

Hume on pleasure and value and the Kantian challenge

Hume sobre prazer e valor e o desafio Kantiano

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I examine Hume's claims about the nature of moral sentiments (mainly in T 3.1.2) using as a foil the Kantian challenge to all material practical principles: they are all of the same type, being based on self-love and making all choices, including moral ones, hedonically fungible. The paper explores Hume's views on pleasure as constitutive of moral sentiment as an answer to that challenge arguing that for him only pleasure is *essentially valuable* for beings like us. It thus grounds a notion of value which, through a "progressive or dynamic" view of human nature, informs a conception of moral pleasure – a "taste in character traits" – as a distinctive type of pleasure that is not amenable to a mere quantitative *criterion* to guide moral choice.

Keywords: Hume's moral philosophy, moral sentiments, human nature, Kant.

RESUMO

Neste texto examino as teses de Hume sobre a natureza dos sentimentos morais usando como contraste o desafio kantiano a todos os princípios práticos materiais: que eles são todos de um mesmo tipo, baseados no amor de si e tornando todas as escolhas, inclusive as morais, fungíveis hedonicamente. Exploro a posição de Hume quanto ao prazer ser constitutivo do sentimento moral como uma resposta àquele desafio argumentando que para ele somente o prazer é *essencialmente valioso* para seres como nós. Essa posição fundamenta uma noção de valor que através de uma visão "progressiva ou dinâmica" da natureza humana informa uma concepção de prazer moral – um "gosto em traços de caráter" – como um tipo distinto de prazer que não está sujeito ao um critério meramente quantitativo para guiar a escolha moral.

Palavras-chave: Filosofia moral de Hume, sentimentos morais, natureza humana, Kant.

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For reflexivity to yield normative outcomes, what is turned inward has to be itself by its nature evaluative, having the good – not merely the true – as its proper object (Baier, 1995, p. 29).

Introduction

After putting the problem concerning the foundation of morality in his *technical* terms – whether it is by means of *ideas* or *impressions*, *tertium non datur*, that we distinguish between virtue and vice (cf. Hume, 1978, p. 456) – Hume seeks to prove, in T 3.1.1., *negatively*: “*Moral distinctions not deriv'd from reason*.” Hume enjoys himself pursuing this part of his argument. If we take into account that its *positive* part – the second section, which aims to show: “*Moral distinctions deriv'd from a moral sense*” – is architectonically based on the negative result and on the view that the alternatives are exclusive and exhaustive, we could well find ourselves asking: does Hume consider the negative part the strongest (14 pages) or the positive part the weakest (practically 6 pages)?

Hume commences in T 3.1.2. the constructive part of his view, and presents the task thus: “The next question is, of what nature are these impressions, and after what manner do they operate upon us?” (Hume, 1978, p. 470).

What is specially striking is Hume’s decisive attitude at first; but then, as a break in the push forwards, we get the circumspect development of the approach, as if the subject required it. Here we have Hume’s main thesis:

Here we cannot remain long in suspense, but must pronounce the impression arising from virtue to be agreeable, and that proceeding from vice to be uneasy (Hume, 1978, p. 470).

This thesis concerns the positive and negative *hedonic* characters of our “impressions” of the objects of moral assessment. However, when Hume “has to be” more specific about the *nature* of these impressions, he deliberately uses phrases – in one paragraph (cf. Hume, 1978, p. 471), the same phrase four times (“particular”, once in italics) – which are *general*, *unspecific*². The impressions in question “are nothing but *particular* pains or pleasures”. The view of an action, or a sentiment, or a character, as virtuous or vicious is due to the fact that it “causes a pleasure or uneasiness of a particular kind”. And “to have the sense of virtue, is nothing but to feel a satisfaction of a particular kind from the contemplation of a character” in an agent. And “in feeling that [a character] pleases after such a particular manner, we in effect feel that it is virtuous”.

In fact, in the sequel Hume (1978) continues to use terms that are not specific: “a satisfaction or uneasiness” (p. 471); “of that *peculiar* kind” (p. 472); “a *particular* kind of pleasure” (p. 472).

Hume himself, then, presents an objection to his argument which is structurally the same as the objection he had used against the rationalist position in the previous section: isn’t it the case that “any object, whether animate or inanimate, rational or irrational, might become morally good or evil, provided it can excite a satisfaction or uneasiness” (Hume, 1978, p. 471)? Hume’s answer to it comprises two observations. The first helps us a bit with the explanation of the nature of “moral pleasure and uneasiness”; the second *seems* to involve a *petitio principii*. These observations, however, allow us to see where the difficulties lie in relation to the positive part of Hume’s argument.

The first observation (cf. Hume, 1978, p. 472) reminds us that the term “pleasure” is in fact used, and in this Hume may mislead us (as if the issue concerned the brute phenomenology of sensations), to refer to many “sensations” which are different among themselves. Good music and a good wine are not going to be mixed up with virtue (I mean, the pleasure they provide). And a man who has “temper and judgment” can accept, in an example which fits the discussion better, that an enemy of his has got a beautiful voice. What we have up to this point are, however, only comparisons.

The second observation (cf. Hume, 1978, p. 473) still aims to *distinguish* what is peculiar about “moral pleasure or uneasiness”. As virtue and vice are in us or in others, they are features of human character, and as they excite a pleasure or pain, we can expect – from these two “circumstances” – that virtue and vice “must give rise to one of [the] four [indirect] passions” (Hume, 1978, p. 473). And we should bear in mind the purpose of this observation: “which clearly distinguishes [virtue and vice] from the pleasure and pain arising from inanimate objects” (Hume, 1978, p. 473).

However, if we want to explain the *specific* hedonic nature of “moral pleasure and pain” with the fact that we feel pride or humility, love or hatred, with our virtues or vices or with those of others – that is, using the *fact* that the indirect passions can also have as their causes moral features – then, it seems, we should not suppose, as Hume does, the “circumstance” that virtue and vice excite pleasure and pain *independently*, which is what enables them to be such a causal factor. Because it was precisely this circumstance that Hume was out to explain in the first place, including with the present reminder of a such well-known fact.

The Kantian Challenge

Kant argues *against* sentiments in at least two of the three main roles, which he discusses, they could play in mo-

² Pace: “Moral impressions, then, are feelings partly analogous to sense impressions. And Hume is fairly explicit about what sorts of feelings they are. [...] They differ from other pleasures and pains in their phenomenological quality (they are [...] qualitatively different from the pleasures of wine and music), and also in virtue of two causal characteristics they have” (Cohon, 2008, p. 105).

rality. The first is their *distinguishing* role. We would use sentiments to mark, in the philosophical phrase Kant uses, “the specific difference between virtue and vice” (cf. Kant, 2002, p. 442). Kant argues this somewhat impatiently and with some contempt (perhaps with Hutcheson in mind):

[...] moral feeling, this alleged special sense, however shallow be the appeal to it, when people who are unable to think hope to help themselves out by feeling, even when the question is solely one of universal law, and however little **feelings**, differing as they naturally do from one another by an infinity of degrees, can supply a uniform measure of good and evil – let alone the fact that one person by his feeling can make no valid judgements at all for others – moral feeling still remains closer to morality and to its dignity in this respect: it does virtue the honour of ascribing to her **directly** the approval and esteem in which she is held, and does not, as it were, tell her to her face that we are attached to her, not for her beauty, but only for our own advantage (Kant, 2002, p. 442-443).

It is quite interesting to notice that Hume, in turn, stresses this specific role of sentiments, and is clearly intent on making a lot out of it. Hume aims to avoid the threat to morality that is similar to a false taste in aesthetic appreciation. In section 8, “Of the sources of allegiance” (part 2, “Of Justice,” of Book 3), Hume has three distinct worries about morality. One is *philosophical* concerning the origin of moral obligation (cf. Hume, 1978, p. 546-547), another is the worry about *degrees* of virtue and vice in the sentiments and characters of agents. In relation to the latter, Hume commits himself, in a typical empiricist fashion, to a specific epistemological conviction: at the basis of this process of attesting the degrees of virtue and vice is the reliable operation of our sensibility. Hume states that what is decisive is that we *feel* pleasure or pain in the contemplation of people’s sentiments and characters, and this pleasure or pain cannot be unknown to the person who feels them (cf. Hume, 1978, p. 457). This strong epistemological thesis licenses the claim that there will be as much *reality* in virtues and vices of a person’s sentiments and character as there is pleasure and pain in a spectator’s contemplation, and there is no possibility of a mistake in this regard. Thus Hume says: “[...] there is just so much vice or virtue in any character as every one places in it, and that it is impossible in this particular we can ever be mistaken” (Hume, 1978, p. 457). I will come back to this text later on.

However, as to the *objectivity* of moral *distinctions* based on sentiments – how they work as ways of *distinguishing* moral features –, Hume is certainly more optimistic than Kant. We can see this in the footnote he puts on the point:

This proposition [that there is just so much vice or virtue in any character as every one

places in it, and that it is impossible in this particular we can ever be mistaken] must hold strictly true with regard to every quality that is determined merely by sentiment. In what sense we can talk either of a right or a wrong taste in morals, eloquence, or beauty, shall be considered afterwards. In the meantime it may be observed, that there is such uniformity in the general sentiments of mankind, as to render such questions of but small importance (Hume, 1978, p. 547n).

The second role of sentiments Kant discusses in relation to morality is crucial for my purposes. This is the *justificatory* role. We are dealing here with what from Kant’s point of view is essential to morality, i.e., *laws* which have the feature of “absolute necessity” – being just for this reason morally valid (cf. Kant, 2002, p. 389). What is needed for our full *understanding* of the nature of morality is that we have available a satisfactory philosophical explanation of “the ground of obligation” (cf. Kant, 2002, p. 389). (This is also what is at issue in Hume’s identification of the philosophical worry with the sources of moral obligation, as we saw above.) For Kant, what is essential to morality is a principle that appears to us necessary as a “categorical imperative.” It is with regard to the *justification* of this principle that sentiments have no role whatsoever. The following is a text where this point is made quite clearly.

*If we really intend to arrive at this proof [the a priori proof of the categorical imperative] it is extremely important to remember that we should not let ourselves think for a moment that the reality of this principle can be derived from the particular characteristics of human nature. For duty has to be a practical, unconditional necessity of action; it must therefore hold for all rational beings (to whom alone an imperative can apply at all), and **only for that reason** a law that holds also for all human wills. Whatever, on the other hand, is derived from the special predisposition of humanity, from certain feelings and propensities, and even, if this is possible, from some special bent peculiar to human reason and not holding necessarily for the will of every rational being – all this can indeed supply a personal maxim, but not a law: it can give us a subjective principle – one on which we have a natural predisposition and inclination to act – but not an objective principle on which we should be directed to act even though our every propensity, inclination, and natural bent were opposed to it (Kant, 2002, p. 425).*

The third role of sentiments in relation to morality in Kant’s thinking will be briefly mentioned only for the sake of the whole picture. It is much less negative. For Kant, we are *natural* rational animals in relation to which it does not make

sense to seek to get rid of our sensibility. However, its correct relation to morality has a *necessary* effect, because specifiable *a priori*, which is the Kantian moral sentiment, i.e., *respect*, this *sui generis* sentiment produced rationally by concepts. Kant's conception of this sentiment is based on his view that there is in us an undeniable natural self-love, which has to be disciplined in the form of a rational self-love; and on his view that there is a natural progression of this form of love, which is censurable when not morally disciplined, towards *moral arrogance*, an attitude which in turn must be wholly annulled, because it is in principle incompatible with the categorical imperative³. I should still mention the four natural predispositions, which we can know are necessarily in us (their consciousness is not of empirical origin), that are at the basis of morality and are the subjective conditions for the receptivity of the concept of duty (featured for the first time as such in the late *Metaphysics of Morals*). They are the moral sentiment, conscience, love for other human beings and respect (cf. Kant, 1996b, p. 399-404). But let us now return to Kant's criticism of the view that sentiments could have a role in the *justification* of morality, which involves what I claim is a challenge to a position such as Hume's.

The Kantian challenge to Hume's position is to be found in the first two theorems and their proofs in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. The first theorem states that a will – as Hume seems to conceive of it – is inevitably always determined *empirically*, never satisfying the *desideratum* of qualifying for a *pure will*. Theorem 1 reads:

All practical principles that presuppose an object (matter) of the faculty of desire as the determining ground of the will are, without exception, empirical and can furnish no practical laws (Kant, 1996a, p. 21).

Theorem 2 puts in abstract terms what the problem is with all empirical or material principles which are geared towards the *matter* of the faculty of desire, i.e., its connection with the *principle* of pleasure as the *rationale* for the determination of choice. Theorem 2 reads:

All material practical principles as such are, without exception, of one and the same kind and come under the general principle of self-love or one's own happiness (Kant, 1996a, p. 22).

Let us look closer at Kant's conception of an empirically determined will. Two issues need to be taken into account in order to grasp Kant's argument against sentiments playing a role in the *justification* of morality.

In the first place, the proof of theorem 2 (cf. Kant, 1996a, p. 22) establishes a connection between the principle

of human natural happiness and pleasure in such a way that the account of all empirical practical principles as of "one and the same type" follows, that is, all of them are hedonically oriented. Human natural happiness is understood as the consciousness of an agreeableness of states in life that accompanies uninterruptedly the whole of a being's existence (p. 22.). And someone who makes this happiness her practical *principle* guiding her choices is in fact orienting herself exclusively by happiness as her only *value*. This involves a specific type of determination of the faculty of desire, i.e., the expectation of pleasure with the existence of an object determines the desire for it because of the *receptivity* of the subject in relation to the object – receptivity because pleasure depends on the affection of our sensibility by an object. For this reason material practical principles, which are geared towards "existing" objects of the faculty of desire, can only determine it through its receptivity, through the desire guided by the expectation of pleasure.

In the second place, Remark 1 to the Corollary of the theorem in question (cf. Kant, 1996a, p. 22-25) makes explicit that pleasure is exclusively the principle of choice when we choose in view of the empirical objects of the faculty of desire. Kant begins by pointing out the mistake of trying to keep apart a lower faculty of desire and a superior faculty of desire by distinguishing the origin of the representation of the object which will offer us pleasure, traditionally, the senses and the understanding respectively. It is a mistake because if what is of interest is the pleasure (the satisfaction) we will get with the object, then it does not matter wherefrom we get the representation of it, whether from the senses or the understanding. For Kant, the crucial point is the "determining ground of the will". It does not matter from which faculty the representation of the object comes as long as the representation has its role in leading to action by presupposing "a feeling of pleasure in the subject". The representation's capacity to have the practical effect that is action depends exclusively on the receptivity of the subject, of her being "agreeably affected by the representation".

However dissimilar ideas of objects may be, though they be ideas of the understanding, or even of the reason in contrast to ideas of sense, yet the feeling of pleasure, by means of which they constitute the determining principle of the will (the expected satisfaction which impels the activity to the production of the object) is of one and the same kind, not only inasmuch as it can be only known empirically, but also inasmuch as it affects one and the same vital force which manifests itself in the faculty of desire, and in this respect can only differ in degree from every other ground of determination. Otherwise, how could we compare in respect of

³ Cf. Kant (1996a, chapter III): "On the Incentives of Pure Practical Reason".

magnitude two principles of determination, the ideas of which depend upon different faculties, so as to prefer that which affects the faculty of desire in the highest degree? (Kant, 1996a, p. 23).

The argument is as follows: if we, when deciding or choosing, look for whatever material object in our search for pleasure (existent or that will exist as a consequence of our action), then, (1) we can not cognize, except empirically, *a posteriori*, whether the object in question will provide us the gratification sought; and (2), concerning the principle determining the choice among objects, we can not have any other *criterium* except the quantity of gratification we expect.

Kant presents his examples of choosing of lesser goods in place of greater goods to establish his point (a text which reminds us of Hume's famous examples, used for quite different purposes).

The same human being may return unread an instructive book which he cannot again obtain, in order not to miss a hunt; he may depart in the midst of a fine speech, in order not to be late for dinner; he may leave a rational conversation, such as he otherwise values highly, to take his place at the gaming-table; he may even repulse a poor man whom he at other times takes pleasure in benefiting, because he has only just enough money in his pocket to pay for his admission to the theatre (Kant, 1996a, p. 23).

The fact that in all these cases it is the *same human being* certainly shows that one option in each pair of possibilities is not justified. But Kant aims to illustrate what a mistaken practical orientation makes inevitable: hedonism. Realistically, these cases happen, but if human beings only choose because of the expected pleasure from the satisfaction of their desire, then the only *criterium* for choice is the amount of pleasure with the choice made. If the basis of choice is the pleasure sought, then the source of the representation of the object does not matter. "The only thing that concerns him, in order to decide upon a choice, is how intense, how long, how easily acquired, and often repeated this agreeableness is" (Kant, 1996a, p. 23). Kant's argument, then, is simply: if the principle of the determination of the faculty of desire is empirical, then the consequence will be the *undesirable* inevitableness of a hedonism of choice, that is, the fungibility of all forms of pleasure⁴.

It is important to note the *rationale* for this argument. It is clear that Kant aims to show that sentiments *can not* be a source of objective values⁵. However we should be clear about the nature of the Kantian argument against giving to sentiments any role to play in the justification of morality. According to Kant, the problem with empirical practical principles is not that they are forms of egoism, or the seeking of satisfaction as such (self-love), also not the egoism which seeks advantages in all choices; rather, the problem is trying to make the search for satisfaction, self-love, a *practical law*, that is, aiming to do it, because this cannot be done, given that empirical practical principles can not rid themselves of a condition of self-reference in value: what is of value for me ends up just being what is of value *to me* (Cf. Herman, 2005, p. 24). As Barbara Herman says: "[...] whatever principle one makes the supreme for one's choice marks what one takes to be of highest value. If an agent who desires happiness makes the *principle* of happiness her supreme determining ground of choice, it is a mark not just of self-love, but of self-conceit. Her first value in action is then her own pursuit of her own happiness" (2005, p. 24). It is impossible for these practical principles to be *objective* practical principles – they cannot contain objective value (which is not relative to the subject who values). The Kantian challenge, then, is the following: without objective value all we can have is a hedonism of choice, which is unacceptable.

However, it is also important to note that the Kantian challenge need not be accepted in Kant's own terms. In fact, I will claim that Hume has much to say about this *difficulty* from his own philosophical perspective.

Hume on the Nature of the Moral Sentiment

The central question of T 3.1.1. – whether it is by means of our impressions or our ideas that we make "moral distinctions" – *seems* to be an *epistemological* question. This would be borne out by Hume's claims: (i) "[...] since vice and virtue are not discoverable merely by reason [...] it must be by means of some impression or sentiment they occasion that we are able to mark the difference betwixt them" (Hume, 1978, p. 470). (ii) "Morality, therefore, is more properly felt than judg'd of" (Hume, 1978, p. 470). (iii) "Now since the distinguishing impressions, by which moral good or evil is known, are nothing but [...]" (Hume, 1978, p. 471). (iv) "We do not infer a character to be virtuous, because it pleases: But in feeling that it pleases after such a particular manner, we in effect feel that it is virtuous" (Hume, 1978, p. 471).

⁴ Cf.: "[...] Kant is [...] clearly aware in the central argument of the second *Critique* that unless there is a source of value separate from our subjective receptivity, we will be left with no better account of rational agency and choice than that offered by hedonism, and that is no account of rational agency at all" (Herman, 2005, p. 30).

⁵ Cf. Herman (2005, p. 31). Cf. also: "The threat is that in the absence of access to objective values, or values derived from some other authoritative source, hedonism is the true theory of motivation and choice" (Herman, 2007, p. 177); and: "[Kant] may have had something else in mind [...]: namely, to use the unpalatable consequences of a hedonism of choice to show the limits of empirical practical reason (i.e., the principle of self-love) as a fundamental principle of will, even in its own domain of nonmoral choice" (Herman, 2007, p. 189).

However, I think that something more important than that comes across in these statements by Hume, and it bears on the nature of the “impressions” by means of which we make the moral distinctions⁶. In my view, Hume at this point commits himself to a conception of the source of moral value. What experience allows us to see is what is *at the basis* of morality. Let us return to the point with which we began. Concerning the nature of moral sentiment we saw Hume stating:

[...] *Of what nature are these impressions [...]?* Here we cannot remain long in suspense, but must pronounce the impression arising from virtue to be agreeable, and that proceeding from vice to be uneasy. Every moment’s experience must convince us of this (Hume, 1978, p. 470).

What Hume claims that experience shows us is the basis of value for us, or what *constitutes value* for us and lies at the basis of morality: pleasure and pain⁷. Hume makes this point clearly in the following passage:

Nor need any one wonder, that though I have all along endeavoured to establish my system on pure reason, and have scarce ever cited the judgment even of philosophers or historians on any article, I should now appeal to popular authority, and oppose the sentiments of the rabble to any philosophical reasoning. For it must be observed, 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 it is impossible in this particular we can ever be mistaken. And, though our judgments concerning the origin of any vice or virtue, be not so certain as those concerning their degrees, yet, since the question in this case regards not any philosophical origin of an obligation, but a plain matter of fact, it is not easily conceived how we can fall into an error (Hume, 1978, p. 546-547).

This passage makes two points: (1) The opinions of men, which have a peculiar authority when it comes to morality and which are “in a great measure infallible,” allow us to state what the *source* of morality is: “The distinction of moral good and evil is *founded* on the pleasure or pain which results from the view of any sentiment or character” (Hume, 1978, p. 546, my emphasis). (2) As this pleasure or pain cannot be unknown to the person who feels it, “there is just so much vice or virtue in any character as every one places in it, and that it is impossible in this particular we can ever be mistaken.” This second point expresses Hume’s *epistemological* conviction, which I mentioned above *apropos* Kant on the role of sentiments in morality. But, as a consequence, the first point must be about the nature of moral good and evil, about what according to Hume constitutes them fundamentally, about what is at their basis so as to make them of value.

When Hume has to deal with the nature of moral sentiment, the orientation of his thinking regarding the conception of value comes out at least in its main features, so that this conception allows him a particular view of the origin of morality. First, Hume quite clearly refuses “the question of human nature,” he refuses to contemplate the excluding options that human beings are by nature either virtuous or vicious and that we could determine this by a special gift of detection (Cf. Gill, 2006, p. 203-205). In the section in question, in answer to the question “*From what principles is it [this pain or pleasure] derived, and whence does it arise in the human mind?*”, Hume claims that it is absurd to think that in each particular case the (NB) “sentiments” should be produced by “an *original* quality and *primary* constitution.” This is a clear refusal of a moral *innatism*: there are not “original” instincts enough for the number and complexity of our moral duties (cf. Hume, 1978, p. 473).

Second, concerning the possibility that the principles have their *origin* in nature, or that they have another origin, Hume refuses a natural law position that equates what is moral with what is natural and what is immoral with what is unnatural (cf. Hume, 1978, p. 473-476). In this respect, Hume’s position is *not* that morality comes to life ready-made from “original” principles of human nature, as is claimed by both rationalists, on the one side, and by moral sentimentalists, on the other. Rather, Hume claims that it springs from our interactions with one another and with the empirical world, and therefore depends on the features of our make-up and on our situations in the world (Cf. Gill, 2006, p. 214-225). This implies a view of human nature which Michael Gill calls “progressive or dynamic,” whereas Hume’s predecessors held a

⁶ Pace: “*Treatise* Book 3, Part 1, is best read as an epistemology of value: an account of how we become aware of the moral properties, rather than an account of the semantic status of moral judgement [NB: perhaps this contrast attenuates my point]. The moral sensing view is an interpretation of this moral epistemology” (Cohon, 2008, p. 101-102). However, Cohon’s main point is that “the moral sensing interpretation [holds] that for Hume our basic awareness of vice and virtue is a *direct apprehension by feeling*. In the standard case, we grasp good and evil directly, by experiencing the sentiments of approval and disapproval” (2008, p. 103).

⁷ Rachel Cohon comes closer to my type of worry when she says that “as for their nature [virtuousness and viciousness], that is not specified. We feel them and form beliefs about whatever properties feel that way, but what they are in themselves is not spelled out. But this is too quick. [...] Hume has *inter alia* made commitments in places to some claims about the nature of good and evil” (Cohon, 2008, p. 113). But then the list is admittedly *negative*, saying what moral properties are *not*, and then Cohon goes back to her epistemological interests.

view which was “static” (Cf. Gill, 2006, p. 227). This *dynamic* perspective is also noticeable in Hume’s claim about the peculiarity of moral sentiment which shows up in its special effect: the indirect passions. Let’s go back to this issue.

At the beginning of the paper, I presented a difficulty with Hume’s reasoning about this, a *petitio* in his claim that this fact could help clarifying the peculiarity of the moral sentiments. Seeing Hume’s account as dynamic allows us to solve the problem. *As long as* Hume can use our experience (the first-person one) that pride and humility with our characters, or our moral qualities, and love and hatred with that of others can have specific *causes* (technically speaking: Hume’s understanding of “cause” here, so that the point point does not concern the phenomenology of the passions, but rather their intentionality), then he can claim, in view of his theory of the double relation of impressions and ideas in the explanation of the origin of the indirect passions, that *this* effect of virtues and vices requires the independent and, in this regard, *proper* hedonic character of the moral sentiment (which constitutes the awareness of virtue and vice; in fact, the mechanism gets started by the satisfaction *with virtue* and the dissatisfaction *with vice*): a form of pleasure or pain entertained in the contemplation of our character or that of others. In this way, the associationistic dynamics dissolves the difficulty when Hume appeals to this causal phenomenon. And we should not play down the importance Hume gives to this: “And this is, perhaps, the most considerable effect that virtue and vice have upon the human mind” (Hume, 1978, p. 473). That is: rather than the effect being an expected normative one at first, it is rather simply the occurrence of certain passions, in part as a consequence of the hedonic character of the “cause” of pride or humility in this case.

But the *dynamic* or *progressive* perspective can also help us with the appreciation of what in Hume lies at the basis of *value* in morality.

The Rationale for Moral Value in Hume

There are many cases which prove the appeal to a dynamic perspective in Hume’s analyses in the *Treatise*. I will consider one which will lead me to the core of Hume’s view on value. I will describe the beginnings of Hume’s argumentation aiming to establish the “first law of nature” that concerns justice, i.e. the convention about the stability of possession.

Human beings are the most dependent animals, they are needy but helpless. We need clothes and dwellings to protect ourselves against the weather (cf. Hume, 1978, p. 484-485). As individuals, we are (1) too weak to do any considerable work by ourselves; (2) unable to improve our abilities to considerable levels; and (3) destined to “inevitable ruin and misery”.

Society is the only solution to these “inconveniences”. It is the remedy for these “defects”. “By the conjunction of forces, our power is augmented: By the partition of employments, our ability encreases: And by mutual succour we are less expos’d to fortune and accidents. ’Tis by this additional *force, ability* and *security*, that society becomes advantageous” (Hume, 1978, p. 485).

However, these considerations are excessively speculative and made *ex post facto*.

But, in order to form society, it is requisite not only that it be advantageous, but also that men be sensible of these advantages; and it is impossible, in their wild uncultivated state, that by study and reflection alone they should ever be able to attain this knowledge (Hume, 1978, p. 486).

What saves us is one of our natural necessities: sexual desire or the “natural appetite betwixt the sexes”. This is “the first and original principle of human society”. It is clear that it has this beneficent effect *not* because of its productive character. What happens is that the desire which unites man and woman is reliable enough to the point where “a new tie takes place in their concern for their common offspring”. This is the “natural affection” towards their children, which in turn, being developed and nurtured, gets to the point of becoming a “custom and habit” which “operat[es] on the tender minds of the children”. This is what “makes them sensible of the advantages, which they may reap from society, as well as fashions them by degrees for it, by rubbing off those rough corners and untoward affections, which prevent their coalition” (Hume, 1978, p. 486).

What happens in the sequel in this natural history of human society is that a “contrariety of passions” develops, a true “opposition of passions”. With regard to our “natural temper”, the important point is not that we are egoists, but rather that our generosity is limited and partial. We are generous first and mainly to our family and friends. As Annette Baier helped us to appreciate, Hume is here again at his cheekiest (Cf. Baier, 1991, p. 200): “But though this generosity must be acknowledged to the honour of human nature, we may at the same time remark, that so noble an affection, instead of fitting men for large societies, is almost as contrary to them as the most narrow selfishness” (Hume, 1978, p. 487).

What saves us at this stage of development are our “outward circumstances”. There is a type of good for us, i.e., those “things” (Hume calls them the “external goods”) that we may acquire by “our industry and good fortune” which have the features of (1) being an unstable possession, without suffering any alterations or losses by their mere easy transfer, and (2) being scarce in view of our needs and desires. But how *can* this help us?

It is *not* by appeal to “our natural uncultivated ideas of morality” (Hume, 1978, p. 489). What happens with these is that they rather “conform themselves to that partiality [of our affections], and give it an additional force and influence” (Hume, 1978, p. 489). *These ideas* simply follow “the natural and usual force of those several affections, which are directed towards [others]”: “[...] As every immorality is derived from some defect or unsoundness of the passions, and as this defect must be judged of, in a great measure, from the ordinary course of nature in the constitution of the mind” (Hume, 1978, p. 488), *in this regard* (in this area of our “natural familiar relations”) we nat-

urally follow this partiality. So, there is a natural partiality in our affections which has an influence on “our ideas of vice and virtue” in *this area*. The consequence is that we judge unacceptable what does not conform to the “ordinary course of nature” either by excessive partiality or by detached impartiality. We blame individuals who are too partial towards their family and who are too welcoming to a “mere chance acquaintance.” Therefore, *these* can not be the ideas that could help us with the problem of correcting the *natural* partiality of our passions. The solution is something that is the product of “judgement and understanding” with regard to those “external goods”: an “artifice,” a “convention” aiming “to bestow stability on the possession of [them].”

So, we should pay careful attention to what is the nature of the “contrariety,” the “opposition” of passions that is solved by the convention which gives stability to possession. Given their scarcity and the instability of their possession, our passions in regard to them enter in conflict with our newly developed “new affection” for society when we become sensible of its advantage, an affection which gets at this point fully expressed in our appreciation of “company and conversation.” The fact is that our generosity (of the naturally limited type) with relation to the “external goods” is what militates against the newly developing “affection” for society.

However, this natural hum[e]an history, which we are inclined to think is so plausible, is ultimately based on what? Why is it that the minds of children are so *sensible* to the advantages of society?

We have seen that Hume refuses, in the second section, some sort of moral innatist naturalism, the position that we are formed by nature with some “original quality,” as for example “the love of mankind, merely as such,” a kind of universal love for human beings *merely as such* (cf. Hume, 1978, p. 481)⁸, mentioned at the beginning of his treatment of justice. Against such a position, Hume (1) claims, quite realistically, that such passion is not to be found in the human mind; and with this he (2) reveals an *axiological* commitment: this “universal affection to mankind” would be, unbelievably, “independent of personal qualities, of services, or of relations to ourself” (Hume, 1978, p. 481).

The latter point is crucial to my claim. Hume is not only realistic, but he also bases the moral value of beneficence on the interchanges of services or facilities which crystallize in personal qualities. Hume hereby positions himself against the Kantian point about the constitutive limitation

of empirical or material conceptions of value, the condition of self-reference, which makes what has value in relation to me into what is of value for me. Hume clearly commits himself to the inevitable self-reference of value, which is not deemed damaging to its satisfactory conception. But why exactly, what is the *rationale* for the point that the “love” for others depends on services, on the relations, to us?

In my view this can be found in what has been dubbed a *metaphysical hedonism* by Peter Kail (2007, chapter 8)⁹. This is the view that only pleasure is essentially valuable and only pain is essentially worthy of aversion (cf. p. 177). This view is quite distinct from a *psychological hedonism*, which is the position that all our actions are motivated by the desire for a future pleasure of the agent (cf. p. 179). Accordingly, metaphysical hedonism is not a thesis about what is in fact desired or not (pleasure, for example, with the emphasis being on the explanation of action), but is a thesis about what is *essentially of value* and is because of it desirable on its own, that is, it is a thesis about what *deserves* to be desired or avoided (cf. p. 183).

This position is sensiblist, for our conception about value arises from our familiarity with our impressions of pleasure and pain, which are for us essentially valuable and non-valuable respectively. According to Kail, this position is *realist*, if only “in a very limited sense,” about (N.B.) what is essential value. “There are states that are desirable or aversion-worthy, albeit states of consciousness” (2007, p. 183)¹⁰.

A crucial evidence for ascribing to Hume this metaphysical hedonism is his argument in Appendix 1 of the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*. Hume appeals to pleasure and pain to put a stop to a regress of *justifications* in a case of practical reasoning (cf. Hume, 1975, p. 293). Why does someone exercise? To keep healthy and so to avoid illness, which is painful. Why does he hate pain? It is not possible to give a *reason* for this. Or someone is trying to keep healthy so as to be able to work, to get money, to have pleasures. Why? Again, there cannot be a *reason* for this.

It is impossible there can be a progress in infinitum, and that one thing can always be a reason, why another is desired. Something must be desirable on its own account, and because of its immediate accord or agreement with human sentiment and affection (Hume, 1975, p. 293).

⁸ Cf. Hume (1978, p. 619) for Hume’s point that his system of *sympathy* only has advantages over other naturalist innatist systems (especially Hutcheson’s).

⁹ Kail (2007, chapter 8): “The Gold: Good, Evil, Belief and Desire”.

¹⁰ This feature seems to me to be compatible with Cohon’s anti-realist view of Hume’s position, given that a moral realist would hold, according to her, that “ethical properties (such as good and evil, virtue and vice, or right and wrong) exist independently of human psychological reactions to the entities (such as people and actions) that are thought to bear these properties” (p. 99). According to Cohon, Hume’s is a “moral sensing view”: “moral properties are emotion-dependent [they are ‘reaction-dependent’], yet we can think and talk about them in a perfectly sensible way [in a ‘true-cognitivist’ way: moral judgements are truth-evaluable and some of them are actually true (p. 98-99), the same way we talk about other things” (p. 129). In the same vein, I think Cohon’s comments on the anti-metaphysical interpretation of Humphrey Morris and Charlotte Brown – Hume is neither realist nor anti-realist – are also congenial to my view: in spite of the issue realism-anti-realism, Hume “thinks we grasp moral good and evil by the process of feeling certain sentiments” (p. 120). I would just add: it does *not* concern, in the first place, epistemology.

Kail says that the role of pleasure and pain is that of presenting “ultimate ends” that cannot be explained by reason, but which experience constitutes as such for us (cf. 2007, p. 188-189). In this regard, the argument has to be based on “a normative view of the role of pleasure and pain,” they are going to be seen as desirable or aversion-worthy on their own sake. The only alternative would be to see Hume’s argument as being a defense of *psychological* hedonism. This hedonism would aim to explain all desire as oriented towards pleasure, our own pleasure, which would amount to the “philosophical chemistry” that Hume criticizes in the doctrine of self-love in the second Appendix of the second *Enquiry*. The argument rather concerns what has essential value, and so far can explain desires and aversions. Hume states: “Taste, as it gives pleasure or pain, and thereby constitutes happiness or misery, becomes a motive to action, and is the first spring or impulse to desire and volition” (Hume, 1975, p. 294, my emphasis)¹¹.

As to the point of there not being a *reason* for our affection towards pleasure and for our aversion towards pain, it seems to me that this view also helps to explain Hume’s shocking anti-Hutchesonian thesis presented in his three famous examples (Cf. McIntyre, 2009).

It is not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger. It is not contrary to reason for me to choose my total ruin, to prevent the least uneasiness of an Indian, or person wholly unknown to me. It is as little contrary to reason to prefer even my own acknowledged lesser good to my greater, and have a more ardent affection for the former than the latter (Hume, 1978, p. 416).

It is clear that Hume’s purpose is not to endorse the preferences we would intuitively judge to be unjustified, but

rather to register that (1) there is something ultimate concerning our hedonic experiences that is not accountable by reason, and (2) they are – in ordinary parlance – “irrational” because of a *reflection* conducted by “calm passions” and not by a reasoning process conducted by reason¹². Hume writes:

Men often counteract a violent passion in prosecution of their interests and designs; it is not, therefore, the present uneasiness alone which determines them. In general we may observe that both these principles operate on the will; and where they are contrary, that either of them prevails, according to the general character or present disposition of the person. What we call strength of mind, implies the prevalence of the calm passions above the violent; though we may easily observe, there is no man so constantly possessed of this virtue as never on any occasion to yield to the solicitations of passion and desire (Hume, 1978, p. 418).

But if this is so, then we will not find in Hume what Simon Blackburn has dubbed a “monotonous hedonism” (“fit only for pigs”)¹³, or also a *monolithic* hedonism. The satisfaction or pleasure with the moral sentiment which approves including strength of mind *in us* can present a *form* of pleasure that can win over promises of violent pleasure in the present *and in the future*. But this implies that there are *qualities* of pleasures, and therefore that the sheer *quantity* of pleasure is not the only *criterion* for our decisions which amount to “determinations of the will,” according to Hume’s point of view. Against the Kantian challenge, Hume does not accept – holding instead a *metaphysical hedonism*, a “material” position for sure – the inevitability of hedonism of choice as Kant understood it¹⁴.

It seems to me that this position is part of an *Aufklärung*’s project, but of a rather *Scottish* type, which accomplishes the

¹¹ *Apropos* of this argument, Baier concentrates on the relations between the agreeable and the useful. However, her main claim is that “such intrinsically valued things are what Hume terms ‘directly agreeable’, as contrasted with the indirectly agreeable, the ‘useful’”. As “the useful is the indirectly agreeable, the expected means to the directly agreeable [,] this seems to make the agreeable the more basic category, ‘agreeable’ the name for the *more ultimate good*” (2009, p. 252, my emphasis).

¹² Cf. McIntyre (2009, p. 81): “What they [cases as the third of Hume’s examples] share is a lack of reflectiveness. The three cases [the ones presented by Hume] together show that calm reflectiveness, and in particular, our ability to use one desire to limit and regulate another, is an activity directed by our calm passions and not by reason. Reflectiveness about the consequences of acting on a propensity or passion involves the use of reason, but reflectiveness needs to be motivated by passion too, just as actions do”.

¹³ Blackburn (2001, Part Two, Section 11, p. 82). Blackburn criticizes Mill’s somewhat Victorian view that introduces the different dimensions of “quality” of pleasures: “This betrays Bentham by introducing some other source of value than the pleasure itself”. In spite of this, “Mill’s main point remains, though, that anybody concentrating upon happiness or pleasure can remember the indefinite variety of things in which human beings take pleasure, or the indefinite variety of things they enjoy” (p. 82). A rather Humean point!

¹⁴ Cf. Schneewind (1998, p. 524) for the place, differently occupied, where a common road leads to: “For Hutcheson and Hume, approval by the moral faculty makes certain motives virtues; and it is quite possible that Kant read Shaftesbury as saying no more than that moral goodness, on that view, is not discovered by the moral faculty but constituted by it. The moral sense is then like the Pufendorffian divine will that creates moral entities. Although the world without the moral feelings would contain motives directed toward the benefit of others, it would contain no moral attributes. It is a neutral universe, and only our response to it makes it otherwise. If our approval is what makes some motive good, others bad, then we are not subject to error as we would be if we had to know an objective Order in God’s mind, or an objective degree of perfection. And if our own approval makes motives good, then, despite Hobbes, when ordinary people test the proposed motives by the law, they are not using some secondhand criterion of morality given them by an authority. We can all determine what is right because our own feelings make it right. Kant plainly agreed with this voluntarist aspect of sentimentalism although he rejected the sentimentalist account of approval. But the knowledge involved in Kantian morality as autonomy is knowledge of the self’s own way of thinking”.

prizing of our sensibility in the form of a *taste* that affords us genuine pleasures and pains. In Baier's *dictum*: "for morality, to him, is a matter of taste in character traits" (Cf. 1991, p. 250). Pleasure and pain may, therefore, be seen by Kantians in too limited a fashion, even when they admit they should not be altogether avoided and must rather be *structured* morally, that is, put in the framework of morality, which nonetheless may seem to Humeans to be framing them inexcusably moralistically¹⁵.

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¹⁵ Thus, pace Herman's remarks: "If we rule out the moralization of all choice as a possible solution, what's left is the idea that the moral law can somehow alter our character with respect to the content of nonmoral action and choice. To do this, it would have to make possible the rational transforming of (some) desires, and the enabling of (some) distinctly human modes of valuation so that we no longer had to regard all nonmoral ends as hedonically fungible" (2007, p. 191-192). For Humeans, they in fact never were like that.