Hume on Moral Motivation

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Freedom in hedonistic determinism

Very much like Locke, who despite his criticism of innatism thinks that we are endowed with such innate inclinations as "a desire of Happiness, and an aversion to Misery" (*E* I.III.3), the first of which is nowadays widely taken as the ultimate Lockean motive for action, Hume holds that human action is ultimately motivated by pleasure or happiness:

> As all men desire pleasure, nothing can be more probable, than its existence when there is no external obstacle to the producing it, and men perceive no danger in following their inclinations. (*THN* 2.1.10.8.)

> All men, it is allowed, are equally desirous of happiness[.] (*EPM* 6.15.)

In other words, the Humean agents are fundamentally *pleasure-driven*; in fact, this is the mainstream early modern notion of the basics of human motivation, shared also by such thinkers as Spinoza and, as mentioned, Locke. And, strikingly enough, of his predecessors, Hume's view of freedom is closest to that of Spinoza: Hume defends determinism – although one based on common sense rather than elaborate ontological considerations[1] – and, in keeping with his naturalism, does not think that there are different types of necessity, natural and "moral," any more than Spinoza does.[2] Moreover, both hold that the notion of contingency is merely a result of our inadequate epistemic position; here is how Hume puts the point:

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[1] "[A]ccording to common notions a man has no power, where very considerable motives lie betwixt him and the satisfaction of his desires, and determine him to forbear what he wishes to perform." (*THN* 2.1.10.5.)

[2] "[W]hen we consider how aptly natural and moral evidence link together, and form only one chain of argument, we shall make no scruple to allow, that they are of the same nature, and derived from the same principles." (*EHU* 8.1.19; see also *EHU* 8.1.14–16.) Of course, Hume's view of causality as based on constant conjunction of event types decisively differs from Spinoza's view of causality as necessary connection.

> When we see a person free from [...] motives, we suppose a possibility either of his acting or forbearing; and *tho' in general we may conclude him to be determin'd by motives and causes*, yet this removes not *the uncertainty of our judgment* concerning these causes, nor the influence of that uncertainty on the passions. (*THN* 2.1.10.6.)

The upshot of all this is that there is no other freedom than *freedom of action*:

> By liberty, then, we can only mean *a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will*; that is, if we chuse to remain at rest, we may; if we chuse to move, we also may. Now this hypothetical liberty is universally allowed to belong to every one, who is not a prisoner and in chains. (*EHU* 8.1.23.)[3]

Again, I am hard pressed to name a key early modern thinker who would be closer to Hume – perhaps apart from Locke of the *first* edition of the *Essay* – than Spinoza.

Given that Hume is operating within a framework of naturalistic determinism that acknowledges a fundamental animate drive for pleasure, the following declaration makes complete sense:

> *The chief spring or actuating principle of the human mind is pleasure or pain*; and when these sensations are remov'd, both from our thought and feeling, we are, in a great measure, incapable of passion or action, of desire or volition. (*THN* 3.3.1.2, emphasis added.)

Hume makes it clear that "[a]s each action is a particular individual event, it must proceed from particular principles, and from our immediate situation within ourselves, and with respect to the rest of the universe" (*THN* 3.2.6.3). In other words, Hume urges us to focus on particular situations in which there are specific causally potent entities at play resulting – barring preventing factors – in a certain action.

[3] Cf.: "[L]iberty, when opposed to necessity, not to constraint, is the same thing with chance; which is universally allowed to have no existence." (*EHU* 8.1.25.)

Character

But how, exactly, do pleasure and pain determine our actions? At this point, Hume's position becomes quite subtle and considerably more difficult to discern.[4] To put things as simply – and thereby inevitably also a bit roughly – as possible, it seems to me that, for Hume, any action is the result of two factors: our *character* and our *passions*. Hume's memorable claims concerning the latter have gained well-deserved attention, but the same cannot be said, I think, of the former. So let us begin by discussing it.

As far as I can see, the best known aspect of the Humean notion of character is that precisely it is *the object of moral evaluation*:[5]

> If any *action* be either virtuous or vicious, 'tis only as a sign of some quality or character. [...] Actions themselves [...] are never consider'd in morality. [...] We are never to consider any single action in our enquiries concerning the origin of morals; but only the quality or character from which the action proceeded. These alone are *durable* enough to affect our sentiments concerning the person. (*THN* 3.3.1.4–5.)

So actions are *signs* "of some quality or character" from which they proceed. But what does Hume understand by character? It seems closely connected to each one's *nature*. Consider the following passages:

> We must not, however, expect, that this uniformity of human actions should be carried to such a length, as that all men, in the same circumstances, will always act precisely in the same manner, without making any allowance *for the diversity of characters, prejudices, and opinions*. Such a uniformity in every particular, is found in no part of nature. On the contrary, from observing the variety of conduct in different men, we are enabled to form a greater variety of maxims, which still suppose a degree of uniformity and regularity. (*EHU* 8.1.10, emphasis added.)

[4] I must confess that I simply do not know whether the position I will defend is controversial or previously presented, or even uncontroversial.

[5] But so are, consistently enough, motives: "But these actions are still consider'd as signs; and the ultimate object of our praise and approbation is the motive, that produc'd them." (*THN* 3.2.1.4.)

> [T]hat Supreme Will, which bestowed on *each being its peculiar nature*, and arranged the several classes and orders of existence. (*EPM* App1.21, emphasis added.)

> Each character, notwithstanding these inconsiderable differences, appears to me, in practice, pretty durable and untransmutable. (*EPM* App2.4.)

One way to read these statements is as follows: each human being has her unchanging character or nature, but characters vary between individuals. Our character, in turn, figures in the production of our actions:

> No union can be more constant and certain, than that of some actions with some motives and characters. (*THN* 2.3.1.12.)

> It is universally acknowledged, that there is a great uniformity among the actions of men, in all nations and ages, and that human nature remains still the same, in its principles and operations. The same motives always produce the same actions: The same events follow from the same causes. [...] Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature, by shewing men in all varieties of circumstances and situations, and furnishing us with materials, from which we may form our observations, and become acquainted with the regular springs of human action and behaviour. (*EHU* 8.1.7.)

So the individual differences between characters are minor to the extent that they do not prevent us from making rather reliable general predictions about human actions – or so Hume optimistically believes. However, the major lesson to be learned from these passages is that *actions result from the combination of character and motive(s)*. I find this intriguing especially because it seems to square far better with the (traditional Aristotelian and rationalist) *substance–determination–accident* scheme than the constant conjunction of *event–types* view of causality, so universally regarded as the Humean one.

Motives and passions

The nature of motives have thus far remained, I think, largely unclear. At one point Hume states, "the mind restrains not itself by any general and universal rules; but acts on most occasions as it is determin'd by its present motives and inclination" (*THN* 3.2.6.9), which suggests that motives are to be understood as causally efficacious impulses. This is corroborated by the famous argument for the causal inefficacy of reason: "I shall endeavour to prove *first*, that reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will; and *secondly*, that it can never oppose passion in the direction of the will." (*THN* 2.3.3.1.) Indeed, "[r]eason being cool and disengaged, is no motive to action, and directs only the impulse received from appetite or inclination" (*EPM* App1.21). This, coupled with the trademark slogan "[r]eason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them" (*THN* 2.3.3.4) indicates that the motives so crucial in determining our actions are *passions*.

This gives rise to the question, How does it come to be settled, in any given situation, which passion is the operative motive for us? Hume has delightfully much to say about this topic. The main thing to note, I think, is that "the passion, properly speaking, is not a simple emotion, but a compounded one, of a great number of weaker passions, deriv'd from a view of each part of the object" (*THN* 1.3.12). This view makes its presence felt in many passages in which Hume discusses our moral psychology. The following passages reveal the way in which passions can combine with each other:

> Since [...] the passion depends on these relations [of impressions and ideas], whatever strengthens any of the relations must also encrease the passion, and whatever weakens the relations must diminish the passion. (*THN* 2.1.9.12.)

> In a word, nature has bestow'd a kind of attraction on certain impressions and ideas, by which one of them, upon its appearance, naturally introduces its correlative. *If these two attractions or associations of impressions and ideas concur on the same object, they mutually assist each other, and the transition of the affections and of the imagination is made with the greatest ease and facility*. When an idea produces an impression, related to an impression, which is connected with an idea, related to the first idea, these two impressions must be in a manner inseparable, nor will the one

> in any case be unattended with the other. 'Tis after this manner, that the particular causes of pride and humility are determin'd. (*THN* 2.1.5.10, emphasis added.)

But of course, passions can also be in conflict:

> 'Tis impossible a man can at the same time be both proud and humble; and where he has different reasons for these passions, as frequently happens, the passions either take place alternately; or *if they encounter, the one annihilates the other, as far as its strength goes, and the remainder only of that, which is superior, continues to operate upon the mind*. (*THN* 2.1.2.3, emphasis added.)

All this means that perhaps the most important determiner of our actions, namely our passions, comes to be settled through *composition and conflict of forces*. Here Hume's view is strikingly close to that of Leibniz:

> Various *perceptions and inclinations combine* to produce a complete volition: it is the result of the conflict amongst them. There are some, imperceptible in themselves, *which add up to a disquiet* which impels us without our seeing why. There are some *which join forces* to carry us towards or away from some object, in which case there is desire or fear[.] (*NE*, 192, emphases added.)

> Since the final result is determined by how things weigh against one another, I should think it could happen that the most pressing disquiet did not prevail; for *even if it prevailed over each of the contrary endeavours taken singly, it may be outweighed by all of them taken together*. (*NE*, 193, emphases added.)

Similarly, according to Hume, when a human being with a specific character finds him- or herself in a situation which gives rise to passions, the prevailing combination of passions determines the resulting action; reason has here only a directing role, it can show us the means to the ends we desire.[6] To my knowledge, Hume does not say anything about the interrelation between different types of characters and different kind of passions; presumably, one's character makes one sensitive to certain passions (so that, for instance, someone with an irascible character is prone to feel hate and act accordingly). At any rate, passions seem to be the predominant ingredient in the etiology of actions.

[6] See esp. *EPM* App 1.18, 21.

Moral sentiments

Assuming that the present interpretation is on the right track, what kind of view of moral motivation and moral action does it imply? It seems evident that without relevant passions, emotions, or sentiments, we would do absolutely *nothing*. So in order to gain traction on our minds, or characters, things considered right or virtuous *must* latch onto our emotional economy. In line with this, Hume states his view of the foundation of moral motivation in no uncertain terms: "Our sense of duty always follows the common and natural course of our passions." (*THN* 3.2.1.18.) Indeed, "moral distinctions depend entirely on certain peculiar sentiments of pain and pleasure" (*THN* 3.3.1.3). But what are the things that give rise to these sentiments? The *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry* only give relatively abstract and vague answers to this question:

> All morality depends upon our sentiments; and when any action, or quality of the mind, pleases us *after a certain manner*, we say it is virtuous; and when the neglect, or non-performance of it, displeases us *after a like manner*, we say that we lie under an obligation to perform it. (*THN* 3.2.5.4.)

> The mind of man is so formed by nature, that, *upon the appearance of certain characters, dispositions, and actions, it immediately feels the sentiment of approbation or blame*; nor are there any emotions more essential to its frame and constitution. [...] Both these distinctions are founded in the natural sentiments of the human mind[.] (*EHU* 8.2.35, emphasis added.)

Fortunately, the second *Enquiry* presents a considerably elaborated view by making it abundantly clear that *usefulness* and *agreeableness* (either to oneself or to others) are the features relevant to our moral sentiments:

> Let these sentiments be supposed ever so weak [...] where everything else is equal, [they] produce a cool preference of what is useful and serviceable to mankind, above what is pernicious and dangerous. A *moral distinction*, therefore, immediately arises; *a general sentiment of blame and approbation*; a tendency, however faint, to the objects of the one, and a proportionable aversion to those of the other. (*EPM* 9.4, latter emphasis added.)

> It appears, that there never was any quality recommended by any one, as a virtue or moral excellence, but on account of its being *useful*, or *agreeable* to a man *himself*, or to *others*. (*EPM* Dial37.)

Thus while still the *Treatise* may give an impression of merely postulating a moral sense as brute fact ("a sense of morals is a principle inherent in the soul, and one of the most powerful that enters into the composition" *THN* 3.3.6.3), the older Hume has a considerably more explicatory story to tell about the genesis of moral sentiments: fundamentally, they arise from the pleasure or uneasiness we feel when we consider the usefulness (or harmfulness) and agreeableness (or unpleasantness) of characters and their motives.

Moral action

With all this in place, we are finally in a position to consider Hume's view of moral motivation and moral agency. In brief, the challenge is to be passionately affected in a morally appropriate manner; Hume clearly thinks that, despite certain individual differences, there is such a thing as human nature endowed with a considerable amount of features universal and constant enough for making generally valid moral judgments. This means that we by and large agree on what is useful and agreeable, which gives rise to passions motivating us to act morally, to the extent that Hume's sentimentalism does not collapse into subjectivism or relativism – or at least so Hume seems to believe.

Although, to my knowledge, Hume never explicitly says so, he seems to think that morally appropriate passions are generally what he calls *calm* passions, widely mistaken for reason. This is how he characterizes them:

> [T]here are certain calm desires and tendencies, which, tho' they be real passions, produce little emotion in the mind, and are more known by their effects than by the immediate feeling or sensation. [...] When any of these passions are calm, and cause no disorder in the soul, they are very readily taken for the determinations of reason[.] (*THN* 2.3.4.8.)

Hume's discussions of strength of mind and weakness of will suggest that, for him, moral motivation in most cases involves, or perhaps even requires, that the so-called calm passions prevail over violent ones:

> What we call strength of mind, implies the prevalence of the calm passions above the violent[.] (*THN* 2.3.4.10.)

> My distance from the final determination makes all those minute differences vanish, nor am I affected by any thing but the general and more discernible qualities of good and evil. But on my nearer approach, those circumstances, which I at first over-look'd, begin to appear, and have an influence on my conduct and affections. A new inclination to the present good springs up, and makes it difficult for me to adhere inflexibly to my first purpose and resolution. This natural infirmity I may very much regret, and I may endeavour, by all possible means, to free myself from it. I may have recourse to study and reflection within myself; to the advice of friends; to frequent meditation, and repeated resolution: And having experienc'd how ineffectual all these are, I may embrace with pleasure any other expedient, by which I may impose a restraint upon myself, and guard against this weakness. (*THN* 3.2.7.5.)

If I am right about this, moral motivation is predominantly about being motivated by calm passions that arise from unbiased consideration of the usefulness and agreeableness of things. In any case, the crucial thing is to be motivated by moral passions, be they calm or violent. If they prove to be the strongest in the composition and conflict of passions – which also involves one's unchanging character – they will inevitably result in moral action, provided that there is nothing to prevent the action from taking place. In fact and rather strikingly, Hume of the second *Enquiry* seems to regard this as a kind of default case:

> All mankind so far resemble the good principle, that, where interest or revenge or envy perverts not our disposition, we are always inclined, from our natural philanthropy, to give the preference to the happiness of society, and consequently to virtue above its opposite. (*EPM* 5.40.)

The self-proclaimed anatomist of human nature (*THN* Abs2) would thus seem to end his dissection on a rather optimistic note about our chances of being morally motivated and of succeeding to act accordingly.

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