the Medieval debate is in (Haldane 1989).
[56] Martin Luther (1483–1546) in his influential *De Servo Arbitrio* (1525) writes that "God is he for Whose will no cause or ground may be laid down as its rule and standard … What God wills is not right because He ought, or was bound, so to will; on the contrary, what takes place must be right, because He so wills it" (Luther [1525] 1961: 193). John Calvin (1509–1564) echoes Luther's emphasis on the fact that God's will is the source of what is morally right, and nothing can be such prior to his willing. In his *Institutes* III.xxiii.2, he writes: "God's will is so much the highest rule of righteousness that whatever he wills, by the very fact that he wills it, must be considered righteous. When, therefore, one asks why God has so done, we must reply: because he has willed it. But if you proceed further to ask why he has so willed, you are seeking something greater and higher than God's will, which cannot be found" (Calvin [1559] 1961: 949).
[57] The only published work of Hume that mentions Calvin and Luther by name is the *History of England*. On the other hand, Pufendorf and Locke are mentioned in philosophical work. The former is mentioned explicitly in a letter to Hutcheson and in a footnote (later removed) of the first edition of the moral *Enquiry*. Locke is referred to in many passages both in the *Treatise*, and in later works including the *Essays* and the *Enquiries*.

undoubtedly the most widely read of anyone who wrote on moral philosophy" (Schneewind 2003: 21). We shall start with him.

2.3.1 Pufendorf and Three Tenets of Voluntarism

In his highly influential eight-volume *De Jure Naturae et Gentium* (1672), Samuel von Pufendorf proposes an explanation of morality and its normative power. In this section, I detail three essential tenets of his voluntarist metaethics:

1. *Moral Neutrality of Nature*: nature is, in itself, neither moral nor immoral.
2. *Existence of a Moralising Element*: for morality to exist there must be a moralising element that imposes moral properties onto morally neutral nature.
3. *Authority of the Normative Source*: for the moralising element to be normative (or legitimately binding) it needs to come from an authoritative source.

1. Moral Neutrality of Nature. Pufendorf's commitment to the moral neutrality of nature emerges from his proposal of a sharp distinction between physical entities (*entia physica*) and moral entities (*entia moralia*).[58] According to him, while physical entities are mind-independent and complete in themselves, moral entities do not exist independent of someone's mind. They are "added to physical things or motions, by intelligent beings" (LNNO 1.1.3, 5).[59]

[58] This contrast is at the core of his voluntarism. Jerome Schneewind identifies this as "one of Pufendorf's most significant, if not perhaps most original, distinctions" (Schneewind 1987: 125). Stephen Darwall calls it "a fundamental distinction" (Darwall 2012: 217). Hannah Dawson refers to this as "a radical dichotomy of nature and morality" (Dawson 2020: 528). For the role of moral entities in Pufendorf's metaphysics, see (Ahnert 2022).

[59] Pufendorf's most influential text in Scottish universities appears to have been his shorter *The Whole Duty of Man According to the Law of Nature* (1673). This much shorter book does not include an explicit discussion of the distinction between moral entities and physical entities that is key to his previous work. Nonetheless, the idea that morality requires a law remains the same: his definition of "Duty" is that of an "Action of a Man, which is regularly order'd according to some prescrib'd Law, which he is oblig'd to obey" (WDM 27).

This distinction between natural and moral entities, in turn, allows for a clear divide between *natural goodness* and *moral goodness*. Pufendorf recognises that certain things have "the native power to produce an effect good and useful to mankind" (LNNO 1.2.6, 28). Nonetheless, he thinks that this, in itself, is not enough to make them *morally* good nor bad. He emphasises that "this natural goodness and evil does by no means constitute an action in the field of morals. For there are many things which contribute to the happiness and convenience of man and yet are not morally good" (LNNO 1.2.6, 28). For Pufendorf, what is useful or beneficial is not in itself yet moral. The imposition of an additional normative element is required. This leads us to the second tenet.

2. Existence of a Moralising Element. For Pufendorf, moral entities are produced by an act of the mind and superimposed onto the physical world. A moralising element must come into play to turn what is initially morally neutral into something that has moral relevance. Such an element is, for Pufendorf, a divine command: morality exists as a result of God's imposition of a law. His text is unambiguous:

> all the movements and actions of man, if every law both divine and human be removed, are indifferent; while some of them are termed naturally reputable or base, because the condition of nature, which the Creator freely bestowed upon man, most rigorously requires either their execution or avoidance; it does not follow, however, that any morality can exist of itself, without any law (LNNO 1.2.6, 27).

While certain things or action can be naturally good—for instance if they are useful to the preservation of the individual or of society—in order for morality to come into existence the moralising element of law is required: "before there was any law, every kind of action was indifferent" (LNNO 2.3.4, 184).

God's commands add to certain natural movements the additional layer of morality. Because of this superadded nature of moral entities, Pufendorf writes that "the

way in which moral entities are produced can scarcely be better expressed than by the word *imposition*" (LNNO 1.1.4, 5).

According to Pufendorf, moral entities emerge when a rule or law is imposed on the physical world. He argues that the moral relevance of physical facts and entities stems merely from conformity to a law: "we call an action good morally, or in moral estimation, which agrees with law" (LNNO 1.7.3, 114). All forms of moral good and evil depend on the presence of a law. With Pufendorf's words:

> good repute, or moral necessity, and turpitude, are affections of human actions arising from their conformity or non-conformity to some norm or law, and law is the bidding of a superior, it does not appear that good repute or turpitude can be conceived to exist before law, and without the imposition of a superior (LNNO 1.2.6, 27).

According to his approach, a law is "a decree by which a superior obligates a subject to adapt his actions to the former's command" (LNNO 1.6.4, 89). The voluntarist nature of Pufendorf's theory begins to emerge here. As Jerome Schneewind has noticed, his account of the law has "no reference to a connection with good. This allows [Pufendorf] to hold that a morally good act may not bring about any natural good" (Schneewind 1987: 128-9). There is no necessary connection between *natural* goodness and *moral* goodness. What is morally good is so simply in virtue of being commanded by God. It is because of God's benevolence (*providentia* in Pufendorf's Latin) that his binding laws are consistent with—and, indeed, conductive to—the realisation of natural goodness and human benefit. The gap between natural and moral goodness—as it will be the case in Hutcheson's sentimentalist picture—is bridged by assuming God's benevolence. In order for what is useful and beneficial "to have the force of laws, it is necessary to presuppose the existence of God and His providence, whereby all things are governed, and primarily mankind" (LNNO 2.3.19, 215).

For Pufendorf, moral properties stem from an act of imposition external to the good or evil consequences produced by a certain action. It is only because God imposes a law presenting a standard for action that moral entities come to existence. Without "the imposition of a superior" (LNNO 1.2.6, 27) even something as basic as "good repute and turpitude" cannot "be conceived to exist" (LNNO 1.2.6, 27). As it has been remarked in the literature, "[t]his law does not rest on an intrinsic morality of actions, an absolute value of persons, on common agreement among humans, or even on the long-term utility that generally follows compliance with its injunctions" (Seidler 2021). It is binding not because of its *content*, but only because of its *source*. This raises the question: what makes a certain imposition morally binding? This is where the third tenet comes into the picture.

3. Authority of the Normative Source: for the moralising element to be legitimately binding it needs to originate in an authoritative source. Pufendorf, of course, recognises the the authoritative source of moral imposition in God: it is because a law is given by God in virtue of his *imperium*—a form of authority over his creatures—that his commands are legitimately binding.

God's authority is required for the law to have normative power because for the imposition to "have the force of law, there is need of a higher principle; for … it alone could never lay so firm a restraint upon the spirits of men" (LNNO 2.3.20, 217). A command needs to be backed up by authority to create a moral standard. In Pufendorf's own words: "It must … under all circumstances be maintained that the obligation of natural law is of God, the creator and final governor of mankind, who by its authority (*pro imperio*) has bound men, His creatures, to observe it" (LNNO 2.3.20, 217). The binding force of divine law stems from divine authority. If God had no authority over us,

his laws would not generate morally binding obligations. Authority is required to moralise nature.[60]

A review of these three tenets shows that, according to Pufendorf, nature is in itself morally neutral. A moralising element of imposition is required to create *entia moralia* and to bring about moral values and moral properties. Not just every imposition, however, will do. The commands imposed by law are morally binding only insofar as they are given by someone in a position of authority. It is because of the fact that God gives a law to human beings that certain acts become morally good and other evils. All of these commitments are essential to Pufendorf's theory in order for him to reject rationalist conceptions of morality that mistakenly "set up an eternal rule for the morality of human actions, beyond the imposition of God" (LNNO 1.2.6, 27). Thinkers who subscribe to that view, Pufendorf explains, "do nothing other than to join to God some co-eternal extrinsic principle which He Himself had to follow in the assignment of forms of things" (LNNO 1.2.6, 27), consequently denying divine omnipotence. Pufendorf's subscription to the three tenets is meant to build an alternative explanation for the existence of morality, one that does not incur in the absurdities of moral rationalism.

Pufendorf illustrates his rejection of rationalism with an example. As he explains, some acts that are morally neutral for beasts are morally criminal when performed by human beings. This is possible because the moral turpitude is not intrinsic to the action, but rather it is imposed on it by a law:

[60] In his *Opinion on the Principles of Pufendorf* (1706), Leibniz criticises precisely this point. He affirms that Pufendorf is mistaken to affirm that the "efficient cause" of the law is "the command of a superior" rather than "right reason" (Leibniz [1706] 1972, 70). If Pufendorf were right and what is morally good depends on the command of a superior, it would follow that "he who is invested with the supreme power do[es] nothing against justice if he proceeds tyrannically ... arbitrarily despoils his subjects, torments them, and kills them under torture" (Leibniz [1706] 1972, 70).

> every day we see beasts committing without sin deeds the performance of which by man would have involved him in the grossest misconduct; not, indeed, because the physical motions of man and of a beast differ, but because there has been imposed by law on certain actions of man a morality which is wanting in the acts of a beast. (LNNO 1.2.6, 28)

Incest, for instance, is immoral in humans not because anything is necessarily morally wrong with the motions of bodies that it involves. If that was the case, it would be equally immoral in non-human animals. It is because God imposes his law on human beings that a moral entity comes into existence. Morally neutral movement of bodies (tenet 1) become morally relevant because of the imposition of a moralising element (tenet 2) stemming from an authoritative source (tenet 3). The way in which Pufendorf keeps these three commitments together is with the presence of an authoritative God who imposes a law.

Because of this picture, on his account, the divine law emerges to be composed of two conceptually distinct elements: the *content* of the law, which is, in itself, morally neutral; and the *command* which introduces the normative element. For instance, a law which commands "Thou shalt not kill" has *killing* as its content—its moralis*ed* element—and a commanded *prohibition* as its form—the moralis*ing* element. Pufendorf believes that in the absence of such a law killing would be morally neutral, a mere motion of bodies. It is only because this motion of bodies becomes part of a law which prohibits it that a moral entity called 'murder' arises as something morally evil. This twofold structure of the law of nature that we find in Pufendorf is key to understanding how morality can emerge in a world initially inhabited by merely physical entities. Objective natural facts become part of the law of nature through an act of imposition and only through that act do they acquire moral relevance.

2.3.2 Locke's Subscription to the Three Tenets

In his 1693 book entitled *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, John Locke recommends the study of Pufendorf as something that "a gentleman should not barely touch at, but constantly dwell upon and never have done with" (Locke [1693] 1989: 239-40). A 1703 manuscript entitled *Some Thoughts Concerning Reading and Study for a Gentleman*, confirms Locke's esteem of Pufendorf's works prescribing the reading of his texts, "*De Officio Hominis et Civis,* and *De Jure Naturali* [sic] *et Gentium*, which last is the best book of that kind" (Locke [1703] 1997: 352). Of course, this does not mean that Locke always agrees with the content of those books. Nonetheless, Locke's admiration for the German jurist is unequivocal.

Like Pufendorf, Locke, adopted a conception of the foundation of morality that subscribes to the three voluntarist tenets.[61]

1. Moral Neutrality of Nature. Locke does not distinguish moral entities from physical entities as clearly as Pufendorf does. Nonetheless, in the section of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* called "Of Other Relations", he stresses that actions can be considered "under … two-fold consideration" (ECHU 2.28.15, 359). On the one hand, they can be considered "as they are in themselves, each made up of such a collection of simple ideas … as the drinking of a horse, or speaking of a parrot" (ECHU 2.28.15,

[61] A number of interpreters take Locke to be a moral rationalist. In her Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy's entry on Locke's Moral Philosophy, for instance, Particia Sheridan writes that "Locke espous[e] a fairly traditional rationalistic natural law position" (Sheridan 2016). When detailing the reasons for this claim, however, she mentions Locke's subscription to "the following three propositions: first, that moral rules are founded on divine, universal and absolute laws; second, that these divine moral laws are discernible by human reason; and third, that by dint of their divine authorship these rules are obligatory and rationally discernible as such" (Sheridan 2016). None of these, however, make Locke a rationalist in the sense opposed by voluntarism. In the posthumously published *Essays on the Law of Nature*—often taken as evidence of Locke's presumed rationalism—he explicitly says that "reason does not so much establish and pronounce this law of nature as search for it and discover it as a law enacted by a superior power" (ELN 82). My attribution of voluntarism to Locke, if not uncontroversial, is supported by the texts and in agreement with influential interpreters (Irwin 2008: 278-283; Schneewind 2010: 203). For an account of the early discussion about the nature of Locke's ethics see (Boeker 2024).

359). On the other hand, "our actions are considered as good, bad, or indifferent" depending on "their conformity to, or disagreement with some rule that makes them to be regular or irregular, good or bad" (ECHU 2.28.15, 359). It is only in this way that someone's drinking can become morally bad drunkenness or talking can become vicious lying. The actions of drinking large amounts of alcohol or reporting things that did not happen are in themselves morally neutral. It is only when an external standard or rule is taken into consideration that they are susceptible of being considered morally good or bad.

Another example from Locke's text is helpful to understand this point: "let us consider the complex *Idea*, we signify by the Word Murther" (ECHU 2.28.14, 358). On Locke's account, when we have "examined all the Particulars, we shall find them to amount to a Collection of simple *Ideas*" such as "Willing, Considering, Purposing before-hand, Malice, or wishing Ill to another" (ECHU 2.28.14, 358). According to Locke, this collection of ideas has, in itself, nothing morally good or bad. For a moral property to arise, we need to take notice of the "Agreement, or Disagreement, with those Patterns prescribed by some Law" (ECHU 2.28.14, 358). This leads us to Locke's subscription to the second tenet.

2. Existence of a Moralising Element. Locke conceives of morality in a way that requires a law. One such an element can generate "Moral Relations", which consist for Locke "in the Conformity, or Disagreement, Men's voluntary Actions have to a Rule, to which they are referred, and by which they are judged" (ECHU 2.28.4, 350). The moral quality of an action is given by its conformity to one or more rules that are essential to moralising the act.

For Locke, the laws that human beings can use to evaluate an action are of three different types: "The *Laws* that Men generally refer their Actions to, to judge of their Rectitude, or Obliquity, seem to me to be these three. 1. The *Divine* Law. 2. The *Civil* Law. 3. The Law of *Opinion* or *Reputation*" (ECHU 2.28.7, 352). Human beings, Locke believes, use one or more of these laws to evaluate and measure the moral worth of their actions: "'tis by their Conformity to one of these Laws, that they take their measures, when they would judge of their Moral Rectitude, and denominate their Actions good or bad" (ECHU 2.28.13, 357).

While Locke talks of moral relations, his account does not fall within the scope of Hume's criticisms in T 3.1.1. This is because Locke's conception of moral relations does not pretend that they are either immutable, eternal, or existing necessarily and a priori. The relation that there is between an action and a law can be of conformity or lack thereof, but there is nothing intrinsically moral in this relation. While an arbitrary rule that an individual could make up is enough to generate a relation, the relation is not yet a moral one. By making up a rule such as "Thou shall not eat pineapple!" I make it so that your act of eating a pineapple is a violation of my rule. But eating pineapple does not become immoral. What makes relations *moral* for Locke is not simply the fact that one of the relata is a rule or a law. Rather the rule or law needs to stem from an authoritative source. Its normativity derives from the authority of the lawgiver. Hence, the third tenet.

3. Authority of the Normative Source. Out of the three laws mentioned by Locke, the only one to give rise to full-fledged— or "most considerable" (ECHU 2.28.8, 352)— moral relations is divine law "which God has set to the actions of men" (ECHU 2.28.8, 352). It is true that the "civil law" and the "law of opinion and reputation" have some normative relevance. Comparing human actions to the former makes them either criminal

or innocent; to the latter, vicious or virtuous. Human beings are bound to comply with these laws due to the punishments that will otherwise be inflicted to them.[62]

The authority of God, however, is superior to that of the civil magistrate and human opinion, as are the respective punishments and rewards that God can dispense. A law is "the decree of a superior will" (ELN, 83) and is binding in virtue of a "superior power" (ELN, 82). For this reason, given God's omnipotence, the divine law is for Locke "the only true touchstone of moral rectitude; and, by comparing them to this law, it is that men judge of the most considerable moral good or evil of their actions" (ECHU 2.28.8, 352).[63] Whether someone's action is ultimately moral or immoral can be evaluated only on the basis of the conformity of that action to that law. God's will sets a law that becomes one of the two relata in every moral relation. It is, therefore, essential to the constitution of moral relations and, consequently, of moral goodness and badness.

The resulting picture, like in Pufendorf's case, is that of a metaethics where a world of initially morally neutral objects (tenet 1) requires a moralising element (tenet 2) backed up by a source of authority (tenet 3) to give rise to moral properties and values. On Locke's view, the law which performs this function is detailed (even more explicitly than it was in Pufendorf's work) as having two components: a moralising and a moralised one. The former, is identified as "the formal cause of a law" and consist in the "decree of a superior will" (ELN, 83). In addition to this, a moralis*ed* element is required: the law must also include a specification of "what is and what is not to be done, which is the

[62] Among these punishments there are the sanctions for infringements of the civil laws in a political society (for breaking the civil law) and social marginalisation (for breaking the law of opinion). The latter is for Locke "a Burthen too heavy for humane Sufferance": no human being can "live in Society, under the constant Dislike, and ill Opinion of his Familiars, and those he converses with" (ECHU 2.28.12). Further details about this are in (Stuart-Buttle 2017).

[63] This passage is added to the second edition of the *Essay*, in response to critics (e.g., James Lowde, *A Discourse Concerning the Nature of Man*, 1694) who saw the mentions of three laws as a relativistic position. Locke makes clear that there only the divine law is the ultimate standard of morality.

proper function of a law" (ELN, 83). An order or command would make no sense *unless something is commanded*.[64]

2.4 HUME'S SECULAR ALTERNATIVE

Both Pufendorf and Locke keep together the three tenets of voluntarist metaethics by identifying God's authority as the keystone of their theories. But is there another way to hold up the arch? In the remainder of this chapter, I argue that Hume subscribes to the three tenets of voluntarist metaethics while also refusing to attribute to God any role in his moral theory. On Hume's view, God is not required to explain the existence of morality and its binding force. Nonetheless, due to his anti-rationalist commitments, Hume also accept that (1) nature is morally neutral; (2) a moralising element is required to bring morality into existence; (3) the source of the moralising element needs to be authoritative. In what follows I explore how Hume integrates these three structural elements of voluntarist metaethics into his own ethics.[65]

2.4.1 Hume's Subscription to the Three Tenets

1. Moral Neutrality of Nature. Like Pufendorf and Locke, Hume believes that natural objects are neither morally good nor morally bad. While he does not distinguish moral

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[64] On this see also (Buckle 1991: 127-129).

[65] The importance of the Natural Law tradition in the development of Scottish Enlightenment ideas has been analysed in a number of studies (e.g., Buckle 1991; Haakonssen 1996). Others stress the importance of "Hume's engagement with modern natural law" (Harris 2019: 228; but also Forbes 1975; van Holthoon 2021). In addition to this, Hume's engagement with Locke's thought—which, as we saw, is aligned with Pufendorf's on the topic at hand—emerges strongly from the *Treatise of Human Nature*, where "Mr. Locke" is mentioned among one of "some late philosophers in *England*, who have begun to put the science of man on a new footing" (T 0.7, xvi-vii). It is, therefore, legitimate to conceive of Hume's philosophy as partially shaped by the doctrines of these authors.

and physical entities as sharply as they do, he gives clear indications that, in themselves, natural facts lack any moral relevance.

As with Locke's discussion of "Murther" which, once "examined all the Particulars" turns out to be merely "a Collection of simple Ideas" (ECHU 2.28.14, 358), Hume asks his reader to consider "[w]ilful murder":

> Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call vice. In which-ever way you take it, you find only certain 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 3.1.1.26, 468)

Adopting the same example used by Locke—as well as resembling language—Hume is making the same point: without the intervention of a moralis*ing* component, mere natural facts do not have any moral relevance.

This is why, just a few sentences later, Hume writes that "[v]ice and virtue … may be compar'd to sounds, colours, heat and cold, which, according to modern philosophy, are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind" (T 3.1.1.26, 469). It is striking that the same comparison between moral judgments and judgments of colours appears also in Pufendorf, when he writes: "That reason should be able to discover any morality in the actions of a man without reference to a law, is as impossible as for a man born blind to judge between colours" (LNNO 1.2.6, 28).[66]

Hume's rejection of the thesis that morality can exist without an additional moralising element is further clarified by another anti-rationalist passage, partially quoted earlier in this chapter:

[66] The comparison between ideas of colours and ideas of virtue and vice is also developed in various places by Francis Hutcheson, see, for instance, (Gill 1995: 285; Radcliffe 1986: 408-15; Winkler 1996). The similarity with Pufendorf is not a proof that Hume read or alluded to his text directly, but suggests that, despite the differences, a similar conception of ethics is proposed by both.

> I would fain ask any one, why incest in the human species is criminal, and why the very same action, and the same relations in animals have not the smallest moral turpitude and deformity? … Animals are susceptible of the same relations, with respect to each other, as the human species, and therefore wou'd also be susceptible of the same morality, if the essence of morality consisted in these relations. (T 3.1.1.24, 467-68)

For Hume, morality is not something that exists in external things and their relations. There is nothing morally abhorrent in a rabbit mating with the offspring of its own parents. Why? Because we do not feel disapproving moral sentiments when presented with such an event. The motions of non-human animal bodies do not fall within the scope of the moralis*ing* element.

While there is no evidence that Hume formulated his argument with Pufendorf in view, it is hard not to notice the similarities with what he says about animals and beasts. In a passage quoted above, Pufendorf noted precisely that certain behaviour which is morally vicious in human beings is morally neutral in other animals. Beasts can "without sin" perform actions that would count as the "grossest misconduct" in the human race, "not, indeed, because the physical motions of man and of a beast differ" (LNNO 1.2.6, 28), but because of an imposition whose scope is limited to human begins and does not extend to animals. Hume and his voluntarist predecessors are united in thinking that moral qualities are not found in mere physical motions or in abstract relations. Rather, morality needs an additional element to come into the picture. Hence, the second tenet.

2. Existence of a Moralising Element. Like Pufendorf and Locke, Hume needs to introduce a moralis*ing* element in his account to explain how morality can emerge in a world of natural (and initially morally neutral) objects. Rather than appealing to God and

his laws, however, Hume finds the moralising element elsewhere.[67] His focus is on the notions of virtue and vice rather than law. However, this leaves him with an important problem to solve. If morality is neither in the nature of things and their relations nor is it imposed onto nature by God, where does it come from?

While for the voluntarist this element was God's law, for Hume it is something in "your own breast … a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action" (T 3.1.1.26, 468-9). The voluntarist model according to which what is moral and immoral derives from an imposition or command of God is not something that Hume is willing to accept. And yet, he retains the overall picture of morality as something that is superadded onto physical facts. That is why, for Hume, when it comes to moral evaluation, "vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object […] 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 3.1.1.26, 469). Appealing to moral feelings, Hume maintains that morality is not a supernatural phenomenon, but it also does not exists in the abstract, without considerations of the contingent sentimental reactions of human beings.

Hume's emphasis on sentiments, however, needs some qualification. Moral sentiments are required for morality to exist. Nonetheless, the individual sentiments of individual moral agents are not enough to constitute morality. Hume does not think that the sentiments of individuals such as Timon of Athens or Emperor Nero are a legitimate source of moral normativity (EPM 5.40, 226-7). These idiosyncratic individuals feel joy, delight, and (possibly) moral approval in front of destruction and suffering. Yet, their feelings cannot be discarded as wrong or unreasonable—at least not by Hume, who

[67] I detail some of Hume's arguments for the fact that morality does not have a divine foundation in chapters 3 and 4.

believes that sentiments are not susceptible of such evaluative modes. Rather, these sentimental reactions do not constitute a moral standard because they are "inverted, and directly opposite to those, which prevail in the human species" (EPM 5.40, 226). But why would a sentiment that is opposite to prevailing ones not be able to play the moralising role that Hume attributes to other moral sentiments? This question can be answered by remarking that Hume also requires the moralising element to have some authority. Hence, the third tenet.

3. Authority of the Normative Source. For Hume's theory to be credible, he needs to give an explanation as to why certain sentiments are authoritative and legitimately play the role of moralising element, while others are not. An initially attractive view may be that sentiments are morally authoritative *if they are natural*. For instance, one could say, a sentiment of approval arising from the contemplation of benevolence is natural because benevolence is beneficial to human wellbeing and to positive societal interactions. On the other hand, approving of malice would be unnatural as it does not help the realisation of human ends. This position is, roughly speaking, the view proposed by Hutcheson, one that Hume explicitly rejects in a well-known letter. On September 17, 1739 he writes to Hutcheson:

> I cannot agree to your Sense of *Natural*. Tis founded on final Causes; which is a Consideration, that appears to me pretty uncertain & unphilosophical. For pray, what is the End of Man? Is he created for Happiness or for Virtue? For this Life or for the next? For himself or for his Maker? Your Definition of *Natural* depends upon solving these Questions, which are endless, & quite wide of my Purpose. (HL, v. 1, 33)

For Hume it is not the case that some sentiments are authoritative because they are more natural than others.[68]

[68] On Hume's non-teleological account of human nature see (Greco & O'Brien 2019).

In a later letter penned on January 10, 1743, Hume further elaborates on this point. He criticises Hutcheson's just published *Philosophiae Moralis Institutio Compendiaria* (1742) because it seems to "embrace Dr Butler's Opinion in his Sermons on human Nature; that our moral Sense has an Authority distinct from its Force and Durableness" (HL, v. 1, 47). In his *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel* (1726), Joseph Butler attributes to the faculty of conscience an authority distinct from its force. Similarly, Hutcheson argues that the moral sense is a 'governing principle' (ἡγημονικὸν) "naturally fitted to regulate all the rest" (Hutcheson [1742] 2007: 49-50). On Hume's view, both Butler and Hutcheson are mistaken to think that one faculty of the mind can be authoritative in virtue of its superior nature.

Unfortunately, Hume never provides us with a detailed account of force and authority in morality. From passages such as the one in the 1743 letter, however, it seems that he is suggesting that moral authority should not be considered as distinct from "Force and Durableness". If this is so, there is, for Hume, no faculty of the mind that is ontologically superior and has authority independent of its force.

Several passages from the *Treatise* corroborate this point. Hume, for instance, appears to identify these two concepts when he writes that "[p]ower or an authority over others makes us capable of satisfying all our desires" (T 2.1.10.11, 315). Or again, when he says that "parents govern by the advantage of their superior strength and wisdom, and at the same time are restrain'd in the exercise of their authority by that natural affection, which they bear their children" (T 3.2.2.4, 486). Force and authority seem to be conflated also when Hume states that "[p]opular fame may be agreeable even to a man, who despises the vulgar … because their multitude gives them additional weight and authority" (T 2.1.11.19, 324).

Even if Hume does not provide a fully-fledged account, his text suggests that authority is simply the sum of the durable influence, power, or force that someone possesses. The last quote is particularly interesting as it introduces the idea that authority may emerge from a large number of people in virtue of their multitude. For instance, an opinion may become authoritative merely because it is shared by a large group of people.

In at least two points in the *Treatise*, Hume explicitly mentions the authority that the general opinion of mankind has in matters of morality. In T 3.2.8, he appeals to the "universal consent of mankind" to argue that "the obligation of submission to government is not deriv'd from any promise of the subjects" (T 3.2.8.8, 546). He writes:

> For it must be observ'd, that the opinions of men, in this case, carry with them *a peculiar authority*, and are, in a great measure, infallible. The distinction of moral good and evil is founded on the pleasure or pain, which results from the view of any sentiment, or character; and as that pleasure or pain cannot be unknown to the person who feels it, it follows, that there is just so much vice or virtue in any character, as every one places in it, and that 'tis impossible in this particular we can ever be mistaken. (T 3.2.8.8, 546-7, my emphasis)

In T 3.2.9, when arguing against the doctrine of passive obedience, he writes:

> The general opinion of mankind has some *authority* in all cases; but in this of morals 'tis perfectly infallible. (T 3.2.9.4, 552, my emphasis)

What Hume affirms here is that the general opinion of mankind—any view that is shared by most if not all human beings—has an "infallible" authority when it comes to morality.

Hume further appeals to the importance of shared feelings in the second *Enquiry*. Here, he makes clear that the very notion of morality requires common sentiments shared by most human beings:

> The notion of morals, *implies some sentiment common to all mankind, which recommends the same object to general approbation*, and makes every man, or most men, agree in the same opinion

> or decision concerning it. It also implies some sentiment, so universal and comprehensive as to extend to all mankind, and render the actions and conduct, even of the persons the most remote, an object of applause or censure, according as they agree or disagree with that rule of right which is established. (EPM 9.5, 271-2, my emphasis)

Hume emphasises the importance of shared, common sentiments as being essential for morality to exist. We could not even understand the notion of morality were it not for the existence of common sentiments and general approbation.

The authority of the normative source—the third tenet of voluntarist metaethics—here finds its place in Hume's moral philosophy. Shared opinions and sentiments are required for morality to exist because they provide the authority which is needed for the moralising element to be effective in its moralising function. For Hume, like Pufendorf and Locke, this element that transforms natural, morally neutral movements of bodies into moral objects needs to be authoritative. This authority, however, does not come from God as in the case of Pufendorf and Locke. Hume replaces the sources of authoritative moral imposition with a secular substitute: the shared opinion and approbation of mankind. The result is the transfer of the normative authority from God's law to human sentiments.

2.4.2 Support for the Approval Interpretation

How does this view support the approval interpretation? As I detailed in chapter 1, this reading claims that for Hume what makes a virtue is the fact that a given character trait or mental quality produces the peculiar pleasure of moral approbation in a large number of people. In other words, what makes a character trait a virtue is *shared moral approval*.

Once we understand that Hume's metaethics is characterised by a commitment to the three voluntarist tenets, we are in a position to see that utility and agreeableness are

not an essential element of virtue. Of course, Hume believes that these qualities are approved by most people and, therefore, they do count as virtuous. But they have, in themselves, nothing moral. They are simply the qualities that most spectators happen to approve of. They are the object invested by the moralis*ing* power of shared moral sentiments.

Utility and agreeableness do not have—without the imposition of a moralising element—any moral normativity. We can think of them as playing the role of the material element of divine law as presented in Pufendorf and Locke. By admitting of normative authority without reference to God, Hume attempted to provide a convincing and fully naturalistic account of morality, one in which the authoritative source of the moralising element is not such because of its divine nature but rather because of the force that it acquires thanks to the support of a vast number of individuals. The resulting picture, in Hume's case, is an account of *virtue* that—like the voluntarist law of nature—must include reference to both a moralis*ing* and a moralis*ed* element.

This puts us in a position to understand the relationship between Hume's apparent two definitions of virtue as "*whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation*" (EPM App1.10, 289) and as "the possession of mental qualities, *useful* or *agreeable* to the *person himself* or to *others*" (EPM 9.1, 268). The utility and agreeableness of certain mental qualities are the moralis*ed* part of what is a virtue, they are what is approved of and, therefore, are the qualities that people ought to cultivate in their character. The morally normative force of this ought, however, comes from a sentiment of approbation shared by a vast number of individuals, the moralis*ing* element that makes utility and agreeableness morally relevant.

This view leads us to favour the approval interpretation over competing options. Going in order, let us consider the five interpretations proposed in chapter 1. Hume's anti-rationalism, together with his subscription to the first tenet—the moral neutrality of nature—is incompatible with (1) the traditional interpretation. A view that stresses utility and agreeableness as the standard of virtue captures *some* aspects of Hume's thought but does not account for the fact that he does not believe that moral qualities are independent of human beings' sentiments. That a character trait is useful or agreeable is not sufficient to make it morally good. An additional element of moral approval, which the traditional interpretation fails to properly account for, is required.

The same criticism applies to (2) the virtue-as-perfection interpretation. That a person fulfils the needs of everyone around them is not something that, in itself, has any *moral* relevance. The need to account for the importance of shared moralis*ing* sentiments remains problematic in this reading. It is not that the perfect character is morally good because it is helpful to others in all circumstances. Rather, it is morally good because being helpful to others in all circumstance is something we approve of. This interpretation is, therefore, unsatisfying.

Compared to the previous readings, (3) the viewpoint interpretation is more accurate. In so far as it affirms that morality is constituted when moral sentiments are felt from the perspective of a certain point of view, it accounts for the importance of a moralising element and for the moral neutrality of nature. What this interpretation does not consider, however, is Hume's subscription to the third voluntarist tenet—the fact that the moralising element should come from an authoritative source. Why is the general point of view more authoritative that any other one? How does it acquire the authority required to its alleged role of moralising element? By failing to raise and answer these

questions, the viewpoint interpretation is an unsatisfactory reading of Hume's account of what makes a virtue.

The importance of both approval and utility/agreeableness is accounted for also in (4) the conciliatory reading, the idea that the two definitions of virtue presented by Hume are coextensive. Nonetheless, this interpretation does not give proper thought to the possibility that these two elements presented in Hume's discourse on virtue may issue different recommendations. As such, the conciliatory reading fails to ask the following question: which of the two definitions of virtue is the one that generates the normative aspect of virtue? This, in turn, makes it so that the question of what makes a virtue for Hume remains unanswered.

In order to fully acknowledge the correct function of both approval and utility/agreeableness, we need (5) the approval interpretation. On this view, the normative force of virtue is given by the moralis*ing* element determined by sentiments and opinions shared by a vast number of people. However, a consensus of moral sentiments is, by itself, not enough to constitute virtue. A moralis*ed* element is required: something needs to be praised or blamed in order for morality to exist. This is how consequences in terms of utility and agreeableness enter Hume's picture. They are the features that people approve of in various character traits—features that are, before the sentiment of moral approval, merely neutral with respect to morality. Before moral approval and disapproval, utility and agreeableness are just natural goods.

Hume's double account of virtue can be fully explained when read in these terms. The two apparent definitions of virtue represent two different aspects of aretaic concepts: the moralis*ing* element of shared moral approval and the moralis*ed* element of mental qualities that are useful or agreeable to oneself or to others. The normativity of virtue

derives from the moralis*ing* element and its authoritative source, which Hume transfers from the will of God to the sentiments of mankind.

Chapter 3: Creating Value Through the Mind

> "the goodness of the object does not precede the act of election, so as to elicit it, but election creates the goodness in the object: in truth, the thing pleases because it is elected, it is not elected because it pleases"
>
> King, *De Origine Mali*

3.1 A Forgotten Voluntarist

The history of moral voluntarism is often ignored by scholars and students of early modern philosophy.[69] Figures who in the early modern period would have been well-known and widely read are now almost completely forgotten. A case in point is Anglican divine William King (1650–1729) whose influence—vast in the first half of the eighteenth century—has now faded.[70] The proposer of an original voluntarist theory of the creation of value, King's name remains almost completely absent even in large-scale reconstructions of the history of Western ethics.[71] As we will see in this chapter, King's theory is a form of voluntarism that does not focus on *law*, but rather on *choice*. As such, I argue, it opens the space for the introduction of an emotional element at the foundation

[69] Material in this chapter has appeared in print in (Galvagni 2024).
[70] His ideas were influential, among others, on Locke (Harris 2005: 42–46; Storrie 2019), Francis Hutcheson (Boeker 2022), George Berkeley (West & Fasko 2020), and David Hume (Fisette 2020). On King's influence, see also (van der Lugt 2021: 73).
[71] For instance, no mention is made of King in Terence Irwin's *The Development of Ethics*, Vols. 1-3 (2007; 2008; 2009). Jerome Schneewind's *The Invention of Autonomy* mentions him only in three short footnotes (286; 313; 405). King has received *some* attention from historians due to his political influence, (e.g., Richardson 2000; Fauske 2004; 2011). Even so, his name remains mostly forgotten.

of morality. An exploration of his ethical thought can help us to unearth important affinities between voluntarism and sentimentalism.

King was Archbishop of Dublin from 1703 to 1729 and author of, among other texts, a volume entitled *De Origine Mali* (1702).[72] The book immediately attracted a great deal of attention in continental Europe. It was famously discussed by both Leibniz and Bayle and had a revival when Edmund Law translated the book into English. This translation was initially published in Cambridge in 1731 with extensive notes and remarks under the title of *An Essay on the Origin of Evil* (including a dissertation on virtue by John Gay). It underwent five editions over a few decades.[73]

King's book contains a provocative account of the creation of moral value. According to his theory, moral goodness and badness are not something that exist in the world independent of someone's mind. While evils of imperfection ("the absence of perfections or advantages that exist … in other beings" DOM 2.1, 36) and natural evils ("pains, uneasiness, inconveniences and frustration of appetites" DOM 2.1, 36) exist in nature, moral evil and moral good depend upon choice. Moral value is created through acts of *election* (free choice) performed by certain agents. Beings that are endowed with the faculty of election (including God and human beings) are capable of *conferring value* onto the (in itself value-free) world.

My goal for this chapter is twofold. On the one hand, I aim to unearth King's fascinating account of the construction of value and to advance a new interpretation of

[72] I will quote from the original Latin edition of 1702 abbreviated as DOM with numbers indicating chapter, section, subsection (where applicable), paragraph and page number. The English translations are mine unless otherwise indicated. I transcribe essential portions of the original Latin text in brackets. My choice of using the Latin version rather than the 1731 English translation is due to the fact that I hope this chapter can be taken as a scholarly contribution to King's philosophy, as much as to Hume studies. Working with King's original text, therefore, is important.
[73] For a more detailed history of the publication, see (Stephens 1996).

it.[74] King's voluntarism differs from Pufendorf's or Locke's in so far as it attributes an essential role to human desires and affections in the constitution of value. On the other hand, I also aim to show that Hume's sentimentalist account of value presents significant parallels with this voluntarist picture. As we will see, Hume drops two essential commitments embraced by King: (1) the fact that humans are endowed with free will of the kind described by King; and (2) the fact that God has a role to play in morality. Nonetheless, Hume's theory of value resembles King's in substantial respects.

Interestingly, Hume was aware of King's work, which he quotes in his manuscript memoranda.[75] While we currently have no direct evidence that Hume developed his moral views with an eye to King's account, the fact that their accounts of the construction of value are structurally similar is worth investigating and arguably reveals the philosophical proximity between voluntarism and sentimentalism. While Hume's ethics does not rely on either God or a faculty of election, he believes—like King—that moral value is not something that exists independent from certain acts of the mind. Rather, things acquire value because of the sentimental reactions of human beings. While analysing this important point of overlap between King's and Hume's thought, I argue that the former's voluntarism and the latter's sentimentalism are united in their idea that things and states of affair acquire value in relation to agents' desires and emotions. Once voluntarism is extended also to *human* action, it develops a sentimental spin.

The chapter is structured as follows. Section 3.2 presents an overview of King's theory of election and argues, in contrast to recent literature on King, that an emotional element of desire or appetite is essential to his understanding of the construction of value.

[74] For this reason, I quote mostly from King's original 1702 text rather than from later early modern translations.

[75] Manuscript NLS 23159, item 14, transcribed in (Mossner 1948). As remarked in (Mazza & Mori 2016), Mossner's transcription contains a series of mistakes. Upon my consultation of the original manuscript, the entries mentioning King, however, appear to have been transcribed correctly.

Section 3.3 introduces an analysis of the role of God in King's theory. It argues here that, while in his account God is required to explain widespread agreement about value, this element is not strictly speaking necessary for value to arise. Rather, value emerges from the fact that certain objects are (or come to be) desired. In section 3.4, I retrace Hume's account of value and show that it can be seen as a way of recasting King's ideas in a secular manner. The sentimentalist way of thinking about morality is a novel way of occupying the conceptual space that was formerly occupied by voluntarist ideas. Thus, this chapter sheds new light on one of the most studied moral theories of the early modern period and contributes to bringing back to life a forgotten but deserving figure in the history of ethics.

3.2 King on Election, Value, and Desire

To understand William King's innovative account of the foundation of morality we need to take a step back and have a look at his theory of 'election' (*electio* in Latin), a term that he uses as a synonym of free choice.

De Origine Mali is a book that, as the title suggests, deals primarily with the problem of evil and its sources.[76] King argues that the existence of human freedom, despite the bad choices that sometimes people make, is overall something that makes the world a better place. To uphold this position, he criticises two opposing sides of the contemporary debate on free will. On King's reconstruction, the two positions can be described as follows. On the one hand, necessitarians affirmed that we do not have freedom of the will or liberty from internal necessity but merely freedom of action or

[76] For a discussion of King's account of evil see (van der Lugt 2021: 67-102) (Antognazza 2014: 115-118).

liberty from external compulsion (DOM 5.1.2.2-3, 100-1).[77] In other words, one is free when one has no obstacles to the realisation of one's will. The will itself, however, is causally necessitated and not free.

On the other hand, libertarians—as King reconstructs their position—believed there is both freedom from external compulsion *and* from internal necessity. Our will is *not* necessitated from antecedent causes, it determines itself freely. This happens, in King's reconstruction, even though we must always choose what appears good: "we can choose nothing except under the appearance of the good (*nihil eligere possumus, nisi sub ratione boni*) ... yet this does not determine the choice (*electio*)" (DOM 5.1.2.2, 100). In other words, even if for the libertarians one is always determined to choose in favour of what appears best, one remains free to refrain from pursuing that good through the exercise of free will. Human freedom, therefore, consists in the possibility of "suspending the action" (*actum suspendere*, DOM 5.1.2.3, 101).[78] Since the will "can either exert or suspend its acts, it is not only *free* from *compulsion* (libera *est a* coactione), but also *indifferent* in itself (indifferens *in se*) ... and determines itself without necessity (*sine necessitate se determinat*)" (DOM 5.1.2.3, 101).

King expresses dissatisfaction with both sides of this dispute. On the necessitarian view, he argues, there is simply no liberty of the will: one is free only when one's actions are not constrained by external obstacles. On the libertarian view, the liberty of the will is a faculty that *we would be better off without* as it would be best for us to always be determined to choose the greater good. While King sympathises with the libertarian side, he knows that on their view freedom of choice risks becoming harmful. Libertarians do

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[77] This label, together with the opposite one of 'libertarians' are not King's terms but are often used to describe these opposing positions in the debate (e.g., Harris 2005; Pearce 2019).
[78] In all likelihood, King had Locke in mind (see Storrie 2019).

not explain why it is better for us to have free will rather than simply be determined to act according to the greater good. King's theory of election aims to fill in this gap.

King's discontent with the libertarian position is summed up in a recent paper by Kenneth Pearce as follows:

> Genuine free will must involve freedom from internal necessity, that is, it requires the psychological possibility of willing otherwise in the same circumstances. But the psychological possibility of willing less than the best is a possibility we would be better off without. (Pearce 2019: 3)

According to King, the error made by both necessitarians and libertarians is that they rely on a false assumption: they assume that the amount of value in the world is independent of free choice.

King's solution is a mark of his voluntarism and consists in arguing that, by an act of election, human beings can create new value. The freely chosen option acquires some moral value and becomes better than it was before the election.[79] In other words, free will is a faculty that is overall better for human beings to have—even though it is sometimes abused—because it *generates* value. King's position, therefore, is close to libertarian views, but avoids the problematic conclusion that we would be better off *without free will*. According to his novel view, we can freely choose one option or one course of action over others and, by doing so, we can *make* it better than other competing options, all other things being equal.

King's position on free will is not only original in the context of his contemporary debate, but also interesting as an early account of a moral theory on which value is not something that the human mind simply *recognises*, but rather *creates*. Not unlike some

[79] As it will become clear in the following pages, the position is not that *nothing* has value before human election. Only that human election creates some extra value.

forms of present-day moral constructivism, King believes that human beings are creatures who are able to *generate value* through their mind.

Let us have a glimpse into King's texts to see how he makes this point:

> the goodness of the object does not precede the act of election, so as to elicit it, but election creates the goodness in the object (*election bonitatem in objecto efficit*): in truth, the thing pleases because it is elected, it is not elected because it pleases (*placet res quia eligitur, non vero eligitur quia placet*, DOM 5.1.3.17, 113).

Or again:

> things please this agent [an agent with the faculty of election], not because they are good in themselves (*in se bonae*) but are made good (*fieri bonas*) because they are elected (*eliguntur*) (DOM 5.1.4.1, 117).

In these passages, King is affirming that some beings who possess the ability to freely choose among options can make one of the options good by choosing it. Presented with two initially neutral objects, the understanding does not judge one of them to be better nor does it prefer one of them. The options appear valueless in themselves. According to King, what is special about election as a faculty is that after a free choice has been made, the elected option becomes valuable.

In this picture, acts of election alter the value of the options among which the agent can choose. Not only can we choose freely between options, but in doing so, we confer some value on the elected option. Therefore, one of the initially neutral options becomes valuable.[80] We freely elect one rather than the other, and those options which were neutral to us before the choice become valuable in different ways.

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[80] Based on King's definition of moral evil as "vicious elections that are hurtful to ourselves or others" (DOM 2.2, 36), we can infer that when an elected option is naturally evil, the election is overall vicious. Nonetheless, the point that King is making about the creation of value remains: in virtue of having been

Pearce usefully clarifies this point by applying King's theory to the case of Buridan's Ass, a donkey that is placed at the same distance from two different piles of hay and, having no reason to prefer one over the other, starves to death. If the donkey had the faculty of election, it could "bring it about that the two piles are no longer equally attractive. This can be done without any change in the intrinsic features of the piles or the donkey's beliefs about those intrinsic features: All that is needed is a change in the donkey's values, a preference for e.g., the left over the right. This preference or valuation is arbitrary, but the resulting action is not, for the preference itself confers additional value on the left pile which removes the indifference" (Pearce 2019, 4). This example helps us to see that King takes value to be something that is not out there in the world but rather *is created through the mind*. A question, however, emerges: how can an act of the mind create value?

3.2.1 Election, Determination, Desire

King does not provide us with a systematic picture of how the creation of value through election is possible. However, some crucial passages in his text provide an explanation of this process. From my analysis, it will emerge that in King's account emotional elements such as desires and appetites play a substantial role in the production of value. This, in turn, allows us to see that, for a voluntarist account like his to provide a psychologically credible theory of the creation of value, an emotional element is required. An important point of contact between King's voluntarism and later sentimentalism begins to emerge.

In 5.1.3, the subsection in which King introduces his theory of election, he makes clear that his position is that "the agent endowed with it [the faculty of election] cannot

elected, the naturally evil option becomes pleasing to the agent that elected it. Its morally negative value is partially complemented by some morally good value that is generated by the fact that the election is pleasant to the choosing agent.

be determined in its operations by any goodness preexistent in the object (*bonitate* praeexistente)", rather, "the agreeableness arises from the determination (*conventientia ... ex determinatione oriri*)" (DOM 5.1.3.5, 107). Right after this account is presented, King introduces an element of desire in the following excerpts which I will call the *Desire Passage*:

> Let us suppose this power [of election] to be already determined (it does not matter how) to embrace a certain object, or to exert the proper operations relating to it; it is certain that *desire* follows this determination (*desiderium* sequi *determinationem*), and desire is followed by an endeavour to acquire and enjoy the object (*desiderium vero conatum acquirendi & fruendi objecti*) following the application of the power. But if anything should hinder or impede this endeavour (*hunc conatum*) thereby preventing the power from exerting those operations which it undertook to discharge in relation to the object, then indeed uneasiness (*molestia*) would arise from the hindrance of the power (*ex potentiâ impeditâ oriretur*). (DOM 5.1.3.6, 108)

This excerpt is critical because here King introduces a conative element of desire and identifies it as the result of the determination of an act of election. King explains that the act of election creates a "determination of the power itself" (*determinationem ipsius potentiae*, 5.1.3.6, 108) and determination is followed by a desire "to obtain the object" that has been elected. This helps us to understand the relation between election and desire. From this passage, the following picture emerges. The *election* is the act of the will that chooses freely between two or more options. Once the option has been elected, there is a *determination*: the will determines itself to obtain the object (or state of affair) that has been elected and, in so doing, confers some value to it. A subsequent *desire* to obtain the elected object emerges in the agent.

According to King, when we make a free choice, we are, at the same time, acquiring a desire to pursue that option. The fact that in 5.1.3.6, King introduced an element of determination, should not lead us astray. A few paragraphs later, he specifies

that the very determination is the election, saying that "we shall call this determination an *election*" (*Determinationem hanc* electionem *dicemus*, 5.1.3.16, 113).[81] A more accurate reconstruction of King's account takes the conative element of desire as arising directly from acts of election.

At this point it may still be unclear whether the desire for the elected choice that arises in us *constitutes* the goodness of the option or whether the desire is generated simply because we now *perceive or recognise* the goodness of the elected option. Another significant passage from *De Origine Mali* can help us see the connection between election, this emotional element, and the process of producing value:

> the mind judges things to be good because we have willed them, because we have formed an appetite in ourselves by some antecedent election (*quia antecedente aliquâ electione appetitus nobis creavimus*), and those things that we embrace by this factitious appetite (*per factitium hunc appetitum*), as we may call it, give us no less pleasure (*non minus placent*) than that which we desire by the necessity of nature. (DOM 5.1.5.23, 139)

Because of election, we form an appetite which is not natural but *factitious*. Given that this factitious appetite plays the same role that in the earlier passage King attributed to desire and, given that they are both conative elements, I propose to read them as equivalent in King's account. A free election determines itself and, consequently, generates a "factitious" conative element of desire or appetite.

If we take this passage seriously, this conative element that makes us desire the elected object is, according to King, what *constitutes* the object's value. In the passage above, he says very clearly that "the mind judges things to be good because we have

[81] For King it is "not a proper question to ask what determines it [a self-active agent] to an election (*ad electionem determinet*). For if something like this was supposed, it would not be indifferent, i.e., it is contrary to the nature (*repugnat naturæ*) of this agent that there is anything at all to determine it." (DOM 5.1.3.17, 113)

willed them, because we have formed an appetite in ourselves by some antecedent election" (DOM 5.1.5.23, 139). This statement—together with the claim that "the goodness of the object does not precede the act of election, so as to elicit it, but election creates the goodness in the object" (DOM 5.1.3.17, 113)—shows that elections *constitute* moral qualities. It is not the case that goodness and badness exist independent of our desires and are simply discovered by our understanding. Rather, value is generated by mental acts of desire, which, King believes, arise from election. Acts of election generate factitious appetites or desires, which in turn make it so that the mind judges the elected things as good. King, therefore, is committed to the idea that things in the world are good or bad because of agents' attitudes towards them. Desire is what colours initially neutral objects with moral tints.

At this point, it may look like King thinks that every human being, in virtue of being endowed with election, fully determines what is good and what is bad for themselves. However, while we do often choose among various neutral options, we also inform our choices based on things that seem to be good or bad in themselves, regardless of our choice. How does King explain the fact that certain objects seem to have value regardless of our choices? How is that value produced, if not by human election? In the next section, I argue that King's voluntarist account of God explains how divine acts of election constitute values that are binding for human beings. It is because we have natural desires given by God that things in the world appear to have value *even before our individual acts of election*.

3.3 Divine Elections and Human Nature

Although King devotes an extensive part of his book to explaining the process through which the faculty of election generates values, he never claims that only *factitious* desires stemming from election are responsible for all the goodness and badness in the world. On the contrary, he emphasises that human beings are constituted in such a way that includes *natural* appetites too, and that they are a source of value. These, unlike the factitious ones, are "implanted by God" (DOM 2.1, 36) in human nature. In line with what he affirms in the case of factitious appetites, however, also in the case of natural ones the relation between conative elements and goodness remains: "some things are adapted to the appetites by the constitution of nature itself (*ex ipsius naturae constitutione*), and for that reason they are agreeable to them and good (*iis convenire & bona esse*)" (DOM 5.1.4.1, 117). Does this mean that some goodness is not produced through election and exists in itself?

It is crucial to keep in mind that, when discussing election and the factitious desires that it generates, King is not talking about *human* election only, but also of *divine* election. He affirms that free choice is a faculty possessed by both humans and God. Divine election is completely unrestricted. In one of the strongest affirmations of his voluntarism, King writes:

> The divine election therefore is not determined *by the goodness* of things, but the goodness and fitness (*bonitas & convenientia*) of things arise *from the election*, and the best for them is what is most concordant with the choice of the deity. (DOM, 5.1.4.17, 126)

The value that exists in objects *prior to* human election exists in virtue of God's election.[82] This is so because God's faculty of election is expressed "in the very first act of his will of creating things (*in primo voluntatis actu decondendis rebus continere*) and depending on whether they are in conformity or opposite to that election they are pleasing or displeasing" (DOM 5.1.4.17, 126). The "laws of nature then are immutable (*leges naturae immutabiles*), namely in conformity to the divine will (*voluntati divinae conformes*) and contained in the very first act of election wherein he determined to create man (*in primo electionis actu, quo hominem condere statuit, contentæ*)" (DOM 5.1.4.16, 125).

In other words, God, through his free will, decided to create the world (including human nature) in a certain way. While initially (i.e., before God's choice) there was no reason to create the world one way rather than another and no value to which God needed to submit his will, *after* the act of election the world becomes valuable.

The natural desires implanted in human nature through God's act of creation stem from God's will and make it so that human beings value their natural objects. Although King ultimately explains all value on the basis of election, either human or divine, every instance of the human activity of *valuing* is a product of desire (either factitious or natural). Here we start seeing how, when it comes to providing a psychological explanation for the process of creating value, King appeals to an emotional element of desire. Without being upfront about this, after a detailed examination, it is clear that King's voluntarist theory has a sentimentalist flavour.

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[82] It is worth noting that there are a few passages early in King's book that seem to take the existence of goodness before God's elections. For instance, in chapter 2, King writes: "*Good* and *evil* are opposites and arise from the relation that things have to each other" ("Bonum & malum *opposita sunt, & oriuntur ex relatione, quam res inter se habent*" DOM, 2.1, 36). This seems to suggest that good and evil would exist even if God did not exist. All such passages, however, appear before King's introduction of his theory of election. Taken in the dialectical progress of the book, they do not deny that God is the ultimate source of value.

3.3.1 King's Moral Voluntarism

God's free will, like human election, generates value in the world. Unlike humans, however, his power has no limits. As King puts it, in the case of God "there is nothing but his own will to bound his Power" (*nihil sit, quod potentiam ejus terminet, praeter voluntatem propriam*, DOM, 3.3, 44). Even what may initially appear as good independent of God's will is, indeed, dependent on his choice. As a powerful statement of this strong form of voluntarism, King writes:

> When therefore we acknowledge that things are good, and assert that some actions are grateful to God, and others odious; this is not because we believe the divine elections to be determined by their goodness, but because we suppose them to be comprehended in the very first act of his will of creating things (*in primo voluntatis actu decondendis rebus continere*), and to be pleasing or displeasing (*placer aut displicere*) to him, so far as they are agreeable or opposite to that election (*illi electioni conformantur aut opponuntur*). (DOM, 5.1.4.17, 125-26)

God's elections, like human ones but on a larger, omnipotent scale, make certain things and actions become good or bad. These moral features rather than being something determined by the goodness of things or their fitness, depend merely on whether they are pleasing or displeasing as per God's elections.

How can such a strong form of voluntarism avoid being seen as arbitrary? After all, if God's will changes and starts electing murder and incest, will they become morally good? King attempts to defend his theory from such a criticism by stressing that God must *necessarily* will what he wills. This necessity, however, remains contingent upon the will determining itself in a certain way. As King puts this point:

> [it does not] destroy the liberty of God (*libertatem divinam tollit*), that he must necessarily will [certain things to be good] while he does will them (*quod haec eum velle necesse est, dum vult*): for everything, while it is, necessarily is; but this necessity is consequent upon, and not antecedent

to the divine will (*consequens non antecedens determinationem voluntatis divinae*). (DOM, 5.1.4.17, 126)

King is making a distinction here between a necessity *consequent* to the divine will and a necessity *antecedent* to the divine will. The former, he believes, is compatible with God's omnipotence. What he wills freely and unboundedly becomes necessary in virtue of being what an omnipotent being wants. On the other hand, nothing can be necessary and antecedent to God's will, as that would hinder his free choice.

This distinction is explained by Edmund Law in a footnote to the 1731 English edition. Law clarifies King's discussion appealing to the notion of "hypothetical necessity" or "consequential necessity" (Law in King 1731: 195). If we "suppose things to be at any time what they now are", it is true that "the very same consequences would flow from them which we now find" (Law in King 1731: 195). It is only upon the suppositions that things are in a certain way, however, that we can derive certain conclusions. The necessity at hand is only *hypothetical* as it depends upon the hypothesis that things have been determined to be in a certain way. This form of necessity is not a danger for God's freedom because it follows God's election and is not antecedent to his will. This means that God necessarily wills certain things only because he has elected them (rather than the other way around).

Both King's text and Law's explanation are unsatisfactory responses to the criticism of arbitrariness. If something is necessary only "while it is", is it *really* necessary? I suspect that many of us would answer this question in the negative. However, we can be charitable to King and try to understand his underlying claim as follows: even if morality can in principle be altered by alterations in God's will, the rules of morality are nonetheless binding for us as long as God maintains his will. Morality is founded on God's will rather than on eternal truths, but this does not plunge us into moral chaos or

moral relativism. What is morally good or praiseworthy for us now is *necessarily* so while God's will remains the same. Even if morality depends on God's will, we are no less obligated to do what is good and avoid what is bad. Without mitigating his voluntarism, King reassures us that his position does not make morality any less real or binding for human beings.

Let us take stock here. From my analysis of King's theory of election, it has emerged that he believes moral goodness and badness to be generated by acts of free choice through the acquisition of desires. A desire or appetite follows the determination of any act of election. Anytime we choose something, we feel a desire to obtain the object of our choice. By doing so, we make it more valuable than it was before. However, certain things have independent value because we also have *natural* appetites. An election is morally good and produces moral value when it choses what is naturally good, which, in turn, is a reflection of God's election manifested in the act of creation. When we exercise our faculty of election, then, we create *some* value in the world, but we also must consider other natural desires as an independent source of value. In other words, some things are naturally good or evil, independent of election, because of the way human nature is constituted. Even in this case, however, a desire or appetite, albeit natural, is required to make certain things valuable.

From this perspective what seems vital for the creation of goodness in King's view is the emotional element of desire or appetite. Granted, according to him, this element is *generated by acts of election* and should be restricted given the fact that God has created human beings with a certain nature which has certain needs and limits. However, once King's theory is in place, neither free will nor God are *directly* necessary in the creation of value. If we were to be left with nothing more than human affective states of desires and appetites, the world would still appear painted in moral colours.

By proposing a form of moral voluntarism that emphasises the role of free choices, and the desires that they generate, over that of a law, King introduces a sentimentalist element in his ethical theory. Moral properties are created through acts of the mind that include, at least in the case of human beings, a substantial element of desire. The possibility of such an element is due to the voluntarist nature of his theory. If King believed, like a rationalist, that morality is mind-independent and engraved in the fabric of the universe, neither divine will nor human choice would have *any chance* to contribute to the creation of moral values and properties. In order for the role of sentiments to be recognised as constitutive of moral properties and values, one needs to be on the voluntarist side. As we will see in chapter 4, sentimentalists differentiate themselves from voluntarists and situate their theory as a third option in opposition to both voluntarism and rationalism. Nonetheless, sentimentalism remains much closer to the former in its metaethical structure and presuppositions. As I go on to show in the rest of this chapter, only a few years after the publication of King's book in English translation, Hume proposed an account of the construction of value that—ironing out the most apparent voluntarist elements—maintains the importance of affective acts of the mind for the creation of value.

3.4 HUME ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF VALUE

Despite the increasing attention devoted to Hume's moral philosophy, his connection to William King's metaethics remains underexplored. His interaction with the Irish philosopher is hard to evaluate.[83] Whether Hume read King's text directly, in Law's

[83] In an early paper, Mossner advances the hypothesis that for some entries in the memoranda "Hume was consulting the 1731 English translation of the *De origine mali*" (1948: 496). However, he does not provide

English translation or only in excerpts found in Bayle's texts, is a matter for further discussion. My task in this section is to show that there are significant similarities between King's voluntarist account of the production of value and Hume's view that moral qualities are produced by sentiments.

3.4.1 Ironing Out Free Will and God

The idea that King's and Hume's accounts of the production of value have some structural similarities may seem immediately endangered by two substantial differences between their philosophies. Hume, in contrast to King, argues both (1) against the postulation of a faculty of election; and (2) against the claim that God plays a role in the production of value. Because Hume's opposition to these theses is well-known and accepted by most interpreters of his philosophy, my reconstruction of (1) and (2) will be cursory.

With respect to (1), Hume affirms that the will is "nothing but *the internal impression we feel and are conscious of, when we knowingly give rise to any new motion of our body, or new perception of our mind*" (T 2.3.1.2, 399, Hume's emphasis). In his opinion, the will is nothing but an internal perception of the mind. It cannot be taken as a faculty capable of determining itself without being determined by anything else, as King's faculty of election appeared to be. Hume famously claims that "necessity makes an essential part of causation" (T 2.3.1.18, 407), and, consequently, if one removes necessity, one is left only "with chance" (T 2.3.1.18, 407) rather than choice. The idea of a faculty

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an attempt to further explore this link. In a later paper, Pittion has argued that it is more "reasonable to assume that Hume's knowledge of King is derived from Bayle" (1977: 374). His evidence for this claim, however, has recently been called into question by Fisette, who point out that Pittion's "argument seems to rest on the fact that the Law translation also contains references to thinkers other than Bayle whom Hume does not cite, which does not strike me as a decisive point" (Fisette 2020: 93-94). Fisette shows in detail the extent to which King's text may be seen to be the source of several memoranda entry relating to King and Bayle. This, to my knowledge, is the strongest attempt to show the likelihood of a direct historical connection between King's voluntarism and Hume's thought (Fisette 2020: 78-81). While I am sympathetic to this effort, I believe that the textual evidence remains limited.

of free will that self-determines itself without necessity would not lead to free decisions, only to random outputs. In King's terms, this would situate Hume on the necessitarian rather than the libertarian side of the debate. In other words, as James Harris explains, "[i]n Hume's hands, the question concerning liberty and necessity concerns the liberty and necessity of actions, rather than of volitions" (Harris 2005: 66). While our actions can be said to be free or constrained, acts of the will are always causally determined. There is no space for a faculty of election in Hume's mental geography.

In relation to (2), it is widely accepted that Hume's position is that God does not play any substantial role in human morality. While interpretations on Hume's own views about religion are manifold, they generally agree on this point. On the one hand, if Hume is an atheist (as some have argued) and believes that there is no divine entity, it would not be surprising to remark that God cannot constitute moral values. On the other hand, less radical interpretations of Hume's position on the *existence* of God stress that, even if he may have accepted the possibility of the existence of a deity as the creator of a harmonic universe, he would still not attribute any *moral* role to such deity.[84]

These two points make Hume's theory appear very different from King's. I do not intend to deny the significance of these differences. These, however, should not obscure the points of convergence that emerge when we analyse their conception of what value is and how it is produced.

3.4.2 Desire, Sentiments, Values

King stresses the importance of election as a faculty that produces moral value. Nonetheless, he details the process introducing a conative element of desire. As I argued

[84] In his book, Thomas Holden has made a strong case for what he calls Hume's moral atheism, namely the idea that "if there is an original cause or organizing principle behind the ordered universe, then this being or principle lacks moral attributes" (Holden 2010: 7).

above, King believes that things acquire moral goodness or badness for human beings depending on whether they are suitable objects of appetites, some of which are generated by individual acts of human elections (*factitious* appetites) while other stem from God's elections and apply to every human being in virtue of their nature (*natural* appetites). In my reconstruction, what is responsible for the creation of value is not the act of *election* itself as it may initially appear, but rather the fact that election generates an *appetite* which leads us to desire certain things.

Similarly, the fact that King takes God to have a prominent role in the production of value in the world through his acts of election is not required to uphold a view according to which value exists only as an effect of certain beings' preferences or desires. King uses God's elections to explain the genesis of our desires, which ultimately derive from his creative act. However, the absence of God from this picture would not call into question the fact that human beings value certain things because they desire them. In other words, while King takes the elements of election and God to be central to his theory, when explaining *how* value is generated, he recurs to human conative states. Divine elections are presupposed as the *origin* of some of those states. Nonetheless, the essential element for the creation of value is the mental state itself rather than its source in divine election. A different explanation (or no explanation at all) for why we have certain desires would not endanger a picture according to which desire generates value.

With this account in mind, we can return to Hume's metaethics. As we saw in chapter 1, on his account moral properties are produced by conative operations of the human mind. Hume believes that nature is, in itself, morally neutral. Even something as strongly abhorrent as "wilful murder" is not vicious as long as one "consider[s] the object" rather than the "sentiment of disapprobation" in one's breast (T 3.1.1.26, 468-9).

All that is morally valuable in the world is so because of certain emotional reactions that have a moralising power.

At this point, it is useful to delve a bit deeper into Hume's much studied account of value. In a recent overview—on which I will rely here—Don Garrett (2023) reconstructs two ways in which, on Hume's view, human beings produce value: we "*determine* value through both passions and sentiments" (Garrett 2023: 301). What is ultimately valuable for human beings is not something that can be determined by other considerations but by the agreement or disagreement with desires and sentiments. In other words, Hume believes that we call 'good' what is "desirable on its own account" (EPM App. 1.19, 293). Nonetheless, it is so "because of its immediate accord or agreement with human sentiment and affection" (EPM App. 1.19, 293) rather than because of some intrinsic value that the good object would have.

For Hume, in certain cases, we can distinguish the object from the value that we are projecting on it (in virtue of it being desired). For instance, when we strongly desire some arbitrary object, we are aware that the value of the object lies in its being desired. In other cases, however, the sentiments that make us value initially neutral objects are calm emotions in the mind, which we are unable to disentangle from the object that they make us desire or appreciate.[85]

In "The Sceptic", Hume writes that "[t]he value of every object can be determined only by the sentiment or passion of every individual" (E 172) and that it is

> certain and undoubted, that there is nothing, in itself, valuable or despicable, desirable or hateful, beautiful or deformed; but that these attributes arise from the particular constitution and fabric of human sentiment and affection. (E 162)

[85] This point is extensively developed in (Garrett 2023).

Hume's account of the production of value distinguishes between values generated by sentiments and by passions. On the basis of Hume's own taxonomy in T 2.1.1.3, sentiments are generally calm impressions of reflection, while "in general the passions are more violent" (T 2.1.1.3, 276). This distinction between two kinds of affective experience—a violent and a calm one—makes it so that we realise that certain attribution of goodness and badness depend on our emotional reactions (passions), but mostly ignore this when those reactions are calm (sentiments). In Hume's own words:

> Who is not sensible, that power, and glory, and vengeance, are not desirable of themselves, but derive all their value from the structure of human passions, which begets a desire towards such particular pursuits? But with regard to beauty, either natural or moral, the case is commonly supposed to be different. The agreeable quality is thought to lie in the object, not in the sentiment; and that merely because the sentiment is not so turbulent and violent as to distinguish itself, in an evident manner, from the perception of the object. (E 165)

Discussing this distinction between passions and sentiments as sources of value, Garrett notes that according to Hume, philosophy "can teach us that passion-based values and sentiment-based values are ultimately on a par with respect to their both being determined by feeling" (Garrett 2023: 297). This means that, while one can rightly insist that for Hume value can be generated by both violent passions and desires as well as calm sentiments, both these value-generating reactions are based on feeling. Value in the world exists as a matter of creation of the human mind through non-rational mental states.

3.4.3 From Voluntarism to Sentimentalism

What is moral depends on what we feel, but, on both the voluntarist and the sentimentalist views, there is nothing necessary nor metaphysically robust about how our feelings operate. For the voluntarist, God could have created human nature otherwise, and moral norms and practices may look substantially different with just a few tweaks on God's

part. Similarly, for the sentimentalist, the normative and binding force of morality derives from our sentiments rather than from anything external to human nature.

Hume's view is that moral properties and values emerge when certain human desires and sentiments moralise states of affair in the world. Moral voluntarists, including King, opened the conceptual space to introduce a metaethical view according to which values do not have independent ontological existence and are rather seen as emerging from certain beings' mental states. As we saw, for King those mental states were desires generated by free acts of elections and their value-generating power ultimately depended on an omnipotent God.

Writing only a few decades after King, Hume came to refuse both the existence of a faculty of election and the idea of God as moral lawgiver. Nonetheless, because of his opposition to moral rationalism, Hume embraced the idea that values and moral properties are produced by acts of the mind, rather than existing independently of human emotional life. This chapter has attempted to show how a voluntarist theory like King's introduced an element of desire in the explanation of how morality is generated. As such, it contributes to showing the conceptual connection of voluntarism with sentimentalist theories of the sort developed by Hume.

In the next chapter, I develop my analysis of the similarities between voluntarism and sentimentalism by discussing Francis Hutcheson's moral philosophy. If in this chapter I teased out a sentimentalist element of voluntarism, in the next I explore a voluntarist aspect of a prominent sentimentalist theory.

CHAPTER 4: SENTIMENTALISM AND THE FOUNDATION OF MORALITY

> "The standard of [reason], being founded on the nature of things, is eternal and inflexible, even by the will of the Supreme Being: The standard of [taste], arising from the internal frame and constitution of animals, is ultimately derived from that Supreme Will, which bestowed on each being its peculiar nature, and arranged the several classes and orders of existence."
>
> Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*

4.1 A NEW MORAL THEORY?

By the end of the 1720s, a new position on the foundation of morality had acquired prominence in Britain. Its champion was Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746), whose work introduced the idea of an internal faculty—the 'moral sense'—which is responsible for the creation of our ideas of moral goodness and badness.[86] The moral sense is, for Hutcheson "a Determination of our Minds to receive amiable or disagreeable Ideas of

[86] The idea of a moral sense was not invented by Hutcheson. Thomas Burnet (ca. 1635-1715) is sometimes credited with introducing the concept in his criticism of Locke's *Essay* (e.g., Tuveson 1948; Grave 1981). Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713) is also frequently mentioned as the first proposer of moral sentimentalism (e.g., Driver 2013). As various commentators have noticed, however, he is an "uncharacteristic figure" who stresses the importance of a moral sense but also "believes, like most 'rationalists', that moral distinctions are real, eternal and immutable and, consequently, that moral concepts signify objective moral properties rather than merely subjective states in moral perceivers" (Perinetti 2013: 251). For Shaftesbury, the moral sense "was not sufficient in itself: reason had an important role to play in 'applying' the affections correctly" (Carey 2006: 157). His "moral sense is intertwined with a certain form of rational activity, which … is rather different from its subsequent development by Hutcheson and Hume" (Kail 2013: 320). For a recent large-scale study of Shaftesbury, see (Gill 2022).

Actions, when they occur to our Observation, antecedent to any Opinions of Advantage or loss to redound to our selves from them" (*Inquiry*, 100). Thanks to this faculty, we feel pleasure and pain upon the observation of certain actions even if they have no other effect on us.

Hutcheson's main and explicitly target was Bernard Mandeville's (1670–1733) egoist theory of morality, on which our moral practices are nothing more than a complex way to increase individual self-interest.[87] Nonetheless, Hutcheson also proposed his account of ethics as an alternative not only to the egoistic theory of that author, but also to others such as rationalism and voluntarism. In relation to the latter, Hutcheson explicitly conceives of his philosophy as in contrast to that of "the greatest part of our latter Moralists" who "establish … that all moral Qualitys have necessarily some Relation to the Law of a Superior" (*Inquiry*, 86).

As we will see in this chapter, however, when pressed by his rationalist opponents to articulate what assures us that the moral sense is a proper guide, he invokes a non-rational faculty of God's mind. Our moral sense is trustworthy and does not give us arbitrary moral recommendations *because it is given to us by a benevolent God*. By doing so, I argue, a substantial voluntarist element emerges in Hutcheson's sentimentalist theory.

Hume's moral philosophy can be questioned by the rationalist along similar lines. Moral sentiments, like Hutcheson's moral sense, do not provide a foundation for morality that would satisfy the rationalist. These emotional elements depend on the constitution of

[87] The full title of Hutcheson's work reads: *An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue, in Two Treatises: In which the Principles of the late Earl of Shaftesbury are Explain'd and Defended, against the Author of the Fable of the Bees: and the Ideas of Moral Good and Evil are establish'd, according to the Ideas of the Antient Moralists. With an Attempt to Introduce a Mathematical Calculation in Subjects of Morality*. Much has been written on Hutcheson's challenges to Mandeville (e.g., McKee 1988; Sheridan 2007).

human nature, which could be different from what it is. Saying that morality is founded on them, therefore, amounts to admitting that what is good and what is bad is a contingent matter, something that has no justification outside human nature.[88] What is felt as good or bad, right or wrong, depends on the constitution of human nature, which could have been otherwise. The lack of a rational bedrock which pushes Hutcheson to invoke God at the foundation of morality, however, does not have the same effect on Hume. Nonetheless, his ethics is also exposed to the criticism of arbitrariness.[89]

This chapter illustrates the challenge that rationalists posed to Hutchesons's sentimentalism as well as his response and the voluntarist aspect emerging from it. In section 4.2, I retrace Hutcheson's account of morality and show that his sentiment-based ethics was variously attacked by some of his contemporaries for making morality depend on human nature, therefore, stripping it from any rational justification. This, in turn, would make morality unsupported by reason, and, therefore—the rationalist claims—arbitrary. In section 4.3, I explore Hutcheson's strategy to deal with this 'charge of arbitrariness'. I argue that he defends his theory by shifting the battlefield and leading his opponents onto grounds that they cannot object to: while maintaining that morality depends on contingent sentiments, he appeals to God's benevolence as a bedrock element that provides moral justification.[90] In section 4.4, I show how his attempt to get rid of rationalist objections against his metaethics are ineffective. Finally, in section 4.5, I compare Hutcheson's account to Hume's aiming to show that the latter's sentimentalist ethics, equally

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[88] A related but different problem of sentimentalism consists of the fact that human sentiments seem to be different across different societies and cultures. This 'horizonal' problem, however, is not the one that I am interested in exploring in this chapter. On this issue, see (Carey 2006).

[89] The similarities between Hutcheson's and Hume's moral theories are conspicuous and well-documented. Initially remarked by (Kemp Smith 1941), the points of connection between these two philosophers have been explored by a number of other scholars including (Darwall 1995; Harris 2015: 121-142; Martin 1991; Winkler 1996). It is now common practice in the presentation of Hume and Hutcheson to associate their ethical theories.

[90] A different point is whether Hutcheson thinks that a belief in God is necessary to act morally. For a full discussion of his point, see (Harris 2003; 2008).

vulnerable to the rationalist charge of arbitrariness, does not include an attempt to introduce an external justifying element. Hume, rather than rebutting the rationalist's objections, fully acknowledges that sentimentalism takes away any rational foundations of morality. What on the rationalist worldview was an objection to sentimentalist ethics becomes, for Hume, an accepted feature of human moral experience.

4.2 HUTCHESON AND THE CHARGE OF ARBITRARINESS

Hutcheson did not think of himself as an innovator in moral philosophy. He conceived of his first and most famous book, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725), as an "Essay upon the Foundations of Morality, according to the Principles of the Ancients" (*Letters*, 135). In the book, he intends to withstand what he saw as a "common System of *Morality*" (*Letters*, 135), promulgated by "Puffendorf" who had "been made the grand Instructor in Morals to all who have of late given themselves to that Study" (*Letters*, 197).[91]

Grounding morality on God's command is dangerous because has the detrimental effect of "almost banish[ing] out of our Books of Morals" the "old Notions of *natural Affections*, and kind *Instinct*, the *Sensus communis*, the *Decorum*, and *Honestum*" (*Letters*, 197). Hutcheson's philosophy can be seen as an attempt to bring these notions

[91] In an analysis of the November 14, 1724 letter to the *London Journal*, Alfred Aldridge affirms that "[a]lthough the only names he mentions are those of Hobbes and Puffendorf, there is little doubt that he is attacking doctrines reflected in the schemes of Clarke and Wollaston" (Aldridge 1946: 154). Against Aldridge, the editors of Hutcheson's letters, M. A. Stewart and James Moore, affirm that "[i]n his reference to 'our common Systems of Morality,' Hutcheson had principally in mind the works of Samuel Pufendorf" (*Letters*, 135). I agree with the latter interpretation, which is supported by Hutcheson's criticism of a direct quotation from Pufendorf's *The Whole Duty of Man* (*Letters*, 138).

back to life. How does he propose to carry out this strenuous task against the dominant ideas of his time?

4.2.1 Hutcheson's Sentimentalism

In his *Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725), Hutcheson begins his discussion of morals with the following definition:

> The Word Moral Goodness, in this Treatise, denotes our Idea of some Quality apprehended in Actions, which procures Approbation, and Love toward the Actor, from those who receive no Advantage by the Action. (*Inquiry*, 85)

The term 'moral goodness' refers to the idea of a feature of actions that generates the sentiment of what we could call 'disinterested approbation' (as distinguished from 'egoistic' or 'interested approbation' of those actions that benefit one's own interest). According to Hutcheson, human nature is constituted in such a way that our disinterested approbation arises when we contemplate instances of *benevolence*.

In order to explain how this approbation emerges, Hutcheson refers to the presence in human nature of a 'moral sense'. In his view, thanks to an internal sense, we feel a certain pleasure of approbation when we see benevolent actions being performed. In his words:

> by a superior Sense, which I call a Moral one, we perceive Pleasure in the Contemplation of such Actions in others, and are determin'd to love the Agent, (and much more do we perceive Pleasure in being conscious of having done such Actions our selves) without any View of further natural Advantage from them. (*Inquiry*, 88)

The moral sense allows us to experience pleasure and pain when witnessing certain actions or characters that would otherwise have no impact on us (hence, the pleasure is disinterested). The ideas of moral goodness and badness emerge from these

perceptions. Because we have a moral sense, we experience a pleasant feeling of approbation for certain actions even if they do not procure any advantage to us. On Hutcheson's picture, when we talk of moral goodness, we refer to the idea of a quality that generates this kind of disinterested approbation.

This sentiment-based conception of the "foundations of morality" (Hutcheson, *Letters*, 135) elicited reactions and criticisms from many of Hutcheson's contemporaries. One of the main clusters of objections moved against his sentimentalism accuses Hutcheson of making morality arbitrary. If sentiments are all that there is to goodness and badness, as the objection goes, what is good and what is bad are only unjustified perception which we feel due to the unaccountable constitution of the human mind. This is, in a nutshell, what I call the 'charge of arbitrariness', a criticism that was raised by several of Hutcheson's contemporaries, including Gilbert Burnet and John Balguy.[92]

4.2.2 Burnet's Criticism

One of the first thinkers to object to Hutcheson's ethics was Gilbert Burnet. The two had a public exchange of letters in the *London Journal* that lasted between November 1724 and December 1725, in which Burnet (under the pseudonym of "Philaretus") questions the legitimacy of Hutcheson's ("Philanthropus") ethical theory. Burnet laments that Hutcheson's "plain and simple Principle in Nature, which he calls a *Moral Sense*" (*Letters*, 153) lacks a guarantee that our moral sense is "not a *deceitful* and *wrong Sense*" (*Letters*, 153). By reflecting on how we often feel pleasure for what we know to be wrong or sinful, Burnet argues that the simple pleasure that the moral sense makes us feel cannot,

[92] Objections along similar lines are presented by later philosophers. For instance, Richard Price, in his *Review of the Principal Questions and Difficulties in Morals* writes that for Hutcheson "all immediate powers of perception" is, ultimately, "arbitrary, and implanted; and that there can be no simple ideas denoting truth, or any thing besides the qualities and passions of the mind […]" (Price 1758: 61). I focus on Burnet and, especially, Balguy because of Hutcheon's direct engagement with their arguments.

by itself, provide a satisfactory explanation of morality. If the moral sense has no foundation in reason, it may deceive us and is therefore unreliable. The mere pleasure of approbation is an inadequate foundation to sustain the weight of morality and its normative force.

On Burnet's view, only reason can provide the appropriate support: "*Reason*, is the *Rule* by which we judge, and the only *Rule* we can judge by, of *Truth* and *Falsehood*; and, in *moral Actions*, of *moral Good* or *Evil*, or what is *Right* or *Wrong*, *Fit* or *Unfit*" (*Letters*, 154-155).[93] A moral theory deprived of a rational bedrock for morality suffers from various objections. One, in particular, presses the charge of arbitrariness:

> if we had not [a] previous Apprehension of *Reasonableness*, antecedent to, and independent on, any *Affections*, or *Sense* […], we could not judge it to be more *wise* or *reasonable* to have bestowed such *Social Affections* on Men, than to have given them only *selfish Affections*, prompting them to take care of themselves alone, without any respect to the *Cruelty of the Means*, *or the bad Influence on a Community*. In short, without such a previous Apprehension of what is *Reasonable* in itself, all conceivable Constitutions of Creatures would have been equally *wise*; which is evidently absurd (*Letters*, 171).

As Burnet expresses in this letter on July 31, 1725, in order to explain why the moral sense we have is better than simply approving of selfish actions, we need to presuppose reason as a standard. If we get rid of a rational standard of morality and ground moral goodness on moral sense alone, we end up losing any external objective standpoint from which we can criticise sentiments and emotional reactions. If morality consists of nothing but sentiments, we have no reason to prefer a moral sense that leads us to approve of beneficial actions than a moral sense that recommends what is selfish and callous.

[93] For a survey of various rationalist criticisms of Hutcheson, see (Boeker 2022).

Hutcheson takes this objection seriously. In his response, he paraphrases Burnet's point saying: "if there is no *Moral Standard* antecedent to a *Sense*, then all *Constitutions of Senses* had been alike *Good and Reasonable* in the Deity" (*Letters*, 182). Similarly, in the *Illustrations*, he presents the following as a possible objection to his sentimentalism:[94]

> if all *moral Ideas* depend upon the *Constitution* of our *Sense,* then all *Constitutions* would have been alike reasonable and good to the Deity, which is absurd (*Illustrations*, 149).

Burnet's objection consists in revealing that, on the sentimentalist view, what we take to be morally abhorrent *could be* morally good. It is only because we happen to have a special feeling of pleasure when contemplating love and benevolence that those are morally better than infanticide, incest, or treason.

4.2.3 Balguy's Criticism

Another early critic of Hutcheson's sentimentalism, John Balguy (1686–1748), develops a similar objection in his *The Foundation of Moral Goodness*. Part I of this work, published in 1728, attempts a systematic refutation of Hutcheson's system which contains "Mistakes … of the outmost Consequences" that "lie at the Foundation of Morality, and, like Failures in Ground-work, affect the whole Building" (Balguy 1728: 3-4). For Balguy, "our several Senses, Instincts, Affections, and Interests" are not the foundation of virtue, but rather "attend as ministerial and subservient to its sacred purposes" (Balguy 1728: 8).

Among the various objections that fill Balguy's volume, the first falls squarely within the scope of the charge of arbitrariness. He writes:

> it seems an insuperable Difficulty in our Author's Scheme, that Virtue appears in it to be of an arbitrary and positive Nature, as entirely depending upon *Instincts*, that might

[94] The *Illustrations* is a book which grew out of the exchange published on the *London Journal*. For more details about the exchange, see (Peach 1970).

> originally have been otherwise, or even contrary to what they now are, and may be at any time alter'd or inverted, if the Creator pleases. (Balguy 1728: 8-9)

Here, Balguy's point is not dissimilar to Burnet's remark that, if morality depends on sentiments, "all conceivable Constitutions of Creatures would have been equally *wise*" (*Letters*, 171). The rationalist insinuates that, on Hutcheson's account, virtue and moral goodness become arbitrary: they stem from the contingent constitution of human nature that could have been created other than it is. More recently, the same worry has been voiced by Joel Kupperman, who asks: "If moral rightness is, as Hutcheson says, tied to approval by the moral sense, then what if the moral sense were different? Would not the moral sense then tell us that the actions we now consider abominable were instead praiseworthy? Would these actions then become praiseworthy?" (Kupperman 1985: 198).[95] Far from ignoring questions of this kind, Hutcheson developed an explicit response to the charge of arbitrariness. His solution consists in shifting the battlefield and leading his opponents onto grounds that they cannot object to.

4.3 Divine Benevolence as Moral Bedrock

Hutcheson was aware from the publication of the first edition of the *Inquiry* that his account could raise the question: "Could not the Deity have given us a different or contrary determination of Mind, viz. to approve Actions upon another Foundation than Benevolence?" (*Inquiry*, 197). The first of Hutcheson's objectors was Hutcheson himself.

[95] He concludes that "[t]he one possibility that Hutcheson does not seem ready to admit is that a human moral sense could be naturally constituted in such a way that it functioned badly" (Kupperman 1985: 199). Hutcheson is, indeed, overly optimistic. As I go on to show, however, he offers an interesting argument to back up his optimism.

4.3.1 God's Rationality in the *Inquiry*

A tentative answer to this question is already present in the *Inquiry*. Hutcheson affirms that nothing surpasses "the natural Power of the Deity" (*Inquiry*, 197): in principle he could make us approve of malice and treachery. Nonetheless, "the present Constitution of our moral Sense" is a product of God's "Goodness" (*Inquiry*, 197). Because God is good, we have all the reason to believe that our moral sense is justified and well-functioning. Hutcheson's appeal to God's benevolence is an essential part of his justification for the operations of the moral sense:

> For if the Deity be really benevolent, or delights in the Happiness of others, he could not rationally act otherwise, or give us a moral Sense upon another Foundation, without counteracting his own benevolent Intentions (*Inquiry*, 197).

Here, Hutcheson seems to silently appeal to a traditional distinction between absolute power (*potentia absoluta*) and ordained power (*potentia ordinata*). God is omnipotent and has an absolute power. Therefore, he could create the world and human nature different from how it is. Nonetheless, once he has determined his power in a certain way, he is bound by hypothetical necessity.[96] This does not damage his omnipotence because what is hypothetically necessary is set by God himself, and, in particular, by his own benevolence. Like Law's defence of King mentioned in the previous chapter, Hutcheson is admitting that God is *not* absolutely necessitated to create human beings with a properly functioning moral sense, but there is a form of hypothetical necessity that still applies. Upon the hypothesis of God's benevolence, we can say that we necessarily have the moral sense we have.

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[96] In his Metaphysics, Hutcheson discusses the distinction between absolute and hypothetical necessity. The former is "a necessity of connection between the terms of a self-evident or proven abstract proposition" (*Met*, 88) and "remains the same in every time and place" (*Met*, 89). On the other hand, hypothetical necessity is that "which necessarily follows upon something else which has been previously posited" (*Met*, 89). On this, see also (Walschots 2022: 132).

The fact that God "could not *rationally* act otherwise" (*Inquiry*, 197, my emphasis), however, remains problematic in the *Inquiry*. If what is moral depends on what is and what is not *rational* for God to will, there seems to be a rational standard of morality to which God is bound. This would reveal a rationalist element at the bedrock of morality, one that Hutcheson is not willing to concede. In order to better understand the role of this rational element in Hutcheson's rebuttal of the charge of arbitrariness, we need to turn to his later *Letters* and *Illustrations on the Moral Sense* (1728).

4.3.2 Exciting Reasons and Ultimate Ends.

In a letter to the *London Journal* (October 9, 1725), Hutcheson introduces the concept of "*exciting Reason*" (*Letters*, 178), namely of a "*Truth which excites the agent to [action], by shewing that it is apt to gratify some Inclinations of his Mind*" (*Letters*, 178).[97] An exciting reason is a consideration that shows to an agent how to fulfil certain inclinations, and consequently moves that agent to act in a certain way.[98] In more colloquial terms, it has been suggested that "exciting reasons are facts about an action through which reason 'recommends' the action" (Tilley 2012: 60).

To move an agent, such recommendations must be preceded by some conative element. In Hutcheson's view, "*Desires, Affections, Instincts*, must be previous to all *Exciting Reasons*" (*Letters*, 179). Because exciting reasons excite one to action "*by shewing that it is apt to gratify some Inclinations of his Mind*" (*Letters*, 178), a previous

[97] For Hutcheson, another sort of reasons are "*justifying Reasons*", by which he refers to "*the Truth which shews a Quality in the Action of any Person, engaging the Approbation either of the Agent or the Spectator; or which shews it to be Morally Good*" (*Letters*, 178). Only exciting reasons are directly relevant for his argument as I reconstruct it below.

[98] John J. Tilley paraphrases Hutcheson's remarks about this kind of reason by saying that they "are facts about an action—call them x, y, and z—through which an agent's reason or reasoning leads her, if certain conditions are met, to perform the action" (Tilley 2012: 60).

inclination (in the form of a desire, affection, or instinct) is required for exciting reasons to exist.

Hutcheson also elaborates on this conative aspect of exciting reasons in the *Illustrations*. He writes:

> in every calm rational Action some *end* is desired or intended; no end can be intended or desired previously to some one of these Classes of Affections, *Self-Love, Self-Hatred,* or desire of private Misery, (if this be possible) *Benevolence* toward others, or *Malice:* All Affections are included under these; no *end* can be previous to them all; there can therefore be no *exciting Reason* previous to *Affection*. (*Illustrations*, 139)

Affections and inclinations are what sets the ends of one's action. Even when one acts in a way that appears calm and reasonable, actions presuppose some goals that are set by affections. Every exciting reason—every 'recommendation' to action—must be preceded by a desire or affection because acting requires goals, which in turn are set by these non-rational attitudes.[99]

This is why, for Hutcheson, only "*subordinate Ends* [namely "*Ends* or Objects desired with a view to something else"] may be called *reasonable*" (*Illustrations*, 139). In contrast to this, "there is no Truth or Reason exciting us to pursue" what he calls "*Ultimate Ends*" (*Letters*, 179). If we were creatures deprived of any affective experience, we would simply be unable to have final ends. While we can say that a certain *subordinate* (or instrumental) end is reasonable or unreasonable (depending how well it contributes to bringing about the final end), this must always be with reference to an *ultimate* goal that presupposes affective experiences and is neither reasonable nor unreasonable.

[99] Put in modern terms, this is Hutcheson's version of what we now call the Humean theory of motivation.

Let us illustrate this point with a simple example. Imagine you want to make a chocolate cake. To do so, you need to buy butter, eggs, flour, and chocolate. In this case, buying the ingredients is your *subordinate* end. Your *ultimate* end is to bake the cake. In Hutcheson's picture, you have exciting reasons to buy the ingredients only as long as you have a desire to bake the cake. If instead of butter, eggs, flour, and chocolate you buy pineapples, you are behaving unreasonably. Not because there is anything unreasonable about buying pineapples, but because that is unhelpful in the attempt to bake chocolate cake. A certain action can be called reasonable or unreasonable, depending on whether it is helpful or unhelpful in the attempt to pursue one's final ends. These ends, however, are in themselves neither reasonable nor unreasonable. They are set by affections, not by reason.

4.3.3 Divine Benevolence and Rationality.

With these clarifications and distinctions in place, we are now in a better position to understand Hutcheson's claim in the *Inquiry* that "the present Constitution of our moral Sense" is *not* arbitrary, because God "could not rationally act otherwise, or give us a moral Sense upon another Foundation, without counteracting his own benevolent Intentions" (*Inquiry*, 197). Once we consider Hutcheson's elaborations on the concept of exciting reason and his discussion of ultimate and subordinate ends, this statement can be clarified.

The present constitution of the moral sense is reasonable (hence, not arbitrary) even if *not founded in reason* (hence, not rationalist). Hutcheson's reasoning takes three steps. He shows, *first*, that God has desires, affections, or instincts; *second*, that these affections are benevolent; and *third*, that someone with benevolent affections has rational constraint on their actions determined by their benevolence. From these, Hutcheson hopes

to show that we can take God's benevolence as the bedrock for morality because it provides us with reasons why our moral sense is the way it is.

The *first* step of his argument consists in pointing out that, since reasons for action presuppose affection we can attribute affections to God. Considering the discussion of reasons and ends in the previous section, this part of Hutcheson's reasoning can be put clearly as follows:

P1. Exciting reasons for action presuppose subordinate or ultimate ends.

P2. Subordinates ends presuppose ultimate ends.

P3. Ultimate ends presuppose desires, affections, or instincts.

P4. Human beings and the world exist because of God's act of creation.

C1. Therefore, God must have exciting reasons to create us. (from P4)

C2. Therefore, God must have desires, affections, or instincts. (from P1-3 and C1)

The *second* step of the argument is based on the idea that there is an observable harmony between various human faculties. This, for Hutcheson, allows us to infer the benevolent nature of God's desires and affections. Because an observation of human nature shows us that we approve of benevolence, which is both beneficial and useful, we have evidence that the pleasure of approbation perceived through the moral sense concurs with the pleasure and advantages generated by benevolence:

P5. Human nature is harmonious, and the operations of the moral sense concur with those of other senses.

P6. God could have created human nature differently and in such a way that would lead us to approve of what is painful and detrimental.

P7. The nature of God's affections can be inferred by observing his creation.

C3. Therefore, God's affections must be benevolent. (from P5-7)

Hutcheson's conclusion is that we have reasons to infer that the author of human nature has something "*essential to his Nature*" that "correspond[s] to our *sweetest* and *most kind Affections*" (*Illustrations*, 151). Not only does God have affections (C2), he also can be inferred to have *benevolent* affections (C3). In other words, given the harmonious nature of the product of God's action we can infer that his affections must be benevolent.[100]

The *third* step of Hutcheson's argument develops the idea that given God's benevolence, he has reasons to give us the moral sense we have rather than a different one. In Hutcheson's words: "the manifest *Tendency of the present Constitution to the Happiness of his Creatures* was an exciting Reason for chusing it before the contrary" (*Illustrations*, 152). The argument can be reconstructed as follows:

P8. Benevolence is an affection that sets as an ultimate end the happiness of others.

P9. Given this ultimate end set by his benevolence, God must have exciting reasons to pursue the subordinate ends to achieve the ultimate end: human happiness.

P10. One who acts contrary to what their exciting reasons recommend is irrational.

C4. Therefore, God would have been irrational if he created human nature with an inverted moral spectrum or a different moral sense, as this would have made humans less happy. (from P8-10)

[100] A similar point is made by Michael Gill who argues that "[t]he naturalistically inexplicable harmony of our affections is, for Hutcheson, itself an argument (an abductive or best explanation argument) for the existence of a benevolent God" (Gill 2006: 186).

What remained partially unexplained in the *Inquiry* is now clear: "if the Deity be really benevolent, or delights in the Happiness of others, he could not rationally … give us a moral Sense upon another Foundation" (*Inquiry*, 197) *because he would act contrary to his own exciting reasons*. Therefore, Hutcheson maintains, the constitution of our moral sense is not arbitrary: there are reasons why it is the way it is. As he articulates most clearly in the *Illustrations*:

> if the Deity had nothing essential to his Nature, corresponding to our *sweetest* and *most kind Affections*, we can scarce suppose he could have any Reason exciting him to any thing he has done: but grant such a Disposition in the Deity, and then the manifest Tendency of the present Constitution to the Happiness of his Creatures was an exciting Reason for chusing it before the contrary. (*Illustrations*, 150-51)

With this argument, Hutcheson attempts a creative shift of the arbitrariness problem from ethics to theology and puts it on a ground that his opponents have no way to refuse. God's benevolence, something that his adversaries must concede, is what makes it so that God had reasons to give us the moral sense we have. The charge of arbitrariness is eluded as long as the person pressing the charge is convinced of the existence of a benevolent creator. This is so because, given Hutcheson's set up, divine benevolence offers the opportunity to introduce an element of rationality in his sentimentalist system and presents a partial justification for the current constitution of our moral sense.

Hutcheson seems to have rebutted the charge of arbitrariness while also maintaining the tenets of his sentimentalism. The charge of arbitrariness as elaborated by Burnet and Balguy—namely that God could have given us a different moral sense and, therefore, a morality founded on moral sense is arbitrary—is countered by the fact that, even if God *could* have done so, given his ends, he could not *rationally* have done so.

Morality is based on sentiments, yet, there are reasons for why it is the way it is. The structure of Hutcheson's argument is illustrated in fig. 1.

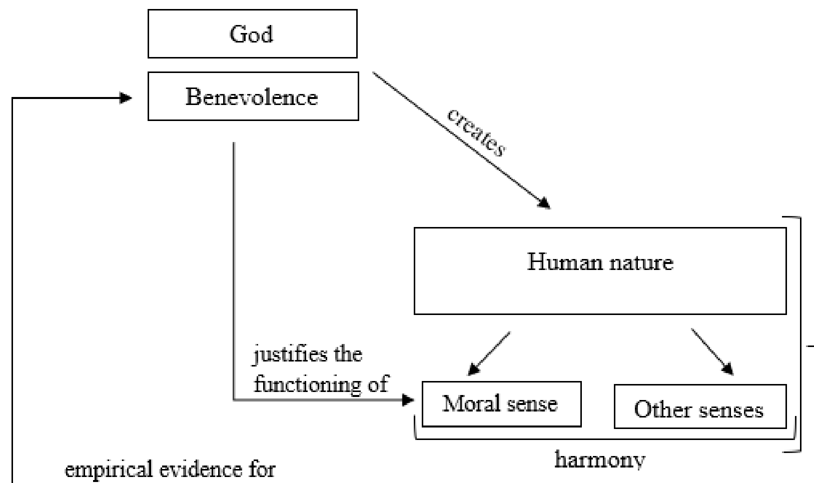

Figure 1 – Schematic representation of Hutcheson's argument

4.4 Two Problems with Hutcheson's Argument

Hutcheson's moral theory aimed to revive the "old Notions of *natural Affections*, and kind *Instinct*, the *Sensus communis*, the *Decorum*, and *Honestum*" (*Letters*, 197) at the foundation of morality. When pressed by his critics, however, he appeals to God's benevolence to provide a justification for the central notion of moral sense. While Hutcheson would not have considered the appeal to God as a weakness of his theory, but rather as a positive link between theology and philosophy, his strategy raises at least two problems. First, his argument detailed above responds only superficially to the charge of arbitrariness. Indeed, it reveals an underlying affinity of sentimentalism with voluntarism which is questionable for both Hutcheson himself and his rationalist opponents. Second,

it relies on the assumption that we can infer God's qualities by observing his creation. I take these two problems in turn.

4.4.1 Remnants of Voluntarism

Hutcheson's argument in response to the charge of arbitrariness reveals an important affinity between his sentimentalism and voluntarist positions. Like the voluntarist, he rejects moral rationalism and appeals to a non-rational faculty of God's mind in his attempt to explain the foundation of morality. In order to introduce a justificatory element for the moral sense, Hutcheson appeals to a God himself endowed with affections deprived of rational justification. Paradoxically, in order for *our* moral sentiments to be justified, we need to appeal to God's benevolent affections, which are equally unjustified and admit no rational support. While God can offer a guarantee that our moral sentiments are justified, that guarantee itself lacks any rational justification.

Although Hutcheson believes that God is bound by rational criteria in the creation of human beings' moral sense, the rationality at play here is merely instrumental. It regards only subordinate ends. Given God's ultimate ends (set by his benevolence), it is rational for him to create human beings with the moral sense they have. There is, however, no reason that can be given for *why* God's affections towards human beings are benevolent. This is simply a brute fact, something that has to be accepted without rational justification.[101]

John Balguy, in his criticism of Hutcheson partially discussed above, stresses precisely this point when he asks: "if our Affections constitute the *Honestum* of Morality, and do not presuppose it, it is natural to ask, what is what it was that determined the Deity

[101] Another way of putting this point is to say that "once our explanations get us all the way to God we automatically get justification as well. We might say, then, that within Hutcheson's theological world-view, where explanation ends justification begins" (Gill 1996a: 28).

to plant in us these Affections rather than any others?" (Balguy 1728: 9). Balguy is implying here that we need to give *reasons* as to why God decided to give us the moral sense that we have rather than a different one. Hutcheson's appeal to divine benevolence is just a way to evading the question. We can still ask: why are God's benevolent affections morally good?

Balguy's objection to Hutcheson's argument develops this line of attack: we cannot attribute benevolence to God unless we already take benevolence to be morally good. We have, however, no way to do so unless we are willing to acknowledge the existence of an objective standard of morality that makes benevolence something positive regardless of God's attitude towards it. With respect to God's benevolence, Balguy asks:

> is such a *Disposition* a Perfection in the Deity, or is not? Is it better than a contrary, or than any other Disposition would have been? more worthy of his Nature, and more agreeable to his other Perfections? If it be not, let us not presume to ascribe it to him. … On the other hand, if this Disposition be absolutely good, and really better than any other, then the question will be why, and upon what account it is so? … If no Reason can be given why then the Deity should be *benevolently disposed*, and yet we suppose him to be so? Will it not follow that he is influenced and acted by a blind unaccountable Impulse? (Balguy 1728: 9-10)

For Balguy, Hutcheson must make a choice: either (i) God's benevolence is a perfection; or (ii) God's benevolence is not a perfection. If (ii) we should not attribute it to God. If (i), then we should ask: why is benevolence a perfection? On Balguy's view, benevolence is a perfection worth ascribing to God because it conforms to a standard of goodness based on reason. Hutcheson's anti-rationalism puts him in a position to refuse this option. But what else is left? If Hutcheson wants to ascribe benevolence to God without doing so because benevolence is independently good, we must attribute to him without giving any reasons why he has this quality. Benevolence, therefore, becomes "a blind unaccountable impulse" (Balguy 1728: 10).

This attack on Hutcheson's foundation of morality expresses a concern like the one that Leibniz voiced against King in an appendix to the *Theodicy*. There, Leibniz attacks King's voluntarist picture of morality because his theory of election disregarded the principle of sufficient reason. Like Leibniz against King, Balguy objects to Hutcheson by arguing that his account of moral foundation resorting to God's benevolence violates the principle of sufficient reason. It ends up demanding that we attribute benevolence to God *without giving us any reasons as to why we should do so*. Benevolence is not attributed to God because it is good, rather, benevolence is good because is an attribute of God.

It is not a coincidence that both King's voluntarism and Hutcheson's sentimentalism are subject to this kind of critique. By arguing that reason is not the fundamental ground for morality, both voluntarists and sentimentalists end up leaving the most fundamental part of their theories without a rational explanation. When Hutcheson resolves the foundation of morality in God's benevolence, he is invoking a justification that does not allow further *philosophical* scrutiny. Feelings, sentiments, and emotions ultimately are brute facts which deflect rational scrutiny and do not allow rational justification.

In a footnote added to the third edition of the *Illustrations*, Hutcheson addresses Balguy's attack directly by writing:

> [God] has real Good-will to his Creatures, their Perfection or Happiness is to him an ultimate End, intended without further View or Reason; and yet […] [h]e is not *acted by a blind Impulse*: the ultimate End is known to him, and the best Means chosen; which never happen in what we call blind Impulses; unless one calls *willing any ultimate End* a blind Impulse. (*Illustrations*, 152, Hutcheson's emphases).

Against Balguy, Hutcheson stresses here that God is active: what the rationalist called a 'blind impulse', is for Hutcheson the active "willing" of an ultimate end. As we saw, however, Hutcheson believes that ultimate ends are set by affections and "there is no Truth or Reason exciting us to pursue" them (*Letters*, 179). Ultimately morality is resolved in God's affections.

In the *Inquiry*, Hutcheson criticised voluntarist theories because they are based on "an insignificant Tautology" namely that "God wills what he wills" (*Inquiry*, 182). The problem he identified is that they "call the Laws of the supreme Deity good, or holy, or just" (*Inquiry*, 182) but they also say that "all Goodness, Holiness, and Justice [is] constituted by Laws, or the Will of a Superior" (*Inquiry*, 182). When pressed by Balguy, however, Hutcheson confesses that the ultimate foundation of morality consists in the willing of an ultimate end for which no reason can be given. Even if Hutcheson does not adopt a law-based conception of ethics, he ultimately resolves the foundation of morality into a non-rational faculty of God's mind. Our moral sense depends on God's action, and even if his actions and choices can be said to be reasonable because they contribute to achieving his ends, these ends exist only in virtue of God's affections. Despite the initial appearances, Hutcheson effectively grounds morality in God. A system of ethics ultimately founded in rationally unexplainable divine desires is, at heart, akin to voluntarism.[102]

[102] Christine Korsgaard has noted, commenting on Hutcheson's theory, that his appeal to God's benevolence "is just a way for God to create morality by positive institution" (Korsgaard 1996: 44). In a recent paper, Michael Walschots has attempted to defend Hutcheson from her criticism. Walschots admits that "although it is true that the moral sense could have, in principle, been created in such a way that we approve malevolence rather than benevolence, God's goodness makes it such that this would never happen" (Walschots 2022: 136). This, however, would not make the moral sense arbitrary. To show this, Walschots appeals to the distinction between two kinds of necessity. On the one hand, it is not absolutely necessary that our moral sense be what it is: "it is indeed necessary that we have the moral sense with its specific standards, but this is not 'internally' or 'absolutely' necessary, which again Hutcheson defines as 'a necessity of connection between the terms of a self-evident or proven abstract proposition'" (Walschots 2022: 136). On the other hand, the notion of hypothetical necessity allows us to say that, given God's

4.4.2 Benevolence as a Mere Presupposition

God's benevolence is an essential requisite to back up Hutcheson's position against the charge of arbitrariness. Nonetheless, we do not have an *a priori* demonstration that God is benevolent. Hutcheson admits this when he writes:

> If we enquire into the Reason of the great Agreement of Mankind in this Opinion, we shall perhaps find no demonstrative Arguments à priori, from the Idea of an Independent Being, to prove his Goodness. (*Inquiry*, 197-98)

All we have is "abundant Probability, deduc'd from the whole Frame of Nature, which seems, as far as we know, plainly contriv'd for the Good of the Whole" (*Inquiry*, 197-98). The fact that the moral sense makes us approve of what is good and useful to others is "one of the strongest Evidences of Goodness in the Author of Nature" (*Inquiry*, 198).

One can plausibly voice a worry of circularity here. Hutcheson infers God's benevolence from the functioning of the moral sense only to move on to justify the moral sense and its functioning through divine benevolence. This worry, however, can be mitigated by observing that Hutcheson is *not* inferring God's benevolence from the *moral or normative* functioning of the moral sense. Rather, by observing that our moral sense makes us approve of what is useful (rather than what is detrimental), we can infer that the creator of human nature was concerned with our happiness. God's benevolence is the hypothesis that best explains the evidence that we observe in human behaviour.

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benevolence, it is necessary that he gave us the moral sense we have: "that we judge benevolence to be morally good is, in the end, only externally or hypothetically necessary, which Hutcheson defines as that 'which necessarily follows upon something else which has been previously posited'" (Walschots 2022: 136). God's benevolence is the element "previously posited", and, consequently, against Korsgaard, Walschots affirms: "The moral sense thus does not arbitrarily have its standards via God's 'positive institution', rather we necessarily (on hypothesis of God's goodness) approve of benevolence" (Walschots 2022: 136). This, however, does not constitute a real solution to the problem: if what we approve of depends on God's benevolence with no rational justification, it remains dependant on his imposition.

Hutcheson believes God to be benevolent because the present constitution of human nature is perfectly suited for life. The "Actions approved by the *present Sense*, procure all *Pleasures* of the *other Senses*" (*Illustrations*, 153), while "the Actions which would have been approved by a *contrary moral Sense* would have been productive of all *Torments of the other Senses*" (*Illustrations*, 153). Simply put, this means that if we may have been created with a moral sense pushing us to approve of murdering, cheating, and stealing, such a moral sense would bring us *pleasure of approbation* for actions that bring *pain to the other senses*. Such a constitution of human nature, although possible, would reveal its creator to be malicious (or at least careless) with respect to his creatures. Unlike this scenario, the present constitution of the mind is one in which we morally approve of benevolent affections and of the utility that follows from them. The pleasure of moral approbation concurs with the pleasure of other senses. Hutcheson takes this to be evidence that human nature has a benevolent creator.

Rather than the circularity of the argument, what is least convincing from Hume's perspective about it is the fact that it relies on P7 above, namely the fact that the nature of God's affections can be inferred from an observation of the world. As we will see in the next section, Hume attacks precisely this point

4.5 EMBRACING CONTINGENCY: HUME'S SENTIMENTALISM

Hutcheson's name appears in Hume's *Treatise* among the "late philosophers in England, who have begun to put the science of man on a new footing" (T 0.7, xvi-vii). Even more explicitly, Hume recognises the important similarities between his philosophy and Hutcheson's in the *Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh* (1745). Here, he writes that in the *Treatise*, he has "denied the eternal Difference of Right and Wrong in

the Sense in which *Clark* and *Woolaston* [sic] maintained" (L 429) and in this "he concurs with all the antient Moralists, as well as with Mr. *Hutchison* [sic] Professor of Moral Philosophy in the University of *Glasgow*, who, with others, has revived the antient Philosophy in this Particular" (L 430).

Unlike Hutcheson, however, Hume does not invoke God's benevolence as a response to the charge of arbitrariness that the rationalists moved against sentiment-based conception of morality. As we saw, Hutcheson gives serious thought to the risk of grounding ethics on sentiments and attempts to produce a response to the challenge. One of the main differences between their ethics lies in the fact that Hume, unlike the Hutcheson, is more comfortable with the contingency of human morality. For both, goodness and badness are the product of human affective responses. Hume, however, does not try to support or justify these elements by an appeal to God.

4.5.1 Hume's Secularised Ethics

Hume does not rely on religion to support his moral theory. Scholars agree that on Hume's view we cannot infer the presence of moral emotions or passions in God from the observation of nature. Two milestones on Hume's philosophy of religion suffice to retrace this point. In his classic book *Hume's Philosophy of Religion* (1988), J. C. A. Gaskin argues that Hume is an "attenuated deist" and that—even if he may be willing to accept the possibility of inferring the probable existence of a designer given the order of the natural world—he thinks we have no reason to believe that such a designer has any *moral* qualities.

In the more recent and highly influential *Spectres of False Divinity: Hume's Moral Atheism* (2010), Thomas Holden proposes an even stronger interpretation of Hume as a "moral atheist", namely someone who provides positive arguments against the fact that

the divinity has any moral qualities. According to Holden's account, Hume emerges as someone who thinks not only that we are unable to infer moral attributes from the observation of the world, but also that we can actively infer the *lack* of moral attributes. Either way, the point that we cannot assume God to have moral affections is granted.

I take it to be uncontroversial that, while Hume's sentimentalism has strong resemblances to Hutcheson's, there is no space for God at the foundation of morality in Hume's theory. Indeed, against Hutcheson's supposition that we can think of God to be benevolent and to possess something similar to our affections, Hume affirms that "[t]o suppose measures of approbation and blame, different from the human, confounds every thing" (E 595). For Hume, the very idea of a moral standard based on something else but human sentiments is confused. A sentimentalist account that embraces this point implies a rejection of Hutcheson's attempt to ground human morality in divine benevolence.

Hume voices the problematic nature of inferences from the observation of the world to the existence of God's moral attributes in multiple occasions. In a letter to Hutcheson of March 16, 1740, he details the point as follows:

> since Morality, according to your Opinion, as well as mine, is determin'd merely by Sentiment, it regards only human Nature & human Life. ... If Morality were determind by Reason, that is the same to all rational Beings: But nothing but Experience can assure us, that the Sentiments are the same. What Experience have we with regard to superior Beings? How can we ascribe to them any Sentiments at all? They have implanted those Sentiments in us for the conduct of Life like our bodily Sensations, which they possess not themselves. (HL, vol. 1, 40)

As we do not have the other side of the correspondence, it is hard to tell exactly what Hume's concerns are. It seems plausible, however, that he is pushing back against Hutcheson's claim that God is endowed with sentiments like those we have. In other

words, given the fact that we have no experience of the nature of God, we cannot attribute passions to him. Not even benevolence. The inference we saw in Hutcheson from human moral sense and its functioning to the “abundant probability” (*Inquiry*, 198) in the benevolence of God appears unjustified to Hume.

A similar argument is presented in the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (1779), where Demea makes the following remark:

> All the *sentiments* of the human mind, gratitude, resentment, love, friendship, approbation, blame, pity, emulation, envy, have a plain reference to the state and situation of man, and are calculated for preserving the existence, and promoting the activity of such a being in such circumstances. (DNR, 3.13)

While Demea is not always straightforwardly Hume’s spokesperson, his reasoning here closely resembles Hume’s own voice. Why should God be conceived of as having any of these sentiments, given the fact that he does not find himself in any of the circumstances in which humans typically experience these emotions? As the character in the *Dialogues* continues, “[i]t seems … unreasonable to transfer such sentiments to a supreme existence, or to suppose him actuated by them; and the phenomena, besides, of the universe will not support us in such a theory” (DNR, 3.13). By Hume’s lights, the claim that God has something “essential to his Nature, corresponding to our *sweetest* and *most kind Affections*” (*Illustrations*, 151) is fantasy. And if we have no reason to believe that God shares our sentiments, we also have no reason to think he shares our moral norms and beliefs.

What is morally good for God (if anything like that exists at all) is likely very different from what is morally good for human beings. To further confirm this, we can look at Hume’s claim in the *Treatise*, that certain moral obligations are weaker for princes than for laypeople: “tho’ the morality of princes has the same *extent*, yet it has not the

same *force* as that of private persons, and may lawfully be transgress'd from a more trivial motive" (T 3.2.11.3, 568). In case like that of a sovereign, moral demands vary based on their position of superiority. With this claim in the background, it is not surprising that God, a being infinitely more powerful than any prince, would not be constrained by moral imperatives that apply to human beings. In the *Natural History of Religion*, Hume points this out explicitly:

> If common conception can indulge princes in a system of ethics, somewhat different from that which should regulate private persons; how much more those superior beings, whose attributes, views, and nature are so totally unknown to us? 'Sunt superis sua jura.' The gods have maxims of justice peculiar to themselves. (NHR 13.7, 79-80)

An explanation of the rationale underlying these claims is that, on Hume's account, morality has primarily a social function. As he puts it, "[n]othing can preserve untainted the genuine principles of morals in our judgment of human conduct, but the absolute necessity of these principles to the existence of society" (NHR, 13.7, 80). We have morality because we need it to preserve society. Given this fact, it seems plausible that someone who occupies a special role in society may be subject to different moral standards. Considering the gap that exists between humans and God, we cannot pretend that he is bound by what human beings call morality.

This argument undermines the possibility to ground sentimentalism on God's benevolence in the way Hutcheson did before Hume. If not with an appeal to the divine, however, how does Hume provide a bedrock for his own moral theory? After all, the rationalist attacks that Burnet and Balguy, among others, moved against Hutcheson's sentimentalism seem to apply to Hume's moral philosophy. An early review of Book 3 of the *Treatise* stresses exactly this point. In the *Bibliothèque raisonnée des ouvrages des*

savans de l'Europe, an anonymous author reprimands Hume for having ignored the debate between Hutcheson and Burnet about the foundation of morality.[103] The text reads:

> When Mr Hutcheson proposed [a moral sense theory] in his *Recherches sur l'origine des Idées que nous avons de la Vertu & du Bien moral*, able people … observed that in this system the perception of objects is confounded with the sentiments that result from it. On this, Mr. Burnet raised objections that up until now have remained unanswered … Dr. Berkeley … made it clear that nothing would be more arbitrary than the ideas of right and wrong if these depended on such an inner taste. I do not understand how it is that our author did not find it appropriate to examine the objections of these scholars. (quoted in Norton and Perinetti 2006: 11)

This text is the "first known printed discussion of Hume's moral theory" (Fieser 2005: 1; cf. Norton and Perinetti 2006: 3). As the passage above clearly shows, Hume's reader does not hesitate to identify the similarity with Hutcheson's theory and to criticise the author of the *Treatise* for failing to consider the objection of arbitrariness.[104]

Similar points about the arbitrariness of morals are emphasised by later critics. Henry Home, Lord Kames in his *Essays on the principles of morality and natural religion in two parts* (1751) criticise Hume's account of morality founded on approbation as relying on a "vague and arbitrary" criterion that "never certainly entered into the mind of any thinking person" (Kames in Fieser 2005: 23). Similarly, in his *Essays on the active powers of man* (1788), Thomas Reid writes:

> If what we call *moral judgment* be no real judgment, but merely a feeling, it follows, that the principles of morals which we have been taught to consider as an immutable law to all intelligent beings, have no other foundation but an arbitrary structure and fabric in the constitution of the human mind: So that, by a change in our structure, what is immoral might become moral, virtue

[103] The review appeared in the volume published in April–June, 1741, Vol. 26–2, pp. 411–27. In their analysis of the document, Norton and Perinetti convincingly attribute the text to Armand Boisbeleau de La Chapelle (2006: 12-16).

[104] Berkeley, in spite of being mentioned in the review, directed his attack mostly to Shaftesbury's ethics, see (Jaffro 2007; Rickless 2020).

> might be turned into vice, and vice into virtue. And beings of a different structure, according to the variety of their feelings, may have different, nay opposite, measures of moral good and evil. (Reid in Fieser 2005: 249)

Why does Hume not address the criticism of arbitrariness to moral sentimentalism which was clearly in the mind of many his opponents?

4.5.2 Embracing Moral Contingency

Unlike Hutcheson, Hume does not engage with rationalist objections against the contingent nature of our moral sentiments and the arbitrary nature of morality. The attempt to defend moral sentimentalism from the charge of arbitrariness is doomed to fail because the charge itself presupposes a conception of morality that reflects rationalist assumptions. The rationalist wants morality to be necessary and immutable, something for which *reasons* can be given. The criticism that sentimentalism is untenable because it makes morality contingent on sentiments whose operations dependant on non-rational faculties of human nature is something that reflects a preexisting rationalist presupposition.

The fact that Hutcheson takes seriously the charge of arbitrariness shows that, in spite of his sentimentalist picture, he remains partially bound to the rationalist desideratum *that morality should exist as a matter of necessity*. In spite of the fact that he proposes a theory of moral properties as emerging from sentiments, indeed, Hutcheson maintains in his theory an element that seems to take moral properties to be mind-independent and existing prior to moral sentiments. An indication of this can be found in Cicero's quote on the frontispiece of the *Inquiry*, which mentions *honestum*, something that even if is not recognised, remains morally good: even if not praised by anyone, is

laudable in its own nature.[105] As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, Hutcheson criticises those moral theories that banish "out of our Books of Morals" the "old Notions of *natural Affections*, and kind *Instinct*, the *Sensus communis*, the *Decorum*, and *Honestum*" (*Letters*, 197). The fact that he takes seriously the charge of arbitrariness shows that he remains at least partially convinced that the *honestum*—what is morally good *in itself*—is something that exists independent of our moral sense and that our moral sense can get things right or wrong.[106]

This concept of *honestum* or good in itself disappears completely from Hume's moral philosophy.[107] Morality exists as a product of certain human sentiments that are part of our nature. Alterations in our moral sentiments would yield different moral practices and values. When discussing the foundation of morals, invoking a metaphysical bedrock—something that provides an a priori or necessary justification for moral values and norms—is neither required nor fruitful. Whenever the rationalist attacks sentimentalism for allowing the possibility of an inverted moral spectrum or the possibility of different moral sentiments, the sentimentalist does not need to reply. Whether these things are *metaphysically* possible—and Hume surely thinks that they are—they do not undercut morality.

[105] The Latin quote reads "*etiamsi nobilitatum non sit, tamen honestum sit: quodque etiamsi à nullo laudetur, naturâ est laudabile*" (*Inquiry*, 3).

[106] In his posthumously published *A System of Moral Philosophy* (1755), Hutcheson seems to be even more explicit about the existence of a good in itself, something that our sentiments *recognise* rather than *constitute*: "Tho' the approbation of moral excellence is a grateful action or sensation of the mind, 'tis plain the good approved is not this tendency to give us a grateful sensation. … when we admire the virtue of another, the whole excellence, or that quality which by nature we are determined to approve, is conceived to be in that other; we are pleased in the contemplation because the object is excellent, and the object is not judged to be therefore excellent because it gives us pleasure" (Hutcheson [1755] 2014: 54).

[107] James Moore argues that for Hume the "*honestum* could be nothing other than a sentiment shared by all mankind" (Moore 2002: 384). While I think that moral value *comes from* shared sentiments, I do not think that Hume would take shared sentiment to be good *in itself*, as calling it 'honestum' may suggest. Rather, sentiments are the moralising force that makes morally good something that is, in itself, neutral.

Hume's nonchalance about the lack of necessity of moral truths takes an intriguing turn when, at the end of the moral *Enquiry*, he mentions God's will at the foundation of morality:

> 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. … After all circumstances and relations are laid before us, the latter makes us feel from the whole a new sentiment of blame or approbation. The standard of the one [reason], being founded on the nature of things, is eternal and inflexible, even by the will of the Supreme Being: The standard of the other [taste], arising from the internal frame and constitution of animals, is ultimately derived from that Supreme Will, which bestowed on each being its peculiar nature, and arranged the several classes and orders of existence. (EPM App1.21, 294)

This passage can be both illuminating and misleading. Hume here mentions that fact that the standard of taste, including both morality and beauty, arises from the "internal frame and constitution" of human nature, which is in turn derived from the "Supreme Will". This passage establishes a connection between Hume's sentimentalism and theories that, like Pufendorf's or King's, stress the importance of God's will for the existence of morality. Hume openly refers to a voluntarist tenet in his explanation of how taste is originated. This, however, should not be taken to be evidence that for Hume morality is given by God.

In the early 1750s, when the *Enquiry* was published in its first edition (1751), Hume was working on his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Here, the sceptic Philo, often taken to represent most of Hume's own arguments in the dialogues recognises that "the works of Nature bear a great analogy to the productions of art" (DNR 12.6, 92). Based on this weak analogy, we may even concede that we can infer the "existence of a Deity" that we can "call … a *mind* or *intelligence*, notwithstanding the vast difference, which may reasonably be supposed between him and human minds" (DNR 12.6, 92). We

can call God a "Mind or Thought" (DNR 12.6, 92), but the resemblance that this may have to a human mind is only partial and imperfect. We can, in other words, attribute a mind to God based on a very remote analogy, but this does not allow us to derive anything morally relevant from such a "mind". We are not provided with *any moral standard*.

When Hume affirms that "[t]he standard of the [taste], arising from the internal frame and constitution of animals, is ultimately derived from [the] Supreme Will" (EPM App1.21, 294), he is not endowing such a will with any moral authority. Even if we take Hume's mention of the "Supreme Will" as a serious statement rather than a prudential move, all we can say is that God is the *cause* of human nature and its constitution. What constitutes morality remains human moral sentiment. Read in this way, even the only passage in which Hume mentions divine will in relation to morality illustrates that God cannot be the cause of normative authority but, at best, the cause of human nature. While we *may* need reference to God to explain the existence of the universe, we do not need it to explain the existence of morality. Human nature is sufficient.

While this passage does not make Hume a voluntarist, it is instructive in so far as it allows us to see that Hume accepts and takes his view of morality to be compatible with voluntarist metaethics. Morality is a new creation that is not discovered by reason but rather produced by the mind. As such, what is morally good is not so in virtue of some immutable relations or theological support. Rather, morality is dependent on our contingent and always only empirically discovered sentiments. By developing his sentimentalist ethics, Hume opens the way to conceiving of morality in a fully secularised and empirical way, one that, as we will see in the next chapter, brings its own challenges.

CHAPTER 5: THE PUZZLE OF ENVY

> "Envy and jealousy have too much place in a narrow circle; and even familiar acquaintance with his person may diminish the applause due to his performances: But when these obstructions are removed, the beauties, which are naturally fitted to excite agreeable sentiments, immediately display their energy; and while the world endures, they maintain their authority over the minds of men."
>
> David Hume, *Of the Standard of Taste*

5.1 HOW TO DEAL WITH MORAL PROBLEMS?

Hume's sentimentalist conception of morality does not appeal to external rationalist relations or divinely imposed moral standards. For rationalists such as Clarke or Wollaston, what is morally good is determined by a mind-independent and eternal standard that exists as a matter of necessity. On their view, we can discover what is good and what is bad by identifying moral truths through reason. For voluntarists such as Pufendorf or King, what is morally good is determined by God's will.

Rationalism and voluntarism diverge on many substantial points. Nonetheless, they both argue for the existence of moral measures external to human nature. Whenever humans experience a conflict of sentiments, both the rationalist and the voluntarist can appeal to their respective standards to solve the dispute.[108] Hume's account does not allow

[108] An epistemological problem remains. How do we determine what the standard really says? Even on the rationalist and the voluntarist proposals, this question is not always easy to answer. Nonetheless, in principle, there is an independent measure of right and wrong that can be used to solve any given dispute.

for such a solution. If morality is a contingent human phenomenon supported by nothing but sentiments, how are we to deal with conflicting feelings and the moral dilemmas that they yield?

This chapter proposes an answer to this question by illustrating one puzzle generated by Hume's sentimentalism. While there are many other difficulties, the one discussed in these pages is a novel and underexplored problem for Hume's ethics. Analysing this puzzle allows me to illustrate possible challenges to moral sentimentalism while also advancing our understanding of Hume's account of the passions and, in particular, his views on envy.

The puzzle is characterised fully in section 5.2. In a nutshell, it can be put as follows: on Hume's view, we determine what is morally good and what is bad based on our sentiments of approbation and disapprobation. These sentiments, however, can be influenced by envy or jealousy felt towards a morally meritorious person. Given the essential role of moral approbation in *constituting* what is virtuous, it is an important worry for Hume's ethics that a virtuous individual can be morally disapproved of because of the pain that he generates in envious individuals. Does the pain of inferiority felt by envious individuals towards the virtuous make him any less virtuous?

Throughout Book 2 of the *Treatise*, Hume takes sympathy—the "propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments" (T 2.1.11.2, 316)—to be a principle which plays an essential role in our moral practices.[109] Our ability to sympathise is key to generating moral sentiments. At the same

[109] This is incontrovertibly the case in Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*, where sympathy plays an essential role which has been studied by various readers, e.g., (Vitz 2004; Greco 2013). The importance of sympathy in later work is open, some interpreters emphasise the changes on this topic between the *Treatise* and the *Second Enquiry*, e.g., (Taylor 2002; 2015); other stress the continuity between Hume's works, e.g., (Waldow 2020).

time, however, an account of morality based on the principle of sympathy seems problematic in so far as our emotional life is unstable and subject to "continual fluctuation" (T 3.3.1.15, 581). For this reason, Hume introduces the "common point of view" as a solution to find an intersubjectively shared perspective that allow us to correct the distortion that time and space have on our moral sentiments.[110] This point of view is reached through reflection and imagination when we consider the feelings of the people influenced by the agent that we are trying to evaluate morally. If people around the person that I am trying to evaluate feel pleasure when contemplating her character, this view will raise sentiments of approbation. Her character counts as virtuous.

The credibility of this model, however, seems to be endangered by the presence of envy within human nature. Envy is a form of pain "excited by some present enjoyment of another" (T 2.2.8.12, 377) and originates from comparison between individuals who are close to one another. This passion is at the heart of the problem: on the one hand, Hume says, we should sympathise with those close to an agent—"those, who have any commerce with the person we consider" (T 3.3.1.18, 583)—to make sound moral evaluations. On the other hand, however, using this as standpoint is problematic because envy—a morally troubling passion that fosters conflict and malice—proliferates in it. In Hume's own words, "[e]nvy and jealousy have too much place in a narrow circle" (E 233).

In this chapter, I develop this overlooked puzzle in Hume's moral philosophy. I show that, given Hume's account of the foundation of ethics as grounded in human sentiments, the only possible solution to puzzles like this can be found by appealing to human sentiments and their functions. Given Hume's secular yet anti-rationalist ethics,

[110] On why the common point of view does not introduce any new moral element, see chapter 1.

nothing beyond human sentiments can ultimately be used to solve the potential tensions that we incur into when thinking about what to do or how to evaluate actions and characters. In section 5.2, I provide a formulation of the problem in form of an argument *ad absurdum*. In section 5.3, I reconstruct Hume's account of sympathy and moral evaluation, explaining the genesis and functioning of the "common point of view" as the standpoint that we acquire by taking up the narrow circle perspective. In section 5.4, I analyse Hume's account of envy. I delve into the moral troubles that this passion generates and argue that his view is that envy spreads with special force in one's narrow circle. In section 5.5, I explore a possible solution to this puzzle by identifying the virtue of decency, the disposition not to display excessive pride, which prevents others from feeling the disagreeable effects of comparison. With an account of this virtue in hand, the presence of envy in a person's narrow circle emerges to be the surprising consequence of a fault in *her* character, namely the lack of decency. Envy in her narrow circle turns out not to be a risk to sound moral evaluation, but rather an indicator of a problem (the lack of decency) within her character. This can be taken as illustrative of the way in which, on Hume's account, we can solve the initial problems of a moral outlook: not by appealing to an external moral standard but rather by reflecting on how human sentiments and reactions contribute to creating (or impeding) harmonious social relations and generate sentiments of moral approval (or disapproval).

5.2 The Puzzle: Narrow Circle and Envy

In this section, I develop the puzzle briefly sketched in the introduction. Since the details of Hume's account will follow in later sections, the reader will find there the textual support for the premises of the argument. For now, I just want to set out the problem by

proposing an argument *ad absurdum* against Hume's model for moral evaluation. We have reason to believe that all the premises below are endorsed by Hume and yet the conclusion is problematic. The argument is as follows:

> P1. In order to morally evaluate a person R, one needs to sympathise with the people that have some personal relation with her.
>
> P2. If the sympathetic feelings generated in one by the sympathetic process in P1 are pleasant, one evaluates R's character as virtuous. If they are unpleasant, one evaluates R's character as vicious.
>
> P3. Sympathy with someone's pain gives an unpleasant feeling rather than a pleasant one.
>
> P4. Envy is a passion that consists in someone's suffering at the present enjoyment of another.
>
> P5. Envy is a passion that proliferates in one's narrow circle as it is triggered by comparison and proximity.
>
> P6. A virtuous agent, because of her superior virtue, can be envied by people around her.
>
> **C.** A virtuous agent can be evaluated as vicious because of the envy that she generates in her narrow circle.

The conclusion is implied by the premises above in the following way: one must sympathise with people around R in order to judge her character (P1). If the sympathetic feeling felt for the people around R is painful, R's character will be judged negatively: she generates pain in people around her (P2). This sympathetic feeling is indeed painful when it mirrors others' pain (P3). Since envy is a passion that makes one suffer (P4) and proliferates in R's narrow circle (P5), R's character must count as morally vicious as it

generates pain in people around her. However, even a virtuous person can be envied (P6). The unwanted conclusion is that in certain cases a virtuous character can be evaluated as vicious because of the envy it generates in others (C). In cases where R is envied by others in her narrow circle, R's character must be said to be vicious even if she is virtuous.

5.3 Sympathy, Narrow Circle and Moral Evaluation

In this section, I detail Hume's account of moral evaluation as it appears in the *Treatise* and, along the way, give textual support for premises P1, P2, and P3 above. In the next section, I give textual support for the other three premises.

5.3.1 The Role of Sympathy in Moral Evaluation

Introduced in the context of his theory of the passions in Book 2, sympathy is described as an emotional mechanism consisting of a "propensity we have to […] receive by communication [other people's] inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own" (T 2.1.11.2, 316).[111] This principle of human nature becomes essential in Book 3 of the *Treatise*, where Hume's focus switches from the passions to morality.[112] Here, he considers "a-new the nature and force of *sympathy*" (T 3.3.1.7, 575) and explores how it "produces our sentiment of morals" (T 3.3.1.10, 577). It is by sympathising with other people and reflecting their emotions that we come to experience moral sentiments.

[111] For a complete taxonomy of the forms that sympathy can take in Hume's account see (Vitz 2004).
[112] Sympathy is indeed a central principle in Book 2 as well (see Harris 2009), but its full moral importance emerges most prominently in Book 3

Hume, however, recognises an important objection to his view: our feelings, even the ones stemming from sympathy, are variable and depend on emotional proximity, while our moral evaluations do not. In Hume's text, the objection takes this form:

> sympathy is very variable […] 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*. They appear equally virtuous, and recommend themselves equally to the esteem of a judicious spectator. The sympathy varies without a variation in our esteem. Our esteem, therefore, proceeds not from sympathy. (T 3.3.1.14, 580-81)

On the one hand, moral evaluation is stable and apparently independent from the relationship existing between the evaluated agent and the moral evaluator. On the other hand, sympathy varies in strength according to the relationship between people. This suggests that sympathy alone cannot be responsible for the formulation of moral judgments about people far away in space or time.

Hume takes seriously the fact that our emotional life is subject to great variations: "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" (T 3.3.1.15, 581). This puts each one of us in a very "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 peculiar point of view" (T 3.3.1.15, 581).

If we were to talk about another's qualities only from our individual and perspective, we would be unable to communicate properly with others when it comes to the moral evaluation of people. If I were able to express moral judgments concerning only the people whose actions and character I can observe, I would be incapable of recognising

the moral qualities of *your* friends who are unknown to me, of long dead individuals, of people far away from me in space, and so on. This would prevent us from being able to share a moral language and to communicate when it comes to morality and would lead us to constant disagreement: "[w]hen we form our judgments of persons, merely from the tendency of their characters to our own benefit, […] we find so many contradictions to our sentiments in society and conversation" (T 3.3.1.18, 583).

5.3.2 The Narrow Circle Perspective

Hume finds a solution to the problem of the variability of sympathy in the fixation of a point of view from which we should make our moral evaluations. When we try to evaluate someone morally, we should do so by trying to prevent the "continual *contradictions*" (T 3.3.1.15, 581) that we experience in our feelings. In order to "arrive at a more *stable* judgment of things, we fix on some *steady* and *general* points of view; and always, in our thoughts, place ourselves in them, whatever may be our present situation" (T 3.3.1.15, 581-82).

As I argued in chapter 1, taking up the general point of view is not an operation that *generates* moral sentiments but rather a procedure to *preserve* them. It allows an individual to evaluate another's character regardless of the actual relationship that exists between them. To remain close to Hume's text, we could say that one's "servant, if diligent and faithful, may excite stronger sentiments of love and kindness" (T 3.3.1.16, 582) than a hero represented in history books. However, one does not affirm that "the former character is more laudable than the latter" (T 3.3.1.16, 582). This is so because of

the human ability to distinguish one's feelings of love for people in one's personal sphere from the feelings that one *would have* in presence of the distant hero's character.[113]

In the same way in which we correct our senses when we pronounce judgments of size or beauty concerning objects that are far from us, we correct our sentiments ("or at least […] our language", T 3.3.1.16, 582) when we evaluate other people morally.[114] In all these cases, when we evaluate an object "we correct its momentary appearance" (T 3.3.1.15, 582). Hume explains this very clearly when he notes that "[w]e 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 reflection, that the former action wou'd excite as strong sentiments of disapprobation as the latter, were it plac'd in the same position" (T 3.3.1.18, 584). Both when it comes to distances and morals, we need to change our perspective in order to escape the limits of our peculiar position. At this point, however, the metaphor still requires some elaboration: what is this point of view and how do we reach it?

[113] As I discussed in chapter 1, there is a debate as to whether one's sentiments count as moral before the general point of view is taken up. Several influential interpreters argue that only the corrected sentiment is moral. Cohon, for instance, argues that there are two different sentiments that are part of the process of moral evaluation: the "situated sentiment, which may need correcting, and the sentiment generated by the imagination, which ultimately is the moral sentiment" (Cohon 2008: 141). The former stems from one's specific point of view and is influenced by one's self-interest. The latter arises when one takes up the perspective of others and, as such, becomes able to enter the shared space of morality. Others supporter of the idea that only corrected sentiments are moral include (Brown 1994; 2001; Taylor 2002; Korsgaard 1999: 4; Radcliffe 2018: 112). As I argued in chapter 1, however, my view is that the textual evidence speaks otherwise. In T 3.3.1.15-17, 582-83, Hume speaks of correcting already existing sentiments of praise and blame. As Garrett has noted, Hume introduces the general point of view one hundred pages after his first discussion of *moral* sentiments (Garrett 2001: 211), which strongly suggests that taking up a specific point of view is not necessary to the experience of morality.

[114] The same point is made by Hume in the moral *Enquiry* where he writes: "The same object, at a double distance, really throws on the eye a picture of but half the bulk; yet we imagine that it appears of the same size in both situations; because we know, that, on our approach to it, its image would expand on the eye, and that the difference consists not in the object itself, but in our position with regard to it. And, indeed, *without such a correction of appearances, both in internal and external sentiment, men could never think or talk steadily on any subject*; while their fluctuating situations produce a continual variation on objects, and throw them into such different and contrary lights and positions" (EPM 5.41, 227-8, my emphasis).

According to Hume, we can take up the perspective of the common point of view through reflection and imagination by considering the feelings of the people directly connected with the person that we are trying to evaluate: we need "sympathy with those, who have any commerce with the person we consider" (T 3.3.1.18, 583).[115] A shift of perspective is required to experience sentiments which we would otherwise not feel.[116]

Hume affirms that "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" (T 3.3.1.30, 591). Hume's solution is expressed later in the *Treatise* as the need to "confine our view to that narrow circle, in which any person moves, in order to form a judgment of his moral character" (T 3.3.3.2, 602). When we want to correctly evaluate a person morally, we should place ourselves through reflection in her narrow circle[117]—how does her character influence her friends, her family, her commercial partners, her fellow citizens and so on?

Moral evaluation in Hume's terms requires this kind of reflective proximity to the person that is the object of evaluation.[118] This is so because "[t]he only point of view, in

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[115] The tension generated by seemingly contradictory claims about morality being a matter of emotions but, at the same time, in need of reflection, imagination and causal inference is also addressed in (Cohon 2008: 126-158).

[116] An interesting example from Book 2 helps us to further clarify this point. Consider what Hume writes: "suppose a man, who takes a survey of the fortifications of any city; considers their strength and advantages, natural or acquir'd; observes the disposition and contrivance of the bastions, ramparts, mines, and other military works; 'tis plain, that in proportion as all these are fitted to attain their ends, he will receive a suitable pleasure and satisfaction. This pleasure, as it arises from the utility, not the form of the objects, can be no other than a sympathy with the inhabitants, for whose security all this art is employ'd; tho' 'tis possible, that this person, as a stranger or an enemy, may in his heart have no kindness for them, or may even entertain a hatred against them" (T 2.3.10.5, 450). Evaluating an enemy town positively (in this case not morally) even if it is harder to conquer is a judgment that stems from positioning oneself in a common point of view, namely in sympathy with the inhabitants of the city.

[117] I follow Anik Waldow's distinction between "reflection" and "reflective" in Hume's philosophy. According to Waldow, the adjective "reflective" is used for phenomena that are triggered by social interaction, while "reflection" is "a specific mental process that can be exerted over [both] reflective and non-reflective perceptions" (Waldow 2020: 306). First-order feelings of sympathy with someone in front of us, therefore, count as reflective feelings, even if they may not be subject to the cognitive process of reflexion.

[118] The fact that Hume's moral theory is not agent-neutral and accommodates partiality has been remarked in various discussion of the general point of view (Brown 1994; Loeb 2003).

which our sentiments concur with those of others, is, when we consider the tendency of any passion to the advantage or harm of those, who have *any immediate connexion or intercourse with the person possess'd of it*" (T 3.3.3.2, 602-3, my emphasis).[119] Hume's characterisation of the narrow circle has been extensively discussed in the secondary literature with particular attention to the extent and limits of the circle.[120] Clarifying the width of the narrow circle goes beyond the scope of this chapter. What is enough to notice is that, when we want to evaluate an agent morally, we have to consult our emotions towards that person or, absent a personal relation with her, we should sympathise with those who have a connection with her. Sentiments are essential to moral evaluation. Very often, however, we lack the possibility to directly survey a character person. To morally evaluate her, in this case, we need to sympathise with her narrow circle. This allows us to see how Hume accepts premise P1 (as articulated in section 5.2):

> P1. In order to morally evaluate a person R, one needs to sympathise with the people that have some personal relation with her.

With the above discussion in place, it is easy to see that it is pleasant feelings which make one evaluate the person as virtuous and unpleasant feelings which make one evaluate the person as vicious. Hume writes:

> 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

[119] Jacqueline Taylor formulates this point interestingly affirming that "members of an agent's circle have better epistemic access to his character because it affects them" (Taylor 2002: 49).

[120] For instance, (Kelly 2004; Loeb 2004; Baier 2006). Given that in his discussion Hume uses various phrases ("immediate connexion", T 3.3.3.2, 603; "immediate intercourse", T 3.3.3.9, 606; and "commerce", T 3.3.1.18, 583), interpreters have focused on who should be included in one's narrow circle (only friends and family? whoever has an interaction with the agent? whoever is affected by the consequences of the agent's action? etc.). More recently, Erin Frykholm has argued that for Hume "an individual's virtues and vices are understood as such in respect to his or her particular associations and relations with others around him or her" (Frykholm 2016: 626) where this association is conceived as the extent of the consequences of an individual's act. In other words, they are "interpersonal connections that are morally relevant even if they do not constitute formal relationships" (Frykholm 2016: 627-28).

> connexion with him. And tho' such interests and pleasures touch us more faintly than our own … [they] are alone admitted in speculation as the standard of virtue and morality. (T 3.3.1.30, 591)

This passage explicitly shows what is probably already obvious given Hume's discussion, namely that when we feel "more faintly" another's *pleasure* via sympathy we judge the character who is the source of the pleasure as virtuous. The same would apply in the negative case: if by sympathising with the "persons, who have a connexion with" the agent the faint sentiments generated by sympathy are painful, the agent is vicious. This supports premise P2:

> P2. If the sympathetic feelings generated in one by the sympathetic process in P1 are pleasant, one evaluates R's character as virtuous. If they are unpleasant, one evaluates R's character as vicious.

Hume writes that sympathy operates as the conversion of an idea "into an impression" (T 2.1.11.3, 317) which "become the very passion itself, and produce an equal emotion, as any original affection" (T 2.1.11.3, 317). When one sees in another the signs of pain and suffering, one's idea of suffering becomes livelier and one comes to feel, even if less strongly, the pain of the other. This is the content of premise P3 in my original argument:

> P3. Sympathy with someone's pain gives an unpleasant feeling rather than a pleasant one.

With this reconstruction of the functioning of sympathy in place, we can now turn to the passion of envy and its problematic impact onto the process of moral evaluation.

5.4 Comparison, Envy, and a Problematic Conclusion

Hume's treatment of envy is rich and, as with many other passions in his philosophy, underappreciated. He devotes an entire section of his *Treatise* to analysing envy and malice (T 2.2.8, "Of malice and envy"), providing us with a detailed account of these passions. Unfortunately, these reflections have been neglected and discussions of envy are rare in the literature.[121] In this section, I provide an exploration of Hume's account of envy in order to present textual evidence for premises P4, P5 and P6 from the argument in section 5.2. Given the fact that envy has been neglected in Hume scholarship, this section also contributes to advancing our understanding of his account of this passion.

5.4.1 Comparison and Envy

In Hume's account, envy is a form of pain "excited by some present enjoyment of another" (T 2.2.8.12, 377) which derives from the fact that when "we observe a greater or less share of happiness or misery in others, we must make an estimate of our own, and feel a consequent pain or pleasure" (T 2.2.8.8, 375). These considerations are enough for us to confirm premise P4:

> P4. Envy is a passion that consists in someone's suffering at the present enjoyment of another.

Hume details at length how envy stems from comparison. When one compares oneself to a more successful or happier person, one experiences pain because diminished

[121] (Protasi 2021) presents a systematic study of envy and includes, in an appendix, a short history of conceptions of envy that devotes a couple of pages to Hume. (Rickless 2013) devotes some space to envy but only to clarify Hume's taxonomy of direct and indirect passions. (Dadlez 2009) explores some similarities between Hume's and Austen's phenomenology of envy. (Swanton 2014: 484-85) tries to evaluate whether people are blameable for being envious but does not offer a definitive answer. The most interesting discussion of this passion is probably in (Postema 2005).

by the other's superiority. The other's success "by comparison diminishes our idea of our own" (T 2.2.8.12, 377) in a way that is unpleasant. Envy consists of this pain felt for the superiority of another. This characterisation emerges mainly from Hume's *Treatise* but is maintained in later works. The same account is present in the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, where Hume states that "another's advancement and prosperity produces envy, which [...] arises chiefly from the comparison of ourselves with the person" (EPM 6.33, 248). In the "Dissertation on the Passions" (1757), he affirms: "The comparison of ourselves with others seems to be the source of envy and malice. The more unhappy another is, the more happy do we ourselves appear in our own conception" (D 3.8, 19).

From this account, it is clear that Hume conceives of comparison as essential to the passion of envy. This principle of human nature is described in various points along the *Treatise* (e.g., T 2.1.6.14; T 2.2.8; T 3.3.2). One of the clearest formulations is in T 3.3.2.4 where Hume talks of it as "the variation of our judgments concerning objects, according to the proportion they bear to those with which we compare them" (T 3.3.2.4, 593). This tendency to compare objects has an influence in every type of judgment. The most important effects of comparison, however, are obtained when it relates to oneself: "no comparison is more obvious than that with ourselves; and hence it is that on all occasions it takes place, and mixes with most of our passions" (T 3.3.2.4, 593). It is from comparison between selves that envy stems.

Powerful as it is, comparison is characterised by limitations due to "resemblance and proximity" (T 2.2.8.13, 376). Hume's observation of human nature indicates that we tend to compare two objects only under certain circumstances. This is so because the principle of comparison has limits dictated by the relation existing between the items

compared. Psychologically speaking, for Hume, if there is no "resemblance and proximity" between the object of two ideas "'tis impossible they can remain long united" (T 2.2.8.13, 376). Hume expresses this concept when he writes that "the great disproportion cuts off the relation, and either keeps us from comparing ourselves with what is remote from us, or diminishes the effects of the comparison" (T 2.2.8.13, 377-78).[122] When the "disproportion" between two compared objects is too large, the principle of comparison does not apply. In more concrete terms, Hume reports that:

> A mountain neither magnifies nor diminishes a horse in our eyes; but when a Flemish and a Welsh horse are seen together, the one appears greater and the other less, than when view'd apart. (T 2.2.8.16, 378)

A mountain is too different from a Flemish horse to trigger reflections by comparison. The same is not true for a Welsh horse, that "seen together" with a Flemish, makes it appear larger by comparison.

The origin of envy in the principle of comparison reveals an essential aspect of Hume's characterisation of this passion, namely the fact that resemblance and proximity between the person who experiences the envy (the 'envier') and the envied person are usually needed for envy to arise. When comparison is triggered by resemblance and proximity, we experience the troubling passion of envy which, according to Hume, is a danger to the principles of humanity.

[122] This is not to say that there is no relation whatsoever between two very different objects. Indeed, any two ideas can be related in at least a "philosophical" sense (see T 1.1.5, 13-15). The fact that they are very different is in itself a judgment that reveals a possible relationship between them. What Hume is talking about is the psychological tendency that human beings have to compare different objects. In other words, we experience some constraints in our tendency to compare things.

Envy "perverts […] our natural philanthropy" (EPM 5.40, 227) and hinders social cohesion. When we envy someone, we will suffer for their joy and, since "[a]ll resembling impressions are connected together […] anger to envy, envy to malice, and malice to grief" (T 2.1.4.3, 283), we will end up desiring their misery. In addition, Hume says that "malice and envy […] arise in the mind without any preceding hatred or injury" (D 3.8, 19): they are not painful feelings caused by another's negative behaviour. Envy, therefore, is not only detrimental because it is painful, but also because it prevents one from appreciating the well-deserved success of others.

Hume's account of envy reveals that, on his analysis of the human mind, we are pulled in two opposite directions by our emotions. On the one hand, we tend to sympathise with others and share their feelings, since "[e]very pleasure languishes when enjoy'd a-part from company, and every pain becomes more cruel and intolerable" (T 2.2.5.15, 363). On the other hand, we are envious and malicious creatures, who often feel "joy in the misery of others" (T 2.2.7.1, 369). The "present enjoyment of another […] by comparison diminishes our idea of our own" (T 2.2.8.12, 377) and leads us to desire their misery. As Hume puts it in the moral *Enquiry*, in human nature there is "some particle of the dove, kneaded into our frame, along with the elements of the wolf and serpent." (EPM 9.4, 271)

Because of its origin in comparison, Hume explicitly recognises that envy is triggered by proximity and even relates it to the narrow circle in his essay "Of the Standard of Taste":

> Envy and jealousy have too much place in a narrow circle; and even familiar acquaintance with his person may diminish the applause due to his performances: But when these obstructions are removed, the beauties, which are naturally fitted to excite agreeable sentiments, immediately

display their energy; and while the world endures, they maintain their authority over the minds of men. (E 233)

Hume's point here is that in order to give a shared evaluation of a performance, we have to remove the "obstructions" of envy and jealousy which take place in one's "narrow circle". In other words, we should *remove* ourselves from the narrow circle if we want to avoid our feelings to be distorted by envy. Hume's account of this passion, therefore, generates a puzzle for his ethics in so far as it seems to disqualify the solution to the variability objection that posed a problem for his sentimentalism.[123]

This discussion of comparison and proximity as something that is a common denominator between envy and the narrow circle gives strong textual support in favour of P5:

P5. Envy is a passion that proliferates in one's narrow circle as it is triggered by comparison and proximity.

In addition, this discussion also shows that envy is a burning pain produced by one's perceived inferiority to another and, in principle, there is no reason to believe that virtuous individuals are not the object of other people's envy. Therefore, also P6 is something that Hume seems to endorse:

P6. A virtuous agent, because of her superior virtue, can be envied by people around her.

[123] Some authors argue that the role of the narrow circle in Hume's ethics is more limited than I picture it. For example, Annette Baier has argued that Hume's introduction of the narrow circle has to do only with a certain set of virtues that she calls the morally "good" virtues, which she contrasts to the morally "great" virtues. The "good" traits are those that we appreciate in our friends and family, and only these are evaluated by appealing to the narrow circle (Baier 1991: 190). There are various problems with this view, but even if it turned out to be correct, the puzzle I am identifying will be reduced only in scope and will still persist within a specific domain of Hume's moral philosophy.

A confirmation of such a possibility is stated by Hume in his early essay "Of the Middle Station of Life" (1742): "I believe most Men of generous Tempers are apt to envy the Great, when they consider the large Opportunities such Persons have of doing Good to their Fellow-creatures, and of acquiring the Friendship and Esteem of Men of Merit" (E 547).

5.4.2 A Problematic Conclusion

My analysis of Hume's conception of envy reveals an overlooked problem within his account of moral evaluation. In many cases, in order to evaluate a person we need to sympathise with her narrow circle. From this perspective we can evaluate the character of that person and formulate a moral judgment even when we do not have a personal relationship with her. However, Hume also affirms that the disruptive emotion of envy is one which thrives precisely in the narrow circle, therefore showing that an individual's evaluation made by her narrow circle may be hostile and marred by that passion. This problem becomes pressing when we draw from the premises (P1 to P6) the conclusion that:

> C. A virtuous agent can be evaluated as vicious because of the envy that she generates in her narrow circle.

In summary, on the one hand, Hume says that we should acquire the narrow circle perspective to manufacture moral evaluations that can be intersubjectively shared. On the other, he admits that the narrow circle is infected by the troubling passion of envy. If one's narrow circle is subject to envy, we will hardly be able to formulate moral judgments using the common point of view as reference point: if even "those, who have any immediate connexion or intercourse with the person" (T 3.3.3.2, 603) are subject to envy, Hume's sentimentalist procedure for moral evaluation seems to fail. The disruptive

passion of envy seems to endanger the functioning of the common point of view that Hume developed as a solution to the variability objection to his sentimentalism. Without this solution, his ethics seems doomed to rely on the unsteady foundation of fluctuating and unstable emotions.[124]

5.5 Decency: A Partial Solution To The Puzzle.

Hume's ethics takes sentiments to be the ultimate foundational element of morality. Consequently, the puzzle of envy cannot be solved with an appeal to immutable standards or absolute prohibitions. While the rationalist or the voluntarist may invoke immutable relations or God's commands to explain how to deal with problematic sentiments, neither of these solutions are available to Hume. A puzzle generated by sentiments can only be solved, if at all, by reflecting on the functions of human emotional life itself.

A surprising (if partial) solution to the puzzle of envy can be found in Hume's overlooked virtue of decency. In this section, I develop such a solution arguing that, given his account of decency spelled out in T 3.3.2 (*Of greatness of mind*), premise P6 in my original argument in section 5.2 must be modified. While, strictly speaking, it remains

[124] One could here object that the problematic conclusion can be avoided if we make a distinction, as Charlotte Brown suggests, between one's "actual narrow circle" and one's "normal or usual narrow circle" (Brown 1994: 24) A similar point is remarked by Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, who writes that "because people have differential access to the actual effects of a particular person's character on the "narrow circle," we need to focus on the effects the character in question would normally have on the relevant people, not on those effects it does have" (Sayre-McCord 1994: 219). Brown's remark is needed to insulate Hume's account of moral evaluation from moral luck. If what counts for our moral evaluation are the feelings in the agent's actual narrow circle, it may happen that the agent, albeit virtuous, find herself surrounded by individuals affected by antisocial personality disorder. In this case, our sympathy with the actual narrow circle will hardly provide us with an intersubjectively valid moral evaluation. Brown's point, therefore, is important: we have to place ourselves in the perspective of one's "normal or usual" narrow circle rather than the "actual" one. However, this does not solve the envy problem since envy, as we saw with the discussion of premise P5 (which should be taken more as a strengthening consideration than a necessary part of the argument), is a natural (hence both "normal" and "usual") passion for human beings to feel and, therefore, persists even in Brown's conception of the narrow circle.

possible for a virtuous agent to be envied by people around her, the fact that Hume's considers decency as a virtue allows us to see that a fully virtuous individual can mitigate envy and its painful effects in her narrow circle.

The virtue of decency is the character trait that consists of not displaying excessive pride in order to avoid other people feeling the disagreeable effects of comparison.[125] Since envy stems from comparison, the presence of envy in a person's narrow circle often reveals a fault in her character, namely the *lack* of decency. Under normal circumstances, envy in her narrow circle turns out to be not a risk to intersubjectively shared moral evaluation, but rather an *indicator* of a moral problem with her character, namely the fact that she lacks a virtue. However, this is only a partial resolution of the problem: cultivating the virtue of decency can diminish the amount of envy in one's narrow circle or mitigate its negative impact but cannot assure that envy will *completely* disappear.

5.5.1 Decency: A Virtue to Prevent Comparison

Hume discusses the virtue of decency in T 3.3.2 in the context of his analysis of the virtues and vices associated with pride. After arguing that pride has beneficial effects for the individual who feels this passion (T 2.1.2-12), Hume notes in Book 3 that this passion can be excessive: an "over-weaning conceit of ourselves" that "is always esteem'd vicious" (T 3.3.2.1, 592). Hume's introduction of decency as a virtue which "require[s]" us to "avoid all signs and expressions, which tend directly to show that passion [pride]" (T 3.3.2.10; 597-8) is conceived of as a tool to prevent the disagreeable effects of comparison with excessively proud individuals.

[125] This virtue is sometimes called by Hume "modesty", "good-breeding" or "humility". In order to avoid confusion with Hume's account of "modesty" as a virtue connected to chastity in T 3.2.12 (*Of chastity and modesty*), it is better to call this virtue decency, a term that Hume himself uses in his discussion (see T 3.3.2.10, 597; T 3.3.2.11, 598; T 3.3.2.13, 600). For a more detailed discussion, see chapter 6.

As I explore in detail in chapter 6, Hume believes that “self-satisfaction and vanity may not only be allowable, but requisite in a character” (T 3.3.2.10, 597) and encourages his reader to conceive of pride as positive. Although we all have “a wonderful partiality for ourselves” (T 3.3.2.10, 597), however, he also thinks that we should *hide* our pride in order not to be disagreeable to others. The virtue of decency is a solution to these two clashing aspects of this passion: on the one hand, pride is useful and agreeable to oneself; on the other hand, the display of pride can be disagreeable and offensive to others. Decency, conceived of as an “outside” appearance of “humility” (T 3.3.2.11, 598), is a virtue because it prevents others from feeling a disagreeable impression of pain stemming from comparison with one’s pride. When pride is unrestrained and excessive, regardless of the real merit of the proud person, it is negative because it generates disagreeable feelings in others who compare themselves to the proud individual.

In so far as decency prevents—or at least diminishes—the negative effects of comparison, this virtue constitutes a possible solution to the problem of envy. As we have seen above, envy is a painful impression which stems from comparison with someone who is better off. What is particularly worrying about this passion is that it is not only painful but also triggered by proximity and, therefore, likely to spread in one’s “narrow circle”. Since the narrow circle perspective is the one which we need to take for moral evaluations, envy seems not only to cause of interpersonal conflict, but also to mar our moral judgments.

The fact that Hume considers decency a virtue, however, provides us with a partial solution to the problem of the potential threat of envy against his sentimentalist moral philosophy. As it appears clearly in T 3.3.2, decency is a virtue that one should cultivate and develop within one’s character. Because of this, the accountability for the presence of envy in one’s narrow circle is, at least in part, the *envied* person’s burden to bear. The

envied person, in order to be envied, must generate a painful impression stemming from comparison in the people in her proximity. This pain is something which the envied could (at least partially) avoid through the virtue of decency, which helps to prevent painful comparison and, therefore, also the formation of envy.

This, however, is only a *partial* solution to the puzzle of envy. A virtuous Othello-like character may avoid showing off his good fortune and success, and yet Iago-like individuals may feel envious. It is possible that Iago's envy of Othello in Shakespeare's play is not due to a lack of decency in the latter. Shakespeare's dramatic representation captures something very real in human nature, namely that envy may arise towards a person even when the display of pride is limited. Even a person who cultivates decency can be envied.

To this, Hume could reply that, even if some envy can be felt towards the decent person, this sociable virtue *mostly* generates love and appreciation. Even "when a person obtains any honourable office, or inherits a great fortune, we are always the more rejoic'd for his prosperity, the less sense he seems to have of it, and the greater equanimity and indifference he shews in its enjoyment" (T 2.2.7.5, 370). We can envy this lucky and successful individual, but if he receives these gifts gracefully, we will be "more rejoic'd" for him. Our love and joy for him will likely outweigh the negative feeling generated in us by comparison.

One example from Hume's *History of England* could help us to see how decency can mitigate envy, although only partially. Commenting on the notorious figure of Piers Gaveston, favourite and supposed lover of Edward II, Hume describes his character by saying that "[i]nstead of disarming envy by the moderation and modesty of his behaviour, Gavaston [sic] displayed his power and influence with the utmost ostentation; and deemed

no circumstance of his good fortune so agreeable as its enabling him to eclipse and mortify all his rivals" (H 14.3). Hume suggests that Gaveston could have prevented other people from envying him if he had limited his display of pride through decency and moderation. The lack of these positive qualities, however, made it so that he caused the envy of his rivals. Hume's description of this historical figure seems to confirm that envy is generated when one is unable to restrain one's pride via decency and, therefore, unable to prevent people from feeling pain from comparison. Decency offers a partial solution to the problem of envy: while a virtuous character can be envied without being flawed, the presence of envy in one's narrow circle is particularly likely when one lacks decency.

5.5.2 The Perfect Character

A litmus test for this solution can be found in Hume's account of the perfect character, that of one who is always loved by everyone in his narrow circle in every circumstance. In the *Treatise*, Hume conceives of "the ultimate test of merit and virtue" (T 3.3.3.9, 606) in the following way: "if there be no relation of life, in which I cou'd not wish to stand to a particular person, his character must so far be allow'd to be perfect" (T 3.3.3.9, 606). Interestingly, this "ultimate test" dovetails with Hume's account of the narrow circle, in so far as this test is passed when one pleases everyone in one's circle. As we saw above, if everyone in a person's narrow circle feels positive emotions this means that any spectator will approve of that person's character via sympathy with the circle.

The abstract account of one's perfect character presented in the *Treatise* takes a more concrete form in the moral *Enquiry*, where Hume substantiates his picture by describing the "model of perfect virtue" (EPM 9.2, 270) in the figure of Cleanthes, "a man of honour and humanity. Every one, who has any intercourse with him, is sure of *fair* and *kind* treatment" (EPM 9.2, 269). Cleanthes is an example of the best mix of

virtues. He inspires love and pride in his narrow circle, his character combines "[s]o much wit with good manners; so much gallantry without affectation; so much ingenious knowledge so genteelly delivered, … a perpetual serenity on his countenance, and tranquillity in his soul" (EPM 9.2, 269). He is admired nor only for his successes but for also for his kindness, for his gallantry, for his serenity. Cleanthes is a person whose character passes "the ultimate test of merit and virtue" described in T 3.3.3.9. He is loved by everyone in his narrow circle and his character responds virtuously in any circumstance, including "severe trials, misfortunes as well as dangers" (EPM 9.2, 270).

The perfect character, in spite of its excellence, does not generate in other people a negative impression due to comparison.[126] This is so because the Cleanthes-like individual combines all the virtues, therefore including "the *companionable* virtues of good manners and wit, decency and genteelness" (EPM 9.18, 280). The presence of decency, in particular, makes it so that one's character does not become disagreeable to others. Decency requires "that we shou'd avoid all signs and expressions" of pride (T 3.3.2.10, 597). A person endowed with a perfect character, being always agreeable does not generate painful comparisons, therefore, arousing in others admiration and love rather than envy.

Here, again, it may be useful to draw on a case taken from the *History of England*. Commenting on Charles II, Hume notices that "[h]is present prosperity was the object rather of admiration than of envy" (H 63.1). This is so because, "[t]o a lively wit and

[126] One could legitimately ask whether Cleanthes would be envied by his narrow circle precisely because of his excellent character. While I have provided textual evidence to claim that, on Hume's account, envy does not spread too much in a decent person's narrow circle, it is possible that the *truly* perfect character *must* contain some imperfections. We love virtuous people when they are excellent, but also relatable. In his discussion of love, Hume claimed that "[w]hen a person is once heartily in love, the little faults and caprices of his mistress […] are yet found to give additional force to the prevailing passion" (T 2.3.4.3, 420). Similarly, one could say that some little faults in one's excellent character are needed to make that character truly perfect.

quick comprehension, he united a just understanding and a general observation both of men and things. The easiest manners, the most unaffected politeness, the most engaging gaiety accompanied his conversation and address" (H 63.2). If "no prince ever obtained a crown in more favourable circumstances" (H 63.1) than Charles, it is also because of his well-mannered temperament and restraint in the display of pride, which, in turn, assures him admiration rather than envy. Or so Hume thought.

These examples offer further confirmation that Hume conceived of the virtue of decency as effective in preventing the generation of painful comparison and envy in one's narrow circle. At the same time, they are illustrative of the way Hume can solve (or try to solve) moral problems. Thanks to good manners and decency, one can prevent—or at least diminish—the generation of envy in others. While it is not clear whether Hume believes that envy can be *completely* eradicated from one's narrow circle in this way, he thought of decency at least as a partial solution to the dangerous spread of envy. This passion is not a merely negative emotion that consumes the envier. Rather, it reveals a fault in the envied person's character as well.

This means that premise P6 in my initial argument is only apparently something that Hume subscribes to. Once we consider the virtue of decency and its impact on comparison, we can affirm that

> P6*. A fully virtuous agent, thanks to decency, prevents (at least in part) envy from arising in people around her.

In so far as the painful emotion of envy stems in one's narrow circle because of a lack of virtue in one's character, the threat that this passion seemed to pose to Hume's sentimentalist ethics is resolved.

To sum up, I have shown that envy appears to generate a problem for Hume's account of moral evaluation in the *Treatise*. Put in form of an argument *ad absurdum*, the problem is that given Hume's account of moral evaluation and his view of envy, his moral philosophy implies the absurd conclusion that there are cases in which one must morally evaluate a virtuous person as vicious. I have identified the virtue of decency as an element that offers an explanation to solve this problem. Decency is a virtue that minimises the painful comparison that one generates in others. As such, possessing this virtue (partially) undercuts the psychological mechanism that generates envy in others. The persistence of strong envy in one's narrow circle, therefore, reveals the presence of a character fault in the envied person. If a person's narrow circle is infected by envy it is because of the lack of decency in that person's character. While Hume conceived of the passions as constitutional facts of human nature, he also expressed concerns about the interference that envy can generate to harmonious social life. This chapter has shown that, although envy presents Hume's ethics with an important problem, the fact that Hume's ethics recognises decency as a virtue helps him to support his account of moral evaluation.

The exploration of the puzzle generated by envy in Hume's moral philosophy is instructive because it illustrates how ethical problems within his sentimentalism must be solved without any appeal to a standard external to human nature. The price to pay for giving up a rationalist or a religious conception of ethics, however, is that the solutions one can find are often only partial. In the untidy domain of morality, many tensions cannot be completely ironed out.

Identifying the virtue of decency as an important concept in Hume's ethics has implications that go beyond what we just discussed. In the next chapter, I further develop

Hume's account of this virtue. I show that it poses a serious challenge to a prominent interpretation of his moral philosophy as a form of motive-based virtue ethics.

Chapter 6: Decency as a Challenge to Motive-Based Virtue Ethics

> "I believe no one, who has any practice of the world, and can penetrate into the inward sentiments of men, will assert, that the humility, which good-breeding and decency require of us, goes beyond the outside"
>
> Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*

6.1 A Challenge to Motive-Based Virtue Ethics

The virtue of decency emerged as a possible (if partial solution) to the puzzle of envy. Even though decency occupies an important place in Hume's reflections, this virtue has rarely been discussed and never fully analysed in a systematic way. In this chapter, I develop an in-depth study of decency as a virtue based on the limited display of pride and show that this overlooked virtue in Hume's philosophy poses a strong challenge to popular virtue ethical interpretations of his thought.[127]

While pride and self-love are *not* at the centre of present-day academic debates in ethics, they were central subjects of philosophical discussion in Hume's period.[128] Authors such as La Rochefoucauld, Pierre Nicole, and Nicolas Malebranche (on the Continent) and Bernard Mandeville, Archibald Campbell, and Francis Hutcheson (in Britain) had, in various ways, examined the ambivalent value of pride. Tapping into this

[127] Material presented in this chapter has appeared in print as part of my (Galvagni 2022), which was selected as the runner-up in the first *Hume Studies Essay Prize* competition in 2021.
[128] See, among others, (Brooke 2012; Herdt 2008; Maurer 2019).

debate, Hume emphasises two opposite forms that this passion can take. On the one hand, Hume contributes to the rehabilitation of pride that he takes to be an agreeable and useful "impression of reflection": "The merit of pride or self-esteem is deriv'd from two circumstances, *viz*. its utility and its agreeableness to ourselves; by which it capacitates us for business, and, at the same time, gives us an immediate satisfaction" (T 3.3.2.14, 600). On the other hand, however, Hume also acknowledges that pride can turn into a vice and become detrimental to social interactions: "excessive pride or over-weaning conceit of ourselves is always esteem'd vicious, and is universally hated" (T 3.3.2.1, 592).

The double-edge sword of pride needs to be handled carefully. Hume's introduction of "decency" (sometimes called "modesty") as a virtue that "require[s]" us to "avoid all signs and expressions, which tend directly to show this passion [pride]" (T 3.3.2.10, 597-8) is conceived of as a tool to provide a solution to these two clashing aspects of pride.[129] As we anticipated in the previous chapter, decency is the virtue that Hume associates with a limited display of pride. In this chapter, I show how an in-depth characterisation of this virtue shows that decency can be constituted by a range of motives, including "secret sentiments" (T 3.3.2.11; 598) that are contrary to real humility. Elaborating on this point, in this chapter I challenge the widespread idea that for Hume every virtue derives its value from underlying virtuous motives. While this idea originates from Hume's text, I argue that it cannot be taken as a fundamental and all-encompassing principle in his philosophy.

This chapter is structured as follows. In section 6.2, I explore Hume's account of pride and pay special attention to the two ways in which pride can be excessive. Keeping

[129] In spite of the fact that Hume sometimes calls this virtue "modesty" or "humility", it is more appropriate to speak of "decency" – used two times in the *Treatise* (T 3.3.2.10; 597 and T 3.3.2.11; 598); one additional time in the negative "indecent" (T 3.3.2.13; 600) – because, as I will show below, Hume's account of this virtue is a far cry from our present-day account of modesty. Using a different term seems appropriate to underscore this gap. See Section II.1 for further terminological and conceptual clarifications.

this distinction in mind helps us to shed light on how the virtue of decency works. Decency is a virtue that consists merely in not *displaying* an excessive pride, it does not go "beyond the outside" (T 3.3.2.11, 598). In turn, a detailed account of decency brings to light an internal tension in Hume's ethics, namely the contrast between his statement that "all virtuous actions derive their merit only from virtuous motives" (T 3.2.1.4, 478) and his account of decency as a virtue of the outside. I offer such a reconstruction in section 6.3, where I demonstrate that the reason why we approve of decency and consider it a virtue does not need to appeal to anything but individuals' *behaviour*. Decency is nothing more than "a fair outside" (T 3.3.2.10, 598) which requires no virtuous motive or intention. As I show in section 6.4, detailed in this way, the case of decency offers a strong challenge to interpreters who read Hume as a virtue ethicist committed to the idea that all virtues derive their moral value from virtuous motives. In section 6.5, I deal with a number of objections that can be raised against my reconstruction of Hume's account of decency and provide replies based on textual evidence. I conclude in section 6.6, by using the case of decency as a further confirmation that we can best understand Hume's moral philosophy by reading it as indebted to voluntarism rather than as a precursor of motive-based virtue ethics.

6.2 The Risks of Pride

In Book 2 of the *Treatise*, Hume argues that pride is an important passion that is not only agreeable but also beneficial. His account of pride has been studied in detail.[130] According to Hume, pride and humility, its opposite passion, cannot be properly defined because

[130] Among others, (Baier 1978; Davidson 1976; Taylor 2016).

they are “simple and uniform impressions” and it is “impossible we can ever, by a multitude of words, give a just definition of them” (T 2.1.2.1, 277). We must, instead, detail their structure explaining the circumstances in which these passions arise. If we do so, Hume believes, pride emerges to have a threefold structure. The *object* of pride must be the self because “[w]hen self enters not into the consideration, there is no room either for pride or humility” (T 2.1.2.1, 277). Together with the object, Hume claims that pride always has a cause that excites this passion. There is a “vast variety” (T 2.1.2.5, 279) of causes of pride. In order to explain this variety, he says that “we shou’d make a new distinction in the causes of the passion, betwixt that *quality*, which operates, and the *subject*, on which it is plac’d” (T 2.1.2.6, 279). Putting the pieces together, pride emerges from the interaction of three components: an object (the self), a subject and its positive quality.

6.2.1 Positive Pride

Delving deeper into his description of pride and humility, Hume recognises that vices and virtues “are the most obvious causes of these passions” (T 2.1.7.2, 295; see also T 2.1.5.2, 285). This connection between pride, humility, and virtue was far from being the traditional understanding of this topic in Hume’s time. Before he detailed his account, pride was commonly understood as a vice and as a deadly sin.

Some of Hume’s important predecessors had already developed accounts of the self-regarding passions which emphasised their positive outcomes. According to Bernard Mandeville (1670–1733), for example, pride and vanity can be curbed to generate various virtues. His discussion of courage in the *Remark (R.)* annexed to his *Fable of the Bees* (1732) is a case in point. Here, Mandeville argues that true courage stems from the passion of anger: “all Men, whether they are born in Courts or Forests, are susceptible of Anger.

When this Passion overcomes (as among all degrees of People it sometimes does) the whole Set of Fears Man has, he has true Courage, and will fight as boldly as a Lion or a Tiger" (Mandeville [1732] 1924: 207). However, even in absence of that passion, one can bring oneself to act courageously out of pride and a desire of honour. In this case, the virtue of courage will not be real but "spurious and artificial" (Mandeville [1732] 1924: 207). In the case of human beings, acts of courage can be "rous'd by [one's] Vanity, as a Lion is by his Anger" (Mandeville [1732] 1924: 216): by curbing pride, humans can generate artificial virtues which are useful to society at large. In spite of this positive function of some self-regarding passions, however, even Mandeville retains the idea that pride is a vicious, albeit useful, passion.

In his *Treatise*, Hume explicitly moves away from the idea that pride must be a vice. In the following passage he engages directly with the tradition:

> There may, perhaps, be some, who being accustom'd to the style of the schools and pulpit, and having never consider'd human nature in any other light, than that in which *they* place it, may here be surpriz'd to hear me talk of virtue as exciting pride, which they look upon as a vice; and of vice as producing humility, which they have been taught to consider as a virtue. But not to dispute about words, I observe, that by *pride* I understand that agreeable impression, which arises in the mind, when the view either of our virtue, beauty, riches or power makes us satisfy'd with ourselves: And that by *humility* I mean the opposite impression. (T 2.1.7.8, 297)

For Hume, pride is an agreeable impression. If you feel proud it means that you (the object) are feeling good because of a positive quality attached to a subject that you are proud of something (the cause). In addition, since the most obvious cause of pride is virtue, Hume's account allows that pride can be good not only from one's own individual perspective but also from a societal perspective.

This connection between virtue and pride becomes even stronger in Book 3 of the *Treatise*. In Section 1 of Part 3, Hume affirms 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 3.3.1.3, 575). Since agreeable qualities of the mind are listed among the virtues, it is natural to think that Hume conceives of one's disposition to feel proud of oneself as virtuous. In addition, pride is also useful to oneself:

> The merit of pride or self-esteem is deriv'd from two circumstances, *viz.* its utility and its agreeableness to ourselves; by which it capacitates us for business, and, at the same time, gives us an immediate satisfaction. (T 3.3.2.14, 600)

It is therefore clear why we take pride to be virtuous: this passion is both agreeable and useful to oneself and, therefore, given the constitution of human nature is approved of by our moral feelings.

6.2.2 Excessive Pride

This, however, is not the whole story. In Book 3, Hume returns to this issue and now seems to turn the tables, affirming that pride can be excessive and, therefore, a vice, and that decency, understood along the lines of moderate humility, is a virtue. In T 3.3.2, *Of greatness of mind*, in which he concerns himself with "the passions of pride and humility, and […] the vice or virtue that lies in their excesses or just proportion", Hume begins by noting that when pride is excessive it turns into an "over-weaning conceit of ourselves" and "is always esteem'd vicious" (T 3.3.2.1, 592). On the contrary, "a just sense of our weakness" generates love in others and is, therefore, virtuous (T 3.3.2.1, 592). Since Hume has maintained that virtue has to "be consider'd as equivalent" to "the power of producing love or pride" and "vice" to "the power of producing humility or hatred" (T

3.3.1.3, 575), his conclusion must be that, insofar as it produces hatred in others, *excessive* pride is vicious:

> The necessary consequence of these principles is, that pride, or an over-weaning conceit of ourselves, must be vicious; since it causes uneasiness in all men, and presents them every moment with a disagreeable comparison. (T 3.3.2.7, 596)

That pride can be *excessive*, however, is an extremely vague formulation. Interpreters take 'excessive' to mean undue, inappropriate, or misplaced. This is surely true: Hume believes without a doubt that an "over-weaning conceit of ourselves" (T 3.3.2.7, 596) is vicious and that one is doing something morally problematic when one *overestimates* oneself. But there is another relevant way in which pride can be excessive, one that has been overlooked by interpreters.[131] For Hume, pride is not "excessive" only when it is undue. One could have good reasons to feel superior to others and be much prouder than one's peers, but this does not make one's pride less excessive. Hume's point is that one's pride can be immoderate simply because other people will feel inferior in one's presence.[132]

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[131] For example, Walter Brand argues that when Hume explains "why excessive pride is a vice" he has in mind individuals who "exhibit unjustified pride, people who overestimate the qualities they have" (Brand 2010: 346). Similarly Christian Maurer writes that Hume's "crucial and most influential point is to make room for a notion of *due* pride or self-esteem, against the more common depiction of pride […] involving an excessive, unjustified and unduly positive attitude towards ourselves" (Maurer 2019: 181). Other discussions, such as (Greco 2019) focus mostly on Hume's rehabilitation of pride and neglect to specify how it can become excessive. Annette Baier, in a similar vein, affirms that "[i]f the pride in question really is well founded […] then the only restraint that seems in order is one on the expression of ill-founded excessive and uncorrected pride" (Baier 1980: 418). Even Páll Árdal, in his extremely influential book, conflates the two ways in which pride can be excessive when he remarks that "[t]he trouble with the man whose pride is greater than his qualities merit lies just in this: that he is insensitive to the fact that his pride is disagreeable to others" (Árdal 1989: 150).

[132] Jennifer Herdt recognised this aspect noting that "[p]ride that we detect in others tends to be regarded as vicious for two reasons: because it is often overblown and because it encourages uncomfortable comparisons with ourselves and our own virtues and capacities" (Herdt 2008: 314). Jacqueline Taylor also touches upon the fact that pride can be excessive in two different ways when she affirms that "an excessive pride is usually ill-grounded (the person is not as great as she thinks or is not superior to others) or displayed in an exaggerated manner to draw attention from others" (Taylor 2015: 145). This point, however, needs further explanation.

In order to explain this second way in which pride can be excessive Hume mentions a "general rule":

> That impertinent, and almost universal propensity of men, to over-value themselves, has given us such a *prejudice* against self-applause, that we are apt to condemn it, by a *general rule*, wherever we meet with it […] (T 3.3.2.10, 598).

Pride is not considered excessive only when one feels it *in disproportion* to its cause, but also—and more importantly for what follows—when it goes beyond general established norms, regardless of the match that may exists between the feeling and the cause. This is so because "custom and practice" bring to light some principles that contribute "to the easy production of the passions, and guide us, by means of general establish'd maxims, in the proportions we ought to observe in preferring one object to another" (T 2.1.6.9, 294).

Hume acknowledges a human tendency to overestimation. This point, far from being a novel discovery, had been observed by previous writers. For instance, in his *Remark (M.)*, Mandeville claimed that "PRIDE is that Natural Faculty by which every Mortal that has any Understanding over-values, and imagines better Things of himself than any impartial Judge, thoroughly acquainted with all his Qualities and Circumstances, could allow him" (Mandeville [1732] 1924: 124). At the same time, as Hume explains "'tis our own pride, which makes us so much displeas'd with the pride of other people; and that vanity becomes insupportable to us merely because we are vain" (T 3.3.2.7, 596). This observation echoes La Rochefoucauld, who in his *Maxims* wrote that "[i]f we did not have pride, we would not complain of it in others" (La Rochefoucauld [1665] 2001: 9). Mandeville, again, noticed that pride "being odious to all the World, is a certain Sign that all the World is troubled with it" (Mandeville [1732] 1924: 124). Elaborating on this

human tendency, Hume argues that we have established a general rule that leads us to negatively judge every forceful manifestation of pride. Even the exceptionally meritorious individual will be subject to blame if they display their (due, but still excessive) pride.

Some interpreters explicitly conflate these two ways in which pride can be excessive. Walter Brand, for example, writes that "it is only when we do not believe that people are justified in their pride that we compare them to ourselves" (Brand 2010: 347). However, Hume is unequivocal: we find disagreeable *all* expressions of excessive pride and we do not "make any exception to this rule in favour of men of sense and merit" (T 3.3.2.10, 598). Even if some especially virtuous individuals have good reasons to be very proud of themselves, their pride will not be less disagreeable to others. There is a way in which pride is due yet excessive. Pride bears some risks for human sociability: if a person displays this passion only on the basis of the proper value of its cause, they risk ending up turning pride into a vice.

6.2.3 Explaining the Tension: "A Disagreeable Comparison"

Such a change of perspective between Book 2 (where pride is a positive and agreeable impression) and Book 3 (where it has potential negative effects) becomes psychologically understandable if we focus on "comparison". As explained in chapter 5, this principle appears already in Book 2, but it is only in T 3.3.2 that Hume analyses it in detail how it interacts with sympathy.[133] Comparison is described as the principle in human nature that is responsible for "the variation of our judgments concerning objects, according to the proportion they bear to those with which we compare them" (T 3.3.2.4, 593). Hume goes

[133] For a classic analysis of comparison see (Postema 2005: 263-269).

on to affirm that "no comparison is more obvious than that with ourselves; and hence it is that on all occasions it takes place, and mixes with most of our passions" (T 3.3.2.4, 593).

The principle of comparison is essential to understand Hume's position on the viciousness of excessive pride. Hume offers various clear formulations of this point:

> by making us enter into those elevated sentiments, which the proud man entertains of himself, presents that comparison, which is so mortifying and disagreeable. (T 3.3.2.6; 595)

> pride, or an over-weaning conceit of ourselves, must be vicious; since it causes uneasiness in all men, and presents them every moment with a disagreeable comparison. (T 3.3.2.7; 596)

The fact that one appears to be very proud, even if for a good reason, tends to make other people feel inferior and generates hatred rather than love. But since Hume has maintained that virtue has to "be consider'd as equivalent" to "the power of producing love or pride" and "vice" to "the power of producing humility or hatred" (T 3.3.1.3, 575), his conclusion must be that, insofar as it produces hatred in others, excessive pride is vicious.

Despite the admission that excessive pride is a vice, however, Hume does not go back on his word. He recognises that another's pride can be disagreeable only because it clashes with one's own pride:

> No one, who duly considers of this matter, will make any scruple of allowing, that any piece of ill-breeding, or any expression of pride and haughtiness, is displeasing to us, merely because it shocks our own pride, and leads us by sympathy into a comparison, which causes the disagreeable passion of humility. (T 3.3.2.17, 601)

This observation is essential because it allows Hume consistently to affirm that "tho' an over-weaning conceit of our own merit be vicious and disagreeable, nothing can be more

laudable, than to have a value for ourselves, where we really have qualities that are valuable" (T 3.3.2.8, 596). The fact that a disposition to feel pride (even due pride) can be disagreeable to others makes it sometimes vicious, but this does not counter the positive value of pride that Hume is very careful to point out:

> nothing is more useful to us in the conduct of life, than a due degree of pride, which makes us sensible of our own merit, and gives us a confidence and assurance in all our projects and enterprizes. […] 'Tis requisite on all occasions to know our own force; and were it allowable to err on either side, twou'd be more advantageous to overrate our merit, than to form ideas of it, below its just standard. (T 3.3.2.8, 596-7)

In short, a certain degree of pride and self-esteem is essential to one's well-being and the achievement of one's ends and projects in life.

6.3 Decency: A Virtue Without Virtuous Motives

Hume's definition of the virtue of decency emerges from the need to reconcile the two aspects of pride described in the previous section of this chapter. On the one hand, an individual should be proud of their own achievements and positive qualities; on the other, they should also conceal their pride (even when they have good reason to feel it!) in order to prevent others from feeling belittled by comparison. On Hume's view, it is ok to have "secret sentiments" (T 3.3.2.11, 598) of pride (agreeable and useful) as long as they are hidden (to avoid their disagreeable effect on others).

Decency is the virtue that consists in not displaying pride and represents a serious challenge to standard interpretations of Hume as a virtue ethicist committed to the idea that *all* actions derive their moral value from underlying virtuous motives. Contrary to

these interpretations, the case of decency shows that Hume does not always believe that a match between motives and actions is required to be virtuous. A person does not need to have underlying virtuous motives to be decent. In this case, what makes a piece of behaviour decent is the *outward* effects, not the presence of internal virtuous motives. Consequently, a decent person—one who reliably acts in a decent way—can be described fully without reference to virtuous motives or praiseworthy inward states of mind.

6.3.1 Modesty, Decency, Good Breeding

Before analysing the virtue of decency in detail, we need to devote some attention to Hume's oscillating terminology. In the context of his discussion of greatness of mind, Hume explores the virtue that consists of "a just sense of our weakness" and "procures the good-will of every-one" (T 3.3.2.1, 592). He sometimes calls this virtue "decency", some other times "modesty", "humility" or "good-breeding".[134] In key passages clearly concerned with the display of pride and humility, Hume uses the word "modesty" rather than "decency":

> modesty, or a just sense of our weakness, is esteem'd virtuous, and procures the good-will of every-one. (T 3.3.2.1, 592)

> tho' pride, or self-applause, be sometimes disagreeable to others, 'tis always agreeable to ourselves; as on the other hand, modesty, tho' it give pleasure to every one, who observes it, produces often uneasiness in the person endow'd with it. (T 3.3.2.9, 597)

In the same section, however, Hume also employs the word "decency" to refer to the exact same concept as denoted by "modesty":

[134] When quoting from Hume's text, I maintain his spelling of "good-breeding" (with a hyphen). When I use the same word out of quotation marks, however, I adopt the present-day spelling "good breeding".

> good-breeding and decency require that we shou'd avoid all signs and expressions, which tend directly to show that passion [pride]. (T 3.3.2.10, 597)

This virtue, therefore, could be called either "modesty" or "decency".

There are two reasons why it is better for us consistently to adopt the latter term. First, our common understanding of the word 'modesty' today is characterised by the reference to a person's actual beliefs of themselves and their value. Individuals are *really* modest only if they sincerely believes that they are less valuable than they actually are.[135] As we will go on to see, this is not a requirement in Hume's account of the virtue concerning the display of pride.[136]

Second, it is preferable to use the word "decency" in order to avoid confusion with Hume's account of modesty as a virtue connected to chastity (as of in T 3.2.12: *Of chastity and modesty*). To eliminate all confusion, let me note that when Hume talks of modesty in connection to chastity, he means something that "we require in the expressions, and dress, and behaviour of the fair sex" (T 3.2.12.2, 570). Modesty, in other words, is strictly connected to chastity in this context because it consists in being dressed and behaving in a way that is not suggestive or sexually explicit. This virtue has nothing to do with one's display of pride or self-esteem. As Ann Levey has noted, modesty in this sense "arises as part of a mechanism to enforce female chastity" and "is strictly a female virtue" (Levey 1997: 217). She puts it very clearly when she affirms that "[m]odesty in dress and

[135] For philosophical discussion of this point see (Driver 1989; 1999).

[136] In her brief remarks on this virtue, Annette Baier writes that "modesty is simply a recognition of the limits of one's grounds for pride" (Baier 1991: 207). This is inaccurate, and, I believe, stems from a projection of our common-sense account of modesty on Hume's account of the virtue that I prefer to call "decency". The same imprecision is in Christine Swanton's discussion (Swanton 2015: 101).

behavior is a public display of repugnance towards the erotic" (Levey 1997: 219). The same cannot be said, of course, for the regulation of pride.[137]

Regardless of the way in which the words "modesty" and "decency" are sometimes associated or used in ways that seems largely interchangeable in Hume's text, in what follows I will try to identify the virtue that Hume associates with a limited display of pride and I will call this virtue 'decency'.

Once we have made a clear conceptual distinction between modesty and decency, it is important to notice that other terms are often associated with decency in Hume's discussion. In the context of T 3.3.1 Hume uses the words "decency" and "good-breeding" in pairs. The phrase "good-breeding and decency" appears twice (T 3.3.2.10 and T 3.3.2.11, 597-8) and in other passages he refers to them in a way that is less straightforward but still clearly identifiable. Hume also talks of "good manners" and "politeness". These terms are used in a way that is not always clear and this has caused a significant amount of confusion in subsequent historiography. While Hume is concerned with politeness and good manners, they are conceptually distinct from the virtue of decency. Hume conceives of good manners as rules concerning conduct in company and conversation, and not specifically as a virtue for the regulation of the display of pride: for Hume "good manners" are "a kind of lesser morality" that has to do with the ceremonies "calculated for the ease of company and conversation" (EPM 4.13, 209).

[137] Hume's terminological imprecisions extend beyond his use of the word 'modesty'. He also uses the word 'decency' in a rather confusing way. In the following passage, for example, Hume uses 'decency' in a way that has nothing to do with pride: "Men have undoubtedly an implicit notion, that all those ideas of modesty and decency have a regard to generation; since they impose not the same laws, *with the same force*, on the male sex, where that reason takes not place" (T 3.2.12.7, 573). A similar conflation of the terms 'decency' and 'modesty' in the case of sexual conduct can be found in passages like the following: "Of the nations in the world, where polygamy was not allowed, the Greeks seem to have been the most reserved in their commerce with the fair sex, and to have imposed on them the strictest laws of modesty and decency" (EPM D.44, 338).

Decency is not the same as good manners: the former concerns only the display of pride, the latter—together with politeness—regards ceremonies, table manners, and etiquette. In his discussion of this topic, some interpreters fail to distinguish between a virtue consisting of the regulation of pride and a more general conformity to good manners. In doing so, they end up conflating politeness with the virtue consisting in a limited display of pride. Mikko Tolonen, for example, writes that "[i]n the *Treatise*, Hume characterizes politeness as an outward principle directly related to the passion of pride" (Tolonen 2008: 31). However, as Tolonen himself emphasises, in an important discussion of politeness to be found in a letter to Michael Ramsay written on September 12, 1734, Hume describes politeness as consisting of "the little Niceties" that "serve to polish the ordinary Kind of People & prevent Rudeness & Brutality" (HL, vol. 1, 21). This shows clearly that politeness goes well beyond the simple suppression of external pride and rather includes a series of gestures, courtesies and formalities which are without doubt artificial. Tolonen fails to isolate decency as a specific virtue made of the regulation in one's display of pride and speaks of 'politeness' (a word that appears one single time in the *Treatise*), decency, modesty and good manners as if they were the same virtue.

In older literature, other interpreters fall into the same trap. Peter Johnson, despite a remarkable analysis of Hume's conception of good manners as "a necessary feature of an ordered social existence" (Johnson 1998: 211), ends up conflating Hume's thoughts concerning the regulation of pride with more general remarks on etiquette and civility which stem from redirected pride but go well beyond the mere hiding of this passion. In his book *The Suasive Art of David Hume*, M. A. Box rightly notices that "Hume places good manners among the artificial rather than the natural virtues" (Box 1990: 142), but assumes that decency, politeness, and good manners are only different names for the same

virtue. As I have argued above, a more fine-grained analysis of Hume's text shows that this assumption needs to be challenged.

Against Box, Johnson, and Tolonen, I claim that Hume describes a specific virtue that is required in the regulation and display of pride in order to prevent disagreeable comparisons. Decency emerges as a virtue that is not only different from good manners or politeness, but also raises a powerful challenge to a common interpretation of Hume's ethics that assumes a necessary match between true virtuous behaviour and correspondent underlying motives for action.

6.3.2 Decency or "A Fair Outside"

Despite Hume's ambivalent view of pride, he is clear that "self-satisfaction and vanity may not only be allowable, but requisite in a character" (T 3.3.2.10, 597).[138] We should feel pride when we have good reason to do so but we also have to hide it to live well in society. From this tension we approve of one's tendency to feel pride but only when this passion is moderate and properly concealed. For this reason, Hume affirms that:

> good-breeding and decency require that we shou'd avoid all signs and expressions, which tend directly to show that passion [pride]. We have, all of us, a wonderful partiality for ourselves, and were we always to give vent to our sentiments in this particular, we shou'd mutually cause the greatest indignation in each other (T 3.3.2.10, 597)

Although we all have "a wonderful partiality for ourselves", we also hide our pride in order not to be disagreeable to others. Note here that Hume is not talking of a way in which we curb or redirect pride. Rather, he is talking of *concealing* this passion. This, in my view, is an essential difference between decency as a virtue consisting of hiding pride

[138] Here I take self-satisfaction to mean "pride" and "vanity" a desire for reputation (T 2.2.1.9, 332). For a more systematic analysis of Hume's distinction between pride and vanity see (Galvagni 2020b).

and politeness as a practice arising from the redirection of the same passion, a difference that interpreters have not stressed in previous readings.

The virtue of decency resides precisely in a *hiding* process, a process that does not require an erasure of what is concealed:

> I believe no one, who has any practice of the world, and can penetrate into the inward sentiments of men, will assert, that the humility, which good-breeding and decency require of us, goes beyond the outside (T 3.3.2.11, 598)

Here, Hume is claiming that one's humility is required by good breeding and decency, but such humility does not go "beyond the outside".[139] We need not have any real feeling of humility in order to achieve the virtue of decency.[140]

The lack of motives of humility becomes even more evident as Hume stresses that decency is a virtue that is compatible with a sort of emotional camouflage. No decent motives are required for true decency. Even more tellingly, a person can be decent and proud at the same time, as long as she keeps her sentiments secret:

> some disguise in this particular is absolutely requisite; and that if we harbour pride in our breasts, we must carry a fair outside, and have the appearance of modesty and mutual deference in all our conduct and behaviour. We must, on every occasion, be ready to prefer others to ourselves; to treat them with a kind of deference, even tho' they be our equals; [...] And if we observe these rules in

[139] This aspect has been incidentally noted in one of the few discussions of the topic. Mikko Tolonen puts it this way: "In the case of politeness, the virtue is a sign of deference without reference to motives or underlying true qualities" (Tolonen 2008: 31). Tolonen states the same point again by affirming that "the actual virtue is the sign of humility, and no questions about motives or real quality have to be asked" (Tolonen 2013: 222-23). This idea, however, needs to be further developed and, as I will show in the rest of the chapter, there are some important questions which we can ask about the way in which decency moves us to action.

[140] With this I am not implying that Hume believes that there is no such a thing as real humility. One could have a disposition to often feel the passion of humility, but this, Hume would say, is not a real virtue. Such a disposition would have to be defined as a vice based on Hume's own idea that "vice and the power of producing humility or hatred" have "to be consider'd as equivalent, with regard to our mental qualities" (T 3.3.1.3, 575).

> our conduct, men will have more indulgence for our secret sentiments, when we discover them in an oblique manner. (T 3.3.2.10, 598)

This excerpt makes clear that Hume's account of decency only requires one to hide the *signs* of pride. On the basis of what we have discussed in section 6.2, it is clear that Hume unequivocally encourages one to feel pride even if he suggests that this passion will have to be kept secret in society. When Hume is highlighting the importance of decency he is not suggesting that we should aim to *truly* eradicate our pride in favour of the opposite passion of humility. All we ought to do is to make sure that the *external* manifestation of our sentiments is decent.

Feeling motives of humility is not a requirement to realise the virtue of decency. This absence of motives is especially striking because decency does not fit with Hume's definition of the artificial virtues. The most important difference that separates decency from good manners is that while good manners are merely artificial and based on social conventions, decency has a natural core.[141] Pride is a natural and common passion and its effects due to comparison may be disagreeable regardless of any social institution, just as generosity is agreeable without requiring any artificial condition. On the contrary, good manners are defined on the basis of the institution of rules established by society. This means that in Hume's system there is a *natural* virtue which has no matching virtuous motives.[142] As we will see in the next section, this poses an important challenge to a standard virtue ethical interpretation of Hume.

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[141] Rachel Cohon seems to recognise that decency is a natural virtue ("the natural virtues of self-confidence and modesty", 2008: 234) but she does not remark that Hume insists on the lack of motives for this virtue.
[142] The debate about what exactly makes it so that a virtue is natural or artificial is lively (e.g., Schneewind 1990: 51-54; O'Day 1994; Fieser 1997; Wiggins 1998; Cohon 2006). Despite this, interpreters agree that our approval of natural virtues does not depend on artificial institutions, while the artificial virtues are approved of because of human artificial conventions.

To be clear, I recognise that while discussing decency, Hume explicitly mentions that "we establish *the rules of good-breeding*" (T 3.3.2.10; 598) and that "[t]he rules of good-breeding condemn whatever is openly disobliging, and gives a sensible pain and confusion to those, with whom we converse" (T 1.3.13.15, 152). The fact that some *rules* are established in society prevents us from being able to say that the decent regulation in one's display of pride is an *entirely* natural virtue. However, the simple existence of general rules is not enough to make something artificial. The passion of pride, for example, is, according to Hume, natural and yet influenced by general rules. In the fifth limitation to his discussion of pride, Hume writes that "*general rules* have a great influence upon pride and humility, as well as on all the other passions" (T 2.1.6.8, 293). This does not make pride an artificial passion. It is therefore possible that decency is equally influenced by general rules without having to be an artificial virtue.

There are, indeed, three reasons to doubt that Hume conceives of decency as artificial. First: unlike artificial virtues such as justice, fidelity to promises, allegiance to the government and chastity (all discussed in T 3.2), decency is discussed among the "other virtues" in T 3.3. The fact that the virtues related to greatness of mind are discussed after the "natural virtues" and before benevolence and natural abilities gives us a strong suggestion that Hume conceives of decency as a natural virtue (or at least one that is closer to the natural than to the artificial).[143] Second: in addition to the fact that Hume discusses decency among the natural virtues, we must recognise that all instances of decency are agreeable to others. Different from artificial virtues such as justice and chastity where the positive effect of the virtue emerges only within a larger pattern of social reiteration, decency always produces agreeable results in every single instance: "Of

[143] More could be said about the virtue of strength of mind and whether it should be counted as artificial or natural (see e.g., Kopajtic 2015; McIntyre 2006; Radcliffe 2015).

the four sources of moral distinctions, this [decency] is to be ascrib'd to the third; *viz.* the immediate agreeableness and disagreeableness of a quality to others, without any reflections on the tendency of that quality" (T 3.3.2.1, 592). Third: Hume explicitly says that we *naturally* value a well-regulated hidden pride:

> I am content with the concession, that the world *naturally* esteems a well-regulated pride, which *secretly* animates our conduct, without breaking out into such indecent expressions of vanity, as may offend the vanity of others. (T 3.3.2.13, 600, my emphases)

I take these three points above as evidence that Hume conceives of decency—unlike etiquette, good manners, and politeness—as a virtue that falls closer to the natural than the artificial. And yet, as I have shown, he also believes that there is no need to feel real humility in order to be decent; all that matters is that one's pride will be hidden from the eyes of one's fellow creatures. While decency is a virtue that can be obtained regardless of one's real feelings, pride, rather than humility, is the passion that we should aim to feel. One's behaviour will be no less decent when it stems from real feelings of humility than when it derives from hidden pride. But since Hume encourages us to feel pride over humility, it seems that we should possess the virtue of decency *and* feel proud of ourselves. Recognizing decency as a virtue distinct from good manners and exploring it in its own right, therefore, provides us with a very peculiar element within Hume's theory of virtue, one that offers an important challenge to some existing interpretations of his moral philosophy.

6.4 The Challenge to Motive-Based Virtue Ethics

The account of decency reconstructed above is something to which Hume scholars have rarely devoted attention. What I have shown is that this virtue, which we have good reason to think of as natural, is one that requires no virtuous motives. It is not the case that one should be moved to decency by a humility in order to be *really* decent: "a fair outside" is enough. One can even have "secret sentiments" of pride and yet be decent simply because one *acts* in a way that does not directly reveal those sentiments. This means that what counts in our moral evaluation regarding decency are not one's motives and desires, but simply one's actions. It does not matter whether a person acts decently because they are truly concerned with the well-being of others or, say, because they fear social marginalisation. All that counts in the attribution of decency is that they do not display excessive pride in their actions. If my reconstruction of decency in 6.3.2 is correct, we have reasons to doubt a common reading of Hume as a virtue ethicist who always holds the claim that the moral value of actions always derives from virtuous motives.

6.4.1 Motives for Virtue?

The idea that Hume's philosophy is a form of virtue ethics is more and more common within current Hume scholarship. Don Garrett, for instance, insists that Hume's virtue ethics consists of his acceptance of the idea that "all virtuous actions derive their merit only from virtuous motives, and are consider'd merely as signs of those motives" (T 3.2.1.4, 478, quoted in Garrett 2015: 264). Lorenzo Greco maintains that Hume's moral philosophy is a form of virtue ethics because "the objects of moral judgments are not people's actions, but the motives that lie behind them; human actions may well be regarded in a positive or in a negative light, but only insofar as the motives that activated

them are valued positively or negatively" (Greco 2019: 211). These examples could easily be multiplied.

This virtue ethical reading of Hume is supported by textual evidence. The thesis, that we may call Hume's motives-for-virtue thesis, is stated in various key paragraphs in T 3.2.1:

> 'Tis evident, that when we praise any actions, we regard only the motives that produced them, and consider the actions as signs or indications of certain principles in the mind and temper. The external performance has no merit. We must look within to find the moral quality. (T 3.2.1.2, 477)

> 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 3.2.1.4, 478)

By taking these excerpts seriously, the virtue ethical interpretation builds on and explains an important feature of Hume's theory that a consequentialist reading has trouble making sense of. When it comes to moral evaluation, Hume places a great deal of importance on *motives*. Here, Hume's point is that we cannot ascribe moral value to an action alone unless it is taken as the sign of an *underlying virtuous motive*. The "external performance" and, plausibly, also its consequences cannot be considered as virtuous or vicious in themselves. A virtue ethical reading of these passages seems plausible.[144]

6.4.2 Motives for Chastity and Justice?

Such an interpretation can be challenged, however, because some virtues seem to have no underlying virtuous motives in Hume's account. The virtues of justice and chastity, for example, are *prima facie* problematic for Hume because they have no natural virtuous

[144] In recent years, various authors have built different forms of virtue ethics inspired by Hume, e.g., (Frykholm 2015; Swanton 2015; Vitz 2018). Interesting as they are, these explicitly present neo-Humean accounts and do not attempt to faithfully interpret Hume's moral philosophy as a form of virtue ethics.

motives. There is no such a thing as a natural virtuous passion or motive that we approve of when we approve of someone's justice or chastity.

These two virtues, however, can be squared with the motives-for-virtue thesis. In the case of chastity, it is Hume himself who explains how an artificial motive is generated in society to make sure that women develop "a repugnance to all expressions, and postures, and liberties, that have an immediate relation to [sexual] enjoyment" (T 3.2.12.5, 572). While the motive associated with chastity is *not* natural, it is a motive that people approve of when they approve of chastity. People do not approve of an individual's chastity merely because of her behaviour, but rather because she has developed a "repugnance" of the expression of sexual enjoyment.[145]

In the case of the virtue of justice, Hume does not provide an explicit discussion of an artificial motive. For this reason, some argue that justice raises a major concern for Hume's motives-for-virtue thesis and, therefore, for virtue ethical readings of Hume. James Harris, for instance, gives a historical account of justice in Hume, arguing that he conceived of it as a virtue only because of its positive *consequences* for society in line with the Grotian tradition (Harris 2010). In a more recent paper, Harris reinforces this point by noting that "Hume's engagement with modern natural law could have led him, without his being fully aware of it, to the Grotian conclusion that the morality of justice and injustice is different in kind from the morality of virtue and vice" (Harris 2019: 228). If this is indeed the case, the agent's underlying motives do not matter in considerations of justice. This is enough to undermine the possibility of interpreting Hume's thought as a coherent form of virtue ethics based on the motives-for-virtue thesis. Hence, there is at

[145] While Hume's discussion of chastity unveils the non-natural origin of this virtue, his account has been criticised for assuming that "nature has given *man* the superiority above *woman*" (E 133). For critical readings of Hume on this point see (Lacoste 1976; Battersby 1981).

least a non-irrelevant part of Hume's moral philosophy that the virtue ethical interpretation fails to capture: at least one virtue does not comply with the motive-for-virtue thesis. A motive-based virtue ethical interpretation of Hume cannot make sense of the virtue of justice.

While an artificial motive is not explicitly provided by Hume in the case of justice, however, interpreters have reconstructed in various ways such a motive using Hume's text. Stephen Darwall, for instance, advances the thesis that on Hume's view, "just persons … regard the fact that something belongs to another, or that the rule of property requires forbearance, as a motive—i.e., a ground or a reason—for not taking it" (1995: 293). When an individual is disposed to be respondent to reasons of this kind, they will count as a just person and "regulates [their] conduct by rules of justice" (1995: 318). In a similar way, Garrett proposes that "Hume does, should, and can recognize a motive to justice", which is "a disposition grounded in a desire to regulate one's actions by the rules of justice" (2007: 277). Although in different ways, these interpreters argue that we should read Hume's motives-for-virtue thesis as compatible with his account of justice. If they are right, the motive-based virtue ethical interpretation of Hume's moral philosophy is not endangered by the case of justice.

6.4.3 Decency: Against Motive-Based Virtue Ethics

The characterisation of the virtue of decency presented above offers a stronger case against Hume's own affirmation that actions are virtuous only when they derive from virtuous motives. The construction of an artificial motive for the virtue of decency is something that interpreters cannot pursue since Hume has openly stated that this virtue is

one that evaluates the outside rather than the inside.[146] In T 3.2.1 Hume affirmed that "[t]he external performance has no merit" (T 3.2.1.2, 477), but later—while discussing the virtue of decency—he tells us that all we need to do to be decent is to "carry a fair outside". A person can be decent even when they "harbour pride" in their breast and have secret sentiments that are contrary to real humility. There is, therefore, one virtue that *explicitly* does not require underlying motives we approve of.

An important point needs to be clarified here. Regardless of whether decency is a virtue with or without an underlying virtuous motive, we still attribute the quality of being decent to a *person* and not only to actions or individual pieces of behaviour. We can affirm that a person is more decent than another, for example, even if there is no single virtuous motive for decency. This is the case even if all that there is to decency is an outward show and it can be justified by appealing to Hume's text. In Hume T 3.3.1.4-5, Hume stresses that what counts in attributions of virtuousness and viciousness are not simply actions, but rather "durable principles of the mind" (T 3.3.1.4, 575). In so far as we can recognise a *stable disposition* to behave decently in someone, we can say that they are a decent person. In other words, we can attribute the virtue of decency to someone even if decency does not stem from virtuous motives if that person reliably behaves in a decent way.

It is essential to note, however, that this stable disposition can be derived from a pattern of actions motivated in very different ways. One will count as a decent person because one reliably prevents disagreeable comparison with others. To do so, this person needs not to have any intrinsically good motives. An individual may reliably behave decently because they are scared of being marginalised or ostracised; another may do so

[146] Note that an explicit specification of this kind is absent in Hume's discussion of justice.

because they are concerned with others' well-being; a third individual can be said decent if they do not show any pride because they have a low self-esteem; and so on. All these individuals, for one reason or the other, will reliably act in a decent way and, therefore, count as decent. This, however, does not erase an important difference between decency and other natural virtues. While in the cases of other virtues a specific motivating passion is required, this is not the case for the virtue of decency. For instance, a benevolent person is not simply one who reliably acts *as if* they cared about others, but one who is motivated in their actions by the feeling of benevolence. Decency, on the other hand, lacks matching motivating passion. While the benevolent, the generous, the caring person needs to be described as acting and feeling in a certain way; the decent person can be described fully without reference to specific decency-related passions or intentions.

While the concept of character remains central in Hume, the virtue of decency poses a powerful challenge to a reading that puts too much emphasis on motives. When accepting that decency is a virtue, Hume is clearly going against his motives-for-virtue thesis: "[w]e must look within to find the moral quality" (T 3.2.1.2, 477), he said, but in the case of decency no virtuous mental state or motive is required for the act to be virtuous. If Hume believes that "all virtuous actions derive their merit only from virtuous motives" (T 3.2.1.4, 478) and that decency is a virtue, as he has been arguing in T 3.3.2, it should follow that we have a virtuous motive to restrain our pride. However, Hume *denies* exactly this point in his characterisation of the virtue of decency. One can be said to be a decent person because they possess a reliable disposition to hide their pride, but no reference to any particular set of virtuous motives is needed. Decency, therefore, poses a challenge to a reading of Hume that takes his motives-for-virtue thesis as something that he consistently accepts all along the *Treatise*. The interpreters who see Hume as

committed to the motives-for-virtue thesis all the way through will need to provide a way to account for this tension in Hume's thought.

6.5 Objections

The case of decency as a challenge to a motive-based interpretation of Hume I developed may give rise to various objections. In order to consolidate my challenge to this popular reading of Hume, in this section I consider three objections to my reconstruction of decency as a virtue without matching motives that we approve of. I offer a response to each of these objections which also helps to clarify my reconstruction of this virtue.

6.4.1 All Virtues Are Mental Qualities

A first objection to my reconstruction above is that the simple fact that Hume talks of decency *as a virtue* prevents us from saying that it has no motives. A virtue is per definition a trait of character, or to be more respectful of Hume's terminology, a "quality of the mind". Saying that decency is a virtue, therefore, is to say that there is a quality of the mind that corresponds to our positive evaluation of decent behaviour. If Hume really believed that no mental quality is associated with decency, then he could not call it a virtue at all. A virtue with no motives is simply *not a virtue*. Recall how in the case of chastity it is only when one develops a "repugnance to all expressions, and postures, and liberties" (T 3.2.12.5, 572) that we can properly say that chastity becomes established as a virtue. So, regardless of whether decency is natural or artificial, we cannot properly call it a virtue unless we are ready to admit that there is a correspondent quality of the mind.

This may seem a legitimate point to raise. However, when Hume says that decency is a virtue, he seems to mean nothing more than the mere fact that we regard certain acts

and behaviour as decent. This attribution of virtuousness to specific actions that conform to decency needs no reference to a *matching* underlying stable motive or quality of the mind. To be clear, this does not mean that the action is uncaused, or that there is no motive whatsoever that generates a given decent action, but simply that we need not identify a single stable motive, mental quality, or character trait from which all decent actions derive their virtuousness. The common account of the attribution of virtuousness in Hume's terms has been spelled out by Rachel Cohon, who describes it as follows: "To behave virtuous*ly* (in a virtuous manner), one's action must be brought about […] by suitable feelings or desires. This is because to act virtuously or well, it is not enough to do the right thing; one must do it for the right reasons" (Cohon 2008: 193). However, this does not apply to the case of decency where internal mental states and reasons become irrelevant.[147]

Walter Brand has tried to argue in favour of the idea that decency has an underlying motive. He says that "[a]n implicit expression of justified pride is a virtue, provided that our intimations *sincerely* express doubt about our intrinsic value. The insinuation of pride *ought to go beyond the appearance of modesty*. Without the element of sincerity, we merely follow the decorums of decency" (Brand 2010: 349, my emphases). Brand's conclusion is that a "sense of humility" (Brand 2010: 350) provides us with a motive to act according to the virtue of decency. However, Brand does not explain how such a motive is possibly virtuous given that Hume unequivocally values pride and affirms that it is essential for one's success. Besides, Brand does not consider

[147] Consider, for example, four individuals A, B, C and D. A is someone who feels no pride and has no good reason to feel pride; B feels pride but is naturally inclined not to show it; C feels a great amount of pride and hide it for prudential reasons since C knows that it would be self-detrimental to show it; and D feels as much pride as C and hide it for benevolent reasons. Hume, I believe, would say that all these individuals are *decent* to the same degree. In order to see this, the reader should try to put aside our common-sense conception of modesty and consider only what *Hume* says about decency as a virtue that requires no sincerity. This is why I have decided to use the word 'decency' rather than 'modesty' to talk about it.

the passages that I have analysed above where Hume affirms that decency does not go "beyond the outside" and is based on "disguise". Brand seems to assume that Hume could not conceive of virtue as a mere following of the "decorums of decency", and therefore also assumes that Hume relies on an "element of sincerity". This operation, however, fails to take seriously Hume's text. As we have seen, Hume repeatedly and explicitly describes decency as a virtue of the "outside" and stresses that it is based on "appearance" and "disguise". A reconstruction of Hume's account that ignores these elements is implausible.

Decent actions are decent simply because they put up a "fair outside". A person can be said to be virtuous in so far as she *exhibits* decent behaviour. This is all that is prescribed since Hume explicitly denies that "a thorough sincerity in this particular is esteem'd a real part of our duty" (T 3.3.2.11, 598). Decency is a virtue because it allows others to maintain their own self-esteem during social interactions: it is required "in order to prevent the opposition of men's pride" (T 3.3.2.10, 597) and, as Hume notices, "vanity becomes insupportable to us merely because we are vain" (T 3.3.2.7, 596). We have to be decent—this is why decency is a virtue—but there is no need to be sincere about it. Decency is a virtue that shows itself in social interaction, but there is no intrinsic moral worth to it. All that matters is to *behave* decently. It is not necessary to identify a specific mental quality, a kind of sincerity in our humility that must be the right reason for which we act decently.

6.4.2 Motives of Benevolence

A reader committed to the virtue ethical interpretation could try to dismiss the challenge set by decency by saying that I have ignored the fact that we should be decent for a regard for the well-being of others. We know that other people feel bad when presented with

excessively proud individuals, and *therefore* we should hide our pride. The virtue of decency, then, would be a disposition stemming from a regard for our fellow human beings to make sure that people around us do not feel belittled by comparison. According to this view, one could try to construct a sort of benevolent motive for decency by saying that what really matters is that a decent person is moved in their decency by a concern for others' well-being.

This objection, however, fails to fully distinguish benevolence from decency. Hume, in contrast to Hutcheson, does not believe that benevolence is the most important and all-encompassing virtue. He constructs a thorough account of virtue that is not bound to benevolent motives. When we evaluate character *in general*, of course, it will be relevant to see whether that person acts decently because of a concern for the wellbeing of others or for merely egoistic reasons. Discovering these motives, however, will tell us something about the virtues or vices of that person *other* than decency. An analogy can be helpful here. A good artist is such because they produce excellent artwork. Whether they do it for money, for success, or for a genuine love of beauty, these motives do not affect our judgment about them *as an artist*. Of course, if we know they sculpt only to gain money and they do not care at all about art, we can judge them as selfish or acquisitive, but this does not allow us to retract our judgment of them being a good artist. In the same way, a decent person may act decently with no regard to others, and yet this does not make them an indecent person. Benevolence and decency, therefore, must be kept distinct and motives of benevolence should not be taken as necessary for one to be decent.

6.4.3 If Justice, then Decency

There is a third objection that may be in the reader's mind at this point. Since Hume underscores various similarities between decency and justice, it can be argued that the account of decency and the problems that this virtue poses to virtue ethical readings of Hume are not different from problems posed by justice. And yet, the debate on justice tends to lean toward a resolution of the issue that considers the possibility of introducing a virtuous non-natural motive. If we can solve the problem with the apparent lack of motives in Hume's account of justice and if justice and decency are similar, then we have reason to believe that we can solve the same problem in the case of decency.

This objection seems supported by Hume's text. Indeed, Hume himself draws a parallel between justice and good breeding:[148]

> In like manner, therefore, as we establish the *laws of nature*, in order to secure property in society, and prevent the opposition of self-interest; we establish the *rules of good-breeding*, in order to prevent the opposition of men's pride, and render conversation agreeable and inoffensive. (T 3.3.2.10, 597)

But behind Hume's parallel, however, we can find an important disanalogy. While Hume encourages the pursuit of pride, he does not do the same with self-interest. A person can be said to be truly just only when they have detached their conduct from their own direct self-interest. If they act justly only to *camouflage* their self-interest under a façade of just acts, they will be acting in a way that lacks the relevant motives. In the case of decency, however, things are different. As we have seen, Hume says explicitly that this

[148] Richard Dees notes that in the case of both justice and good breeding there is an "artifice" that mediates between two opposing tendencies: "conflicting prides are eased through the convention of etiquette, and conflicting interests are mollified through the convention of property and the rules of justice" (Dees 1997: 53). As I have argued above, we have reason to believe that, even if the rules of good breeding are socially constructed, decency is a natural virtue.

virtue is based on "disguise" and that it never goes "beyond the outside". Decency and good breeding are virtues only insofar as they allow one to avoid the disagreeable effects on others of pride in oneself or self-confidence. Pride in oneself is "useful to us in the conduct of life" and "gives us a confidence and assurance in all our projects and enterprizes" (T 3.3.2.8, 597). It is useful and agreeable to oneself and is, therefore, a virtue. It is only because of the negative effects that this virtue sometimes produces in others that we have to play one virtue against the other—the most virtuous option is to be proud inside *and* decent outside.

Since decency is a virtue only because it moderates the disagreeable effects of pride, we are not bound to be decent in the same way as we are bound to be just. A hypothetical motive for justice can be constructed in Humean terms, building upon the internalisation of the rules of justice. The same, however, is not possible for decency, which is a surface virtue. In specific circumstances where we would find ourselves able to express our pride in a way that is not disagreeable to others, we would have reason to do so and to act out of the virtue of self-confidence. This opens a remarkable gap between decency and justice.

The disanalogy between these two virtues can be further developed by noticing that dispositions to act reliably in a decent and just manner are motivated in a very different way. The person who acts in accordance with justice but does so only out of self-interest will not be said to possess the virtue of justice because they will not *reliably* act justly. They will conform to the rules of justice only as long as someone is watching but will break them as soon as they can do so without getting in trouble. Decency, however, is a virtue that always requires the eyes of others to come into the picture. One cannot exercise decency unless one is in a social setting. This makes it so that a

motivational pattern based on fear of being judged negatively will be enough to produce reliable decent behaviour. As argued above, a reliable and stable motivational pattern is enough for the attribution of the virtue of decency even in the absence of a matching motive of decency or humility. This cannot be the case for justice because, inevitably, one may find oneself in circumstances where no one is looking. Only the person who has internalised justice making it a stable disposition will act justly (e.g., bringing to the police a wallet full of money found in the woods instead of keeping it for oneself). Without a moral motivation for following the rules of justice, one will not reliably act justly in circumstances when one can have some personal gain with no risk. The same, however, is not true for decency since the very nature of this virtue requires that it is exercised in the presence of others.

As a foil to this view, consider Hume's notorious case of the "sensible knave", a man who breaks the rules of justice every now and then, but is careful enough to do so only as long as that does not endanger himself or social stability:

> a sensible knave, in particular incidents, may think, that an act of iniquity or infidelity [i.e., injustice] will make a considerable addition to his fortune, without causing any considerable breach in the social union and confederacy. 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. (EPM 9.22, 282-83)

According to Hume, by behaving *unjustly* when he can, the sensible knave "sacrifice[s] the invaluable enjoyment of a character […] for the acquisition of worthless toys and gewgaws" (EPM 9.25, 283). The knave gives up on his own "inward peace of mind, consciousness of integrity, [and] satisfactory review of [his] own conduct" (EPM 9.23, 283) because of his unjust behaviour. The same, however, is not true in the case of

decency. Since the disposition to feel pride is a virtue, by being proud when one can be so without being detected by others, one would not be culpable of 'sensible knavery'. The proud sensible knave does not renounce his inward peace of mind as the unjust sensible knave does. He is an individual who makes the most of the opportunities that he has to feel proud, and, at the same time, he makes sure other people around him do not feel belittled by comparison. But this means that the proud sensible knave is not a knave at all. When presented with the opportunity to feel pride, the virtuous individual should take it. On the contrary, being unjust in the same circumstances would be problematic for its disruptive effects on one's own character and mental peacefulness.

6.6 The Priority of Moral Approbation

Decency is a virtue that Hume describes clearly and yet it has been overlooked by Hume scholars. Even the rare studies that touch upon this virtue have conflated it with concepts such as good manners and politeness. If the account that I have reconstructed above is correct, this lack of attention given to decency is an important gap in the study of Hume's account of virtue. Decency, I have stressed, is a virtue that we naturally approve of and yet requires no sincerity or real humility. In order to judge a person as decent, we can limit our observation to her "fair outside": no reference to specific motives or mental states is required. Any individual whose actions avoid the production of negative consequences due to an excessive display of pride can be said to be decent.

The thesis that decency is a virtue without underlying virtuous motives is strengthened by Hume's observation that it is compatible with motives that are in conflict with real humility. Secret sentiments of pride are perfectly fine to have as long as they

are well-hidden. The case of decency, therefore, represents a serious and underexplored challenge to interpretations of Hume's ethics that see him as committed to the idea that all virtues derive their moral value from underlying motives. In no other place does Hume deny so explicitly that motives are not required for virtuousness as in his discussion of decency.

Challenging the motive-based virtue ethical reading of Hume in this way allows us to reaffirm the importance of an alternative interpretation of his moral philosophy. As I have stressed in the opening pages of this dissertation, the considerable degree of attention that has been devoted to Hume's account of virtue in recent scholarship has not been matched by a study of his relationship to the voluntarist tradition. A close textual analysis of T 3.3.2 and decency reveals that Hume's thought includes an important element that is *not* captured by common motive-based virtue ethical interpretations.

Hume's moral philosophy revolves around the notion of moral approbation. Our sentiments are the ultimate source of what is virtuous and what is not. Insisting on motives, consequences, or any other element as necessary for a trait to be virtuous reveals a misunderstanding of his sentimentalism. Hume does not conceive of morality as something that exists independent of human beings' contingent sentiments and emotional reactions. The comparison with voluntarism is instructive: it shows us that for the anti-rationalist a mind has to impose morality onto the initially neutral world. Motives and consequences, therefore, emerge to be morally relevant *only if and when they generate moral sentiments*. As such, both can coexist in our moral life: while certain acts are approved of because they signify underlying motives, others generate approbation in virtue of their consequences alone. What is morally good depends on approbation, the moralis*ing* element which illuminates natural objects in a new light.

CONCLUSION

In her 1958 paper "Modern Moral Philosophy", Elizabeth Anscombe claims that the concepts of 'moral obligation' and 'moral ought' require "a *law* conception of ethics" (1958: 6). As she puts it, "it is not possible to have such a conception unless you believe in God as a law-giver; like Jews, Stoics, and Christians" (1958: 6). When this religious understanding of the world is given up, the concept of 'moral ought' loses "the framework of thought that made it … intelligible" (1958: 6). In such a context, she writes, "the notion 'morally ought'" becomes one where "no content could be found" and, therefore, it "would be most reasonable to drop it" (1958: 8).

Anscombe's paper has attracted much attention, and is often credited for the present-day revival of virtue ethics. However, her idea that the notion of 'moral ought' requires a divine legislator is questionable. What is it that makes the presence of a divine legislator necessary for moral oughts to make sense? She illustrates her claim with an example: "It is as if the notion 'criminal' were to remain when criminal law and criminal courts had been abolished and forgotten" (1958: 6). For Anscombe the concept of 'moral ought' without that of 'divine legislator' is like a cog removed from its machine.[149] Once it loses its place in the system where it belongs—once the system is destroyed, the machine dismantled—the cog turns into meaningless junk. As such, Anscombe suggests, "the concepts of obligation, and duty … and of the moral sense of "ought," ought to be jettisoned" (1958: 1).

[149] Alasdair MacIntyre agrees with Anscombe: "We possess indeed simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have—very largely, if not entirely—lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality" (MacIntyre 2007: 3).

For voluntarist thinkers, a law is essential to create moral oughts. For Pufendorf, "moral necessity, and turpitude, are affections of human actions arising from their conformity or non-conformity to … the bidding of a superior" (LNNO 1.2.6, 27). Similarly, for Locke, morality requires "the Conformity, or Disagreement, Men's voluntary Actions have to a Rule, to which they are referred, and by which they are judged" (ECHU 2.28.4, 350). Anscombe agrees with their view: the notion of 'moral ought' implies "a verdict on my action, according as it agrees or disagrees with the description in the 'ought' sentence. And where one does not think there is a judge or a law, the notion of a verdict may retain its psychological effect, but not its meaning" (1958: 8).

However, Anscombe does not think that giving up the concept of moral ought implies abandoning ethics *tout court*. Rather, we should "do ethics without it" (1958: 8):

> It would be a great improvement if, instead of "morally wrong," one always named a genus such as "untruthful," "unchaste," "unjust." We should no longer ask whether doing something was "wrong," passing directly from some description of an action to this notion; we should ask whether, e.g., it was unjust (Anscombe 1958: 8-9)

Anscombe's text famously sparked a revival of ethics done with aretaic concepts rather than deontic ones, contributing to the centrality of virtue ethics in present-day moral philosophy. Concepts such as 'moral obligation' and 'moral ought' must be abandoned and substituted by others such as 'generosity', 'courage', 'benevolence', and 'justice'. Only these types of concepts can constitute the basis of an ethical theory that does not require a superior lawgiver. For a secular ethics to make sense, it needs to be based on virtue.

Yet a pressing question remains. *Why should I be virtuous?* Virtues *ought* to be cultivated and vices *ought* to be ironed out of one's character. A normative aspect remains

incapsulated in these concepts. But where does this element come from? Anscombe is unable to account for the fact that we *ought to be virtuous* (we ought to act generously when we can, we ought to care about the environment, we ought to treat each other with respect, and so on). If moral oughts can only make sense within a divine command theory of ethics as Anscombe proposes, a virtue ethical theory remains worthless in so far as it cannot give any moral recommendation.

So, where does Hume stand in all this? Despite his rejection of divine authority as the foundation of morality, he does not suggest getting rid of the notion of 'moral ought'.[150] Anscombe recognises this. In her view, Hume's philosophy represents the interesting case of "the survival of a concept outside the framework of thought that made it a really intelligible one" (1958: 6). The concept of 'moral ought' is turned by Hume into "a word of mere mesmeric force" (1958: 8).

In this dissertation, I have proposed to read Hume's moral philosophy as similar to voluntarist metaethics in several important respects. After introducing his account of virtue and various interpretations of what makes a character trait virtuous (in chapter 1), I charted central voluntarist tenets and argued that Hume subscribes to each of them (chapter 2). I showed that, for him, the existence of morality and its normativity—the 'oughts' that it generates—do require an authoritative moralis*ing* element to come into existence. The voluntarist way of accounting for this element is the introduction of a divine legislator who gives a law. However, Hume offers an alternative: one can appeal

[150] It is true, Hume famously complains that all systems of morality he has encountered include a sudden and unaccounted shift from "is" to "oughts". However, this is not to say that moral oughts lack meaning in the absence of a legislator. Rather, Hume means to show that "the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects" (T 3.1.1.27, 469) that can be described by is-statements. From descriptions of relations of objects, no moral ought can be generated. Something else is required.

to the authority of the general approbation of humankind to fulfil the functions that the voluntarist remitted in God's hands.

Before Hume, the importance of a sentimental component in the process of the creation of moral value emerged in William King's voluntarist theory (chapter 3). When Hutcheson developed his full-fledged moral sentimentalist account, he maintained an element of divine benevolence and divine will at the foundation of ethics (chapter 4). The history of sentimentalism is intertwined with that of voluntarism. Recasting sentimentalism in a secular context required Hume to account for the existence of morality and its normative force without appealing to the will of God as the ultimate source of morality. In Hume, the authoritative moralising element that gives meaning to moral oughts changes its host, not its form. While Hume does not develop a law-conception of ethics and does not appeal to God's will, he substitutes these elements with something able to perform their function: the authoritative standard set by shared human sentiments. The result is an ethics that is based on sentiments but, unlike Hutcheson's, cannot appeal to a justificatory element *outside of human nature*. Any conflict arising in the interaction among human beings must be solved without appeal to external moral standards. The detrimental effects of envy, for instance, can be mitigated only by appealing to human nature. With morality turned into a secular and naturalistic phenomenon, a solution to envy must be found in the virtue of decency (chapter 5). This virtue, in turn, poses a challenge to existing virtue ethical readings of Hume (chapter 6).

Hume is not a voluntarist. He does not assign to God any central role in his moral theory and does not take commands stemming from free will to be necessary to morality. Nonetheless, an exploration of core voluntarist commitments reveals that Hume's metaethics is much more similar to the voluntarist one than it may initially appear. The

exploration of these similarities improves our understanding of his account of virtue and moral evaluation.

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But, is Hume's attempt to substitute divine authority with a naturalistic source doomed to fail? Christine Korsgaard, for instance, would object that "[i]f we try to derive the authority of morality from some natural source of power, it will evaporate in our hands" (1996: 30). This claim is exemplified by her reading of Hobbes. In her reconstruction, Hobbes attempts to ground moral obligations in the authority of a political sovereign. But, she thinks, "sanctions … are the source of the sovereign's authority and so of our obligations" (1996: 29). What about the cases in which "the sovereign [is] not able to punish me" (1996: 29)? She concludes, "if my obligation sprang from his ability to punish me, then I had no obligation. So a crime I get away with is no crime at all" (1996: 29). There it goes, moral normativity evaporating in our hands.

The case, however, is different with Hume. For Hume, *moral* oughts do not stem from the authority of a *political sovereign*. Rather, as we saw, he naturalises the authority of the divine legislator by appealing to the common sentiments of humankind. His criticism of Butler and Hutcheson—who take authority to be "distinct from … Force and Durableness" (HL, v.1, 47)—suggests that he believes moral authority to require force. Nonetheless, this force is not the centralised power of a political sovereign but the general agreement of people's sentiments. In virtue of being contributors to this shared moral standard through their own feeling, individuals cannot escape the sanction by hiding their immoral action from a powerful sovereign. Rather, the sanctioning power is, at least in part, within themselves. As Hume acknowledges, "[i]nward peace of mind, consciousness of integrity, a satisfactory review of our own conduct … are circumstances very requisite

to happiness" (EPM 9.23, 283). The inescapable sanction attached to breaches of morality is the loss of "the invaluable enjoyment of [one's own] character … for the acquisition of worthless toys and gewgaws" (EPM 9.25, 283).[151]

Reading Hume as inheriting important elements of the voluntarist tradition is not only in line with the textual evidence, but also allows us to appreciate his naturalistic explanation of morality. In my interpretation, the framework that makes 'moral ought' and 'moral normativity' intelligible is not lost. These concepts remain in Hume's philosophy not as meaningless simulacra of a lost conception of the world, but as productive forces that bind us to be virtuous.

[151] Korsgaard does not explore this possibility. Rather, she interprets Hume as proposing a reflective standard of normativity, which she finds unsatisfactory (Korsgaard 1996: 51-66). Her approach has been criticised in (Gill 1996b).

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