

PHIL 480: Seminar in the History of Philosophy
Building Moral Character: Neo-Confucianism and Moral Psychology

Spring 2013

Professor JeeLoo Liu

[Handout #15]

David Hume, “Concerning Moral Sentiments”

§ Main Theses

- 1. Morality is not determined by reason alone.**
- 2. Morality is determined by sentiment.**
- 3. Virtue = whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation.**
- 4. Vice = whatever that gives to a spectator the opposite of the pleasing sentiment of approbation.**
- 5. Moral science is simply our endeavor to extract some general observations with regard to these sentiments.**

Discussion question:

Q: Does Hume advocate moral constructivism?

Q: Does Hume’s theory lead to subjectivism or individual relativism?

Q: Where would objectivity in moral judgments come from in Hume’s theory?

Q: If one does not have the moral sentiments of approbation or disgust as most others do, is one then a moral outcast?

§ Target Theory: Reason is the sole source of morals.

1. The chief function of moral praise lies in the usefulness (beneficial consequences for society or for the individual) of any quality or action.
2. Reason is best for this kind of judgment, as reason can adjudicate among opposite utilities or conflicting personal demands.
3. Therefore, reason is the sole source of morals.

Hume’s Theory: Utility + Sentiment → Action

Reason can be sufficient to instruct us in the pernicious or useful tendencies of qualities and actions, but it is not alone sufficient to produce any moral blame or approbation:

1. Utility is simply a tendency to a certain end.
2. If we feel indifferent to the end, then we should feel the same indifference towards the means.
3. Therefore, there must be a *sentiment* that shows preference to the useful rather than the pernicious tendencies.
4. This sentiment is called *humanity*, which is a feeling for the happiness of mankind, and a resentment of their misery.

5. Therefore, *reason* instructs us in the several tendencies of actions, and *humanity* makes a distinction in favor of those that are useful and beneficial.

§ Five Considerations concerning the Foundation of Morality

- (1) **Examine, for example, the crime of ingratitude toward good will by reason alone, and you will never come to any conclusion on wherein consists the demerit or blame.**

Reason judges either of *matter of fact* or of *relations of ideas*. But morality does not consist in the relation of its parts to each other.

- (2) **In moral decisions, the whole circumstances and relations must be antecedently known, and the mind, from the contemplation of the whole, feels some new impression of affection or disgust, esteem or contempt, approbation or blame. All moral determinations consist in these sentiments, not in a discovery of relations of any kind.**
- (3) **Moral judgments are similar to aesthetic judgments since moral beauty resembles natural beauty: the beauty is not a quality of the object, but the effect the object has on the mind. From sentiments alone arises the sense of elegance or beauty.**
- (4) **Inanimate objects can never be the object of love or hatred, and cannot be susceptible of merit or iniquity.**
- (5) **The ultimate ends of human actions can never be accounted for by reason, but recommend themselves entirely to the sentiments and affections of mankind, without any dependence on the intellectual faculties.**

Why does one hate pain and why does one desire pleasure? It is impossible to find an answer to this question.

Hume's Argument

1. Suppose a man loves x for the reason that x is a means to y, then we can further ask: why does he desire y?
2. If he answers that he loves y for the reason that y will lead to z, then we can further ask: why does he desire z?
3. It is impossible that there can be a progress *in infinitum* in our further pursuit of the reason.
4. Therefore, something must be desirable on its own account.
5. A thing desirable on its own account = a thing having an immediate agreement with human sentiment and affection.

§ Conclusion

1. Reason and taste are different faculties of the mind.

Reason	Taste
Reason conveys the knowledge of truth and falsehood.	Taste gives the sentiment of beauty and deformity, vice and virtue.
Reason discovers objects, as they really stand in nature, without addition or diminution.	Taste has a productive faculty, and guilding or staining all natural objects with the colors borrowed from internal sentiment, raises a new creation.
Reason is cool and disengaged.	Taste gives pleasure or pain, and is the first spring or impulse to desire and volition.
Reason leads us to the discovery of the concealed and unknown from the known or supposed circumstances and relations.	But taste is the one faculty that makes us feel from the whole a new sentiment of blame or approbation.
The standard of Reason is founded on the nature of things, it is therefore eternal and inflexible.	The standard of Taste arises from the internal frame and constitution of constitution of animals. It is ultimately derived from the supreme will, who bestowed on each being its peculiar nature, and arranged the several classes and orders of existence.

2. Therefore, Reason is no motive to action. It directs only the means of obtaining happiness or avoiding misery.
3. Taste constitutes happiness or misery and becomes a motive to action.

Reason is and ought to be the slave of the passions.