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# Hume's Moral Philosophy

## Sam Rayner

David Hume postulated that morality may be grounded in senses and emotions rather than reason or divine will, put forth the origins of much of utilitarian thought, and furthered Locke's empiricism. Despite his achievements, however, one often perceives a great disunity in his works sometimes to the point of self-contradiction. This contradiction occurs in part because of the breadth of philosophy contained in Hume's theorizing. Writing on Hume, Ronald Glossop notes that: "Even within the past few years, articles and books have appeared suggesting that his theory should be classified as a type of utilitarianism, a type of subjectivism, or as a type of qualified or ideal spectator theory."<sup>1</sup>

It is not surprising that disagreement exists amongst various critics concerning how to classify Hume as a moral philosopher. Throughout his works Hume seems to support many varied philosophical doctrines. There is much in his writing to suggest that Hume was a utilitarian; Hume wrote a considerable amount on the subject of the utility of morals, and even postulated that many forms of morality may be based on a form of rule utilitarianism. At the same time, Hume believed that morality arises in individual sentiments, which suggests that he may be best interpreted as a subjectivist. Hume, however, also discussed the necessity of departing to the frame of mind of an impartial spectator in order to make correct moral judgments, which contradicts a doctrine of pure

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<sup>1</sup>R. Glossop, "The Nature of Hume's Ethics," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 27 (1967): 527-536.

subjectivism. Hume's writing also displays skeptical thought; he questions the notion of causality, and debates whether inductive reasoning can consistently and truthfully be carried out. On top of it all, Hume's entire philosophy is empirically based, and therefore does not seem to support a normative doctrine such as utilitarianism.

One question, then, for readers contemplating Hume's writings, is what unified theory (if any) to draw from his enquiries. Many philosophers tend to limit Hume to one branch of modern moral philosophy, to one specific and formulaic system. I believe that Hume's writing defies simple categorization into one branch of modern philosophy, and that Hume fully intended this. To group Hume's ideas into one system of moral philosophy (i.e. utilitarianism or skepticism) forces one to ignore the breadth of his philosophy and distort his intended eschewal of overly rigid formalism in moral enquiry.<sup>2</sup> Rather, Hume's moral theory is best expressed as an amalgamation of several different systems of philosophical thought, including those mentioned above. Although syntheses of Hume's moral thought have been previously attempted, as in Glossop's aforementioned article, there is more work to be done in order to extract from Hume's texts a properly integrated moral theory.

In this paper I attempt a distillation of Hume's moral writings into one reasonably cogent and unified theory, thoroughly incorporating the disparate philosophical ideas that Hume addresses. To accomplish this, I focus mainly on Hume's *A Treatise*

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<sup>2</sup>For a discussion of the manner in which Hume rejects rigid formalism in moral study see: J. Passmore, *Hume's Intentions*, (New York: Basic Books Inc. 1952), esp. 152-159.

of *Human Nature*<sup>3</sup> and his second Enquiry which, as Glossop notes, presents a clearer and less contradictory version of the moral ideas he put forth in his Treatise. Although some philosophers see the Enquiry as a departure from Hume's earlier thought, I believe that Glossop's assertion of the similar relationship between Hume's Treatise and his second Enquiry is borne out in this paper through the arguments and examples which are consistently drawn from both works.

Hume's moral philosophy is perhaps best seen as the synthesis of four main philosophical ideas: empiricism, subjectivism (more specifically sentimentalism), impartial spectator theory, and utilitarian thought. Although Hume is often associated with skepticism (and a moderate skepticism is evident in his *epistemological* thought) as discussed further on in this paper, I do not see Hume as a *moral* skeptic.

Empiricism underlies Hume's entire moral philosophy. Hume is not setting forth a normative doctrine but is instead examining moral attitudes, sentiments, and beliefs from an empirical standpoint. Describing the empirical nature of Hume's moral enquiry, Mackie says of the Treatise that: ". . . it is an attempt to study and explain moral phenomena (as well as human knowledge and emotions) in the same way in which Newton and his followers studied and explained the physical world."<sup>4</sup> The empiricism of Hume's moral thought is most readily seen in the famous passage on

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<sup>3</sup>David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (London: Oxford University Press, 1967). Hereafter referred to simply as the Treatise.

<sup>4</sup> J. L. Mackie, *Hume's Moral Theory*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1980), 6. Also see Passmore's aforementioned work for a relation of Hume's empirical thought to Newton's scientific inquiry.

page 469 of the Treatise from which what R. M. Hare has called “Hume’s Law” is derived:

In every system of morality I have hitherto met with, I have always remark’d, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surpriz’d to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition other than *ought* or *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this *ought* or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, ‘tis necessary that it should be observ’d and explain’d; and at the same time a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it. But as authors do not commonly use this precaution, I shall presume to recommend it to the readers; and am persuaded that this small attention wou’d subvert all the vulgar systems of morality, and let us see, that the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceiv’d by reason.

“Hume’s Law” as Hare calls it, is the idea that a moral imperative (an *ought*) cannot proceed from a factual observation (an *is*).<sup>5</sup> This sets the stage for Hume’s moral philosophy in which he postulates that morality must be grounded in innately moral sentiments, rather

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<sup>5</sup> The correct interpretation of this passage has long been under debate, and some critics dispute whether “Hume’s Law” is actually to be derived from his writing. While I disagree, this side of the debate is important to note. See, for example: A. C. MacIntyre, “Hume on ‘Is’ and ‘Ought,’” *The Philosophical Review*, 4 (1959): 451-468.

than following from non-moral objects, such as reason. It also reflects the empiricism of his discussion on virtue and vice; he is simply reporting what causes moral sentiments without proclaiming there to be normative truths in actions themselves.

Hume makes the point that the only place that morality can be found is in our sentiments, as he believes that there is no morality in objects or actions themselves. Therefore we cannot be motivated to act morally through reason alone, because reason is only concerned with determining truths about objects already existing in the world. This point is made throughout his writings, and is explained well in the beginning of his second Enquiry when, speaking of “inferences and conclusions of the understanding,” Hume states:

They discover truths: But where the truths which they discover are indifferent and beget no desire or aversion, they can have no influence on conduct and behaviour. What is honourable, what is fair, what is becoming, what is noble, what is generous, takes possession of the heart, and animates us to embrace and maintain it. What is intelligible, what is evident, what is probable, what is true, produce only the cool assent of the understanding . . . extinguish all the warm feelings and prepossessions in favour of virtue, and all disgust or aversion to vice: Render men totally indifferent towards those distinctions; and morality is no longer a practical study, nor has any tendency to regulate our lives and actions.<sup>6</sup>

In his second Enquiry Hume does allow reason some importance in morality, in that his Enquiry explicitly ascribes to reason both the role of

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<sup>6</sup>David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principle of Morals*, ed. Eric Steinberg (Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company Inc. 1983), 15. Hereafter referred to as ECPM.

determining the nature of an object, and deciding how to best achieve something desired by the passions. Yet this does not represent a departure from his earlier thought, as some critics ascertain. Indeed, in his *Treatise* Hume expresses nearly the same idea, although in less detail, by stating:

Thus upon the whole 'tis impossible, that the distinction betwixt moral good and evil, can be made by reason; since that distinction has an influence on our actions, of which reason alone is incapable. Reason and judgment may, indeed, be the mediate cause of an action, by prompting, or by directing a passion. . .<sup>7</sup>

Hume sees what he calls *sympathy* as the underlying foundation of the interpersonal nature of human morality. By sympathy Hume is referring to the human ability to convey our moral sentiments to one another and, upon observing the outward effects of someone else's internal moral sentiments, our ability to actually feel those sentiments as though they were our own. On page 319 of his *Treatise* Hume states:

'Tis indeed evident, that when we sympathize with the passions and sentiments of others, these movements appear at first in *our* mind as mere ideas, and are conceiv'd to belong to another person, as we conceive any other matter of fact. 'Tis also evident, that the ideas of the affections of others are converted into the very impressions they represent, and that the passions arise in conformity to the images we form of them.

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<sup>7</sup>See the *Treatise*, 462

Hume tempers the above ideas by adding the necessity of judging morality from the standpoint of an impartial observer. Hume believes that in order to make consistent moral judgments a human must move to an imaginary and impersonal frame of mind. On this topic, Hume states:

When a man denominates another his *enemy*, his *rival*, his *antagonist*, his *adversary*, he is understood to speak the language of self-love, and to express sentiments, peculiar to himself, and arising from his particular circumstances and situation. But when he bestows upon any man the epithets of *vicious*, or *odious*, or *depraved*, he then speaks another language, and expresses sentiments, in which, he expects, all his audience are to concur with him. He must here, therefore, depart from his private and particular situation, and must choose a point of view, common to him with others: He must move to some universal principle. . . <sup>8</sup>

It is difficult to reconcile the fact that elsewhere in his writings Hume asserts the subjectivism of each human's moral sentiments, with this seemingly diametric idea of a "universal principle" as stated in the passage above. It is my interpretation that Hume believes that humans are naturally uniform to some degree in their perception of moral sentiments. Through sympathy moral sentiments are communicated, and the sentiments of others can be felt and perceived. In cases where one's morality is clouded by his proximity to a matter, Hume believes he must imagine the moral sentiment of an impersonal observer. Through sympathy this sentiment can then be adopted

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<sup>8</sup> ECPM, 75. For the expression of the same ideas in the Treatise, see 577, 581, 582.

by him as his own, and he will be able to make a correct moral judgment. In a similar line of reasoning, Glossop makes a very relevant distinction between moral *sentiments* and moral *judgments*. Glossop states that *sentiments* arise from *actual sympathy*, and by correcting them through reflecting on them with an imagined impartiality we can attempt to make appropriate moral *judgments*, by adopting the sentiments afforded by the resultant *ideal sympathy*.<sup>9</sup>

Hume believes that although morality arises from sentiments, by determining commonalities in the nature of the sentiments that give us approbation, we can induce general principles of morality. From this, according to Hume, one can plainly see that often the moral sentiments which cause us approbation are those that are useful to us or to society. Utilitarian tendencies in Hume's thoughts are ubiquitous; his second Enquiry, especially, is peppered throughout with words such as "useful," and "utility," often italicized or capitalized. Yet, Hume's pseudo-utilitarianism differs from typical utilitarian thought in that Hume does not believe that utility imparts a moral *ought* to us. The difference between Hume's utilitarian thought and the utilitarianism of his successors such as Bentham or Mill, is that Hume's utilitarianism is empirical rather than normative: Hume does not hold that we *ought* to do what is useful to society (as a true utilitarian would), rather he simply notes that in most cases that which causes us moral sentiments of approbation happens to be that which is useful. Utilitarianism then is not true by definition; it is something that we induce to be true, empirically, due to the nature our sentiments.

Hume's descriptions of morality describe a sort of empirical rule utilitarianism in that he explains,

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<sup>9</sup>See the Treatise, Footnote 1, 530.

especially in areas of justice, that following a rule that in general is of great utility to mankind will give us sentiments of approbation even if in particular instances it does not impart any great usefulness to us.<sup>10</sup> Hume distinguishes in many cases between “natural virtues” and artificial virtues such as justice (which are creations of man), by relating natural virtues to act utilitarianism, and artificial virtues (especially justice) to rule utilitarianism saying:

The only difference betwixt the natural virtues and justice lies in this, that the good, which results from the former, arises from every single act, and is the object of some natural passion: Whereas a single act of justice, consider'd in itself may often be contrary to the public good; and 'tis only the concurrence of mankind, in a general scheme or system of action, which is advantageous.<sup>11</sup>

One can easily accept Hume’s seemingly utilitarian leanings along with the rest of his philosophy because Hume simply shows, empirically, that utility reflects a pattern in which of our sentiments give us moral pleasure and in no case advocates a normative doctrine based on utilitarian thought.

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<sup>10</sup>See page 36 of ECPM where Hume states: “general rules are often extended beyond the principle. . .”

<sup>11</sup>Treatise, 579. Though Hume speaks of some virtues as “artifices of man,” such as justice in this case, he explains that this is an instance of man using his reason to determine how best to achieve a moral end. Hume states that politics, law, justice, and other human artifices and virtues are essentially man’s attempt to achieve moral sentiments of approbation in a logical way. The use of logic, however, does not change the fact that the sentiments of approbation it seeks lie in man’s innate nature and not in his reason.

Hume's ideas are also often associated with skepticism. Indeed Hume's overall philosophy is one of moderate epistemological skepticism as Fogelin points out.<sup>12</sup> Fogelin asserts that Hume questions whether our inductive inferences have rational grounds to support them, but that Hume believes that the inductions that we make are conceptually valid if we reduce our knowledge to the level of probabilities. Hume suggests that we as humans will never fully understand the basis for all human knowledge, and to move forward in any philosophical thought we must presuppose certain facts, such as constancy in nature. At the very least, he suggests, not being able to provide a basis for our inductions should not preclude us from philosophy.

Though Hume is a moderate epistemic skeptic, his moral writings tend towards subjectivism rather than outright skepticism. More specifically, Hume's position has been termed "sentimentalism" because he believes that morality arises from human sentiments. Hume firmly states this position in many areas of this treatise, such as when he says "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."<sup>13</sup> Quotes such as this lead one to believe that Hume is rejecting realism by advocating a view that actions or objects themselves do not have morality as an attribute.

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<sup>12</sup>R. Fogelin, *Hume's Skepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature*, (London: Routledge & Keagan Paul, 1985), 2, 6, 123. It is important for me to point out, however, that Fogelin believes Hume to be much more skeptical than most critics, he ascribes a pyrrhoian skepticism to Hume. For the purposes of this paper I regard Hume only as a moderate epistemological skeptic.

<sup>13</sup> Treatise, 469

Hume's rejection of a realist account of morality is stated almost explicitly a few pages earlier in the treatise when, after proclaiming that morality is derivative from sentiments or passions, Hume goes on to deny passions true/false validity:

Now 'tis evident our passions, volitions, and actions, are not susceptible of any such agreement; being original facts and realities, complete in themselves . . . 'Tis impossible therefore that they can be pronounced either true or false, and be either contrary or conformable to reason.<sup>14</sup>

Mackie, in his aforementioned text, having concluded from similar passages of the treatise that Hume's philosophy is best categorized as subjective sentimentalism, attempts to further classify Hume's philosophy as one of four branches of sentimentalism: Emotivism, Dispositional Descriptivism, Prescriptivism, or what Mackie calls "The Objectification theory." Of the first three Emotivism is the most relevant to Hume's writings, and Hume has often been referred to in critical works as an Emotivist. Emotivism, according to Mackie, is the belief that "a moral statement expresses, rather than reports, a sentiment which the speaker purports to have, and, by expressing it, tends to communicate it to a suitable hearer." Critics such as Stroud and Mackie, however, reject Hume as an Emotivist citing what they see as the obvious contradiction of Emotivist theory with other areas of Hume's writing.<sup>15</sup> They argue that because so much of what we say when reasoning morally is comparable to

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<sup>14</sup>Treatise, 458

<sup>15</sup>See: B. Stroud, *Hume*, (London: Routledge & Keagen Paul, 1977), 182, 184.

what we say when making true or false designations it is illogical to believe that we are only expressing our feelings. They hold that Hume recognizes that moral language is spoken of in true or false terms, and therefore he could not have intended an Emotivist philosophy without gross contradiction. I agree with Stroud and Mackie in that I view Emotivism as innately fallacious and at odds with other areas of Hume's writing, and I cannot believe that Hume intended to put forth any sort of Emotivist doctrine. Speaking of Emotivism Stroud points out on page 182 of his work that:

There is no evidence that Hume even considered any such theory. He thinks of a moral conclusion or verdict as a 'pronouncement' or judgment – something put forward as true. Of course, his considered view is that moral judgments are not literally true of anything in the action in question. . .

The above passage segues nicely into what I consider to be the correct interpretation of Hume's sentimentalism. Stroud purports that perhaps Hume is saying that while we *are* making objective claims, there is no objectivity in the object or action itself. We as humans objectify what is unobjective. . . we impart objectivity to actions and objects due to the sentiments we have and the nature of our humanity. This is embellished in Mackie's book into what he has termed "The Objectification theory," which is very similar to Mackie's Error Theory simply reworded and applied to Hume. In accordance with Stroud's ideas, Mackie's theory holds that Hume believes we state moral claims as though morality was a matter of cognitive true/false statements, although in reality it is not, and there is no true or false to be discerned in moral actions or objects themselves. Mackie's argument is made all the more

convincing when one examines Hume's writings, such as the following passage which is quoted by Mackie:

Thus 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. The one discovers objects as they really stand in nature, without addition or diminution: The other has a productive faculty, and gilding or straining all natural objects with the colours, borrowed from internal sentiment, raises in a manner a new creation.<sup>16</sup>

This passage shows Hume relating the perception of "vice and virtue" to "taste," and expresses the idea that while reason shows us objects as they really are, by combining our perception of objects through reason with the moral sentiments afforded us by "taste," humans assign moral properties (falsely) to amoral objects and actions.

Mackie's interpretation does not drive Hume into skepticism, though it does show him to be a subjectivist as well as an antirealist. In the above interpretation, Hume is skeptical only in the sense that he doesn't accept that moral values are, in actuality, true or false statements of fact, and thus also cannot accept that moral values are immutable laws existing outside of the human condition. Hume still holds, however, that some degree of objectivity is imparted to actions and objects through the human sentiments that we have about them:

Nothing can be more real, or concern us more, than our own sentiments of pleasure and uneasiness; and

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<sup>16</sup> Page 72 of Mackie's book, the quote is from Hume's appendix to ECPM

if these be favorable to virtue, and unfavorable to vice, no more can be requisite to the regulation of our conduct and behavior.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, though morality does *not* in and of itself consist of true or false statements, humans attempt to describe morality in true or false terms in accordance with how much pleasure we derive from our “virtues,” or how much uneasiness from our “vices.” Thus, while there is no objective true or false in the nature of morality itself, human perceptions of moral sentiments impart a true and false reasoning to non-objective phenomena. In this way Hume can be portrayed, in a way, as accepting normative values *within the confines of our humanity*, and his skepticism towards realist thought is easily reconciled with the rest of his moral theory.

While I accept and admire much of Mackie’s analysis of Hume’s moral theory, I disagree with Mackie’s classification of Hume as a non-cognitivist, because Hume (by Mackie’s own admittance) recognizes that moral statements are put forth with the intention of making a true or false designation. Whether morality in actuality is a matter of true or false, or simply approval and disapproval (as Hume believes) does not change the fact that the language used by humans to analyze our moral sentiments is cognitive in nature. Hume’s recognizance of the true or false nature of moral statements makes him a cognitivist regardless of what he may say about the actual lack of morality in objects or actions themselves.

If one adjusts Mackie’s interpretation by considering Hume to be a cognitivist as well as an “Objectification theorist”, a powerful argument can be

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<sup>17</sup> Treatise, 469

derived from Hume's writing. This is because Hume's subjectivism is tempered by his idea of the communication of sentiments through sympathy, and his idea (as stated by Glossop) of the possibility of correcting our sentiments into moral judgments by adopting the sympathy of an impersonal spectator. Such tempered subjectivism is powerful because it explains the essentially personal nature of human moral sentiments while allowing for a standard of morality across humankind. Interpreting Hume as an "Objectification theorist" as well as a cognitivist, allows Hume to avoid the pitfalls of Emotivism, Prescriptivism, or Descriptivism because such an interpretation explains the fact that moral statements represent an attempt to judge actions and objects in declarative terms.

To recapitulate my argument, to attempt to bring Hume's ideas on morality into a cogent whole one could make the following points: (1) While a rational basis for accepting morality may not be possible to find, if we accept reasoning within the confines of human limitations, we can act on and discuss morality. (2) Morality arises from sentiments which are subjective, yet we communicate our sentiments through sympathy and by appealing to the imagined sympathy of an impersonal observer, we can utilize a standard of morality and make moral judgments. (3) Examining empirically which moral sentiments give us approbation, we can see that most often, that which is moral is that which has utility to us or other humans, and in cases where utility is not immediately apparent it is often the rule itself which is useful to humanity and thus gives us sentiments of approbation. (4) To be human means to see the world in terms of morality, thus we impart objectivity to objects and actions that are unobjective outside of our human nature. Nevertheless moral

arguing is valid within the confines of what it means to be human.

The above interpretation of Hume is certainly not the only one possible. The nature of what Hume intends is still hotly contested even today, and much of what Hume says is contradicted in the wording of other passages. Hume introduces a broad range of ideas, sometimes with remarkable lack of regard for continuity. Passmore regards this breadth of enquiry as one of Hume's major accomplishments:

Hume's achievement, then, must be diversely described; his philosophy will not fit neatly with any of the ordinary categories. He is pre-eminently a breaker of new ground: A philosopher who opens up new lines of thought, who suggests to us an endless variety of philosophical explorations. No one could be a Humean, in the sense in which he could be a Hegelian; to be a Humean, precisely, is to take no system as final, nothing as ultimate except the spirit of enquiry.

I assert, however, that just as we should not ignore the breadth of Hume's philosophy and attempt to confine him to one philosophical system, the fact that Hume's doesn't fit rigid categories of modern philosophical thought does not force us to reduce Hume's writings merely to the "spirit of enquiry." While one must appreciate the active enquiry of Humean thought and the progress Hume made against rigid formalism, I propose that it is still possible to find a unity in his work and to extract a powerful moral argument.