

# 14 Toward a Humean Virtue Ethics

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## I

More and more scholars, for various and often contrasting reasons, have recently put Hume's moral philosophy under the heading 'virtue ethics'. Also, many contemporary philosophers are trying to elaborate a specific form of Humean virtue ethics to be contrasted with the more famous neo-Aristotelian alternatives. Hence, as occurred with the renaissance of Aristotelian virtue ethics, it appears that there is space to develop a full-fledged Humean version of it as well. My scope here, however, is more limited. After having presented the main reasons in favor of a classification of Hume among virtue ethicists, what I would like to do is to take into account some recent attempts at presenting a virtue ethical interpretation of Hume, with the aim of shedding some light on the theoretical direction I believe a project of a systematic Humean virtue ethics should take. I shall proceed by addressing some specific issues raised by the favorable reading of Hume provided by Christine Swanton<sup>1</sup> and by the criticism moved against Hume by Rosalind Hursthouse.<sup>2</sup> By doing that I'll argue that Hume offers the philosophical tools to redefine some basic notions of virtue ethics in a more efficacious way compared to the opposing neo-Aristotelian model and that the strength of Hume's version of virtue ethics is that he aims at the unity of character instead of the unity of the virtues. This makes it possible to develop a pluralistic and secularized morality that denies any supposed final cause or *télos* for human beings conceived as a species and instead upholds the individuality of the person as the fundamental value that should be pursued and promoted.

## II

To begin with, is Hume's ethics a form of virtue ethics in all ways? What cannot be denied is that Hume himself, in his examination of morality, recognizes a crucial role to the notions of virtue and vice (EPM 1.10; SBN 173–174).<sup>3</sup> Hume's intent is to give a list of virtues and vices in accordance with the way human nature develops within particular contexts.<sup>4</sup> Moreover,

Hume tells us that the objects of moral judgments are not people's actions, but the motives that lie behind them; human actions may well be regarded in a positive or in a negative light, but only insofar as the motives that activated them are valued positively or negatively (T 3.2.1.2; SBN 477).<sup>5</sup> In turn, these motives have to be related to the characters of people, and people are morally evaluated because they display characters of certain kinds (T 3.3.1.4–5; SBN 575 and T 3.3.1.19; SBN 584).

This progress from actions to motives, and from motives to characters that make persons virtuous or vicious agents, brings Hume's conception of morality very close to a virtue ethical model. Moreover, since agents are morally evaluated because of their characters, the way these characters are formed becomes an issue of the greatest importance for Hume (T 3.2.2.26; SBN 500–501).<sup>6</sup> Hume appears to be concerned with that 'ethical formation'<sup>7</sup> that again occupies so much space in many virtue ethics discussions. It is important, however, to stress the original way in which Hume explains how characters develop, an explanation that is in line with his sentimentalism. Hume says that, by 'custom and education' (T 3.2.2.26; SBN 500) people can build up 'calm' passions, whereby it is possible to lead lives guided by stable principles of action. Often confused with reason because of their lacking of emotive violence, calm passions are in fact for Hume strong passions that organize one's existence according to goals that in the end become firm and coherent. Thanks to calm passions, agents acquire 'strength of mind' by which they are able to persist in the realization of their projects, without being tempted by false ends—maybe more appealing in the short period, but in fact pernicious to their lives considered in their totality (T 2.3.3.8 and 10; SBN 417–418).<sup>8</sup> Only those who are properly educated and have adopted the correct habits will curb their passions and fortify those characters that will make them virtuous agents. But it is worth repeating that this moral learning, for Hume, works purely and solely at a sentimental level. Virtuous agents are those who come to be moved by calm passions, which correspond to traits of character regarded as virtues.

This marks a difference between the Humean conception of ethics and other virtue ethical approaches—in particular some kinds of neo-Aristotelianism<sup>9</sup>—according to which being properly educated means being able to respond correctly to the moral features of a given situation. According to this neo-Aristotelian model, virtue should foremost be considered as a form of knowledge, and the virtuous person as someone who first of all gets things right and then acts accordingly. The *phronimos* is gifted with a perceptual capacity, usually explained in intellectual terms as a form of moral wisdom, by which he or she becomes sensible to the suitable requirements that the situation imposes on behavior. Conversely, Hume makes no reference to any intellectual faculty of any kind when he has to explain how a person becomes a virtuous agent; the Humean virtuous person does not act on the strength of such a faculty as 'either desire-related intellect or thought-related desire',<sup>10</sup> which guarantees at the same time the right look

on things and the motivational force to move consequently. Besides, for Hume ‘morality [. . .] consists not in any *matter of fact*, which can be discovered by the understanding’ (T 3.1.1.26; SBN 468). Rather, values seem to work rather like secondary qualities (T 3.1.1.26; SBN 469). Whether the secondary quality comparison is the best way to explain Hume’s conception of the nature of values is still a much debated question, and I will not address it here. However, what can be observed is that, though for Hume the dimension of values is presented as a sort of projection onto the world due to the sentimental framework of human nature, this dimension does not require anything *beyond* this very sentimental framework to be stated. Taste, Hume affirms, moral and aesthetic, ‘has a productive faculty, and gilding or staining all natural objects with the colours, borrowed from internal sentiment, raises in a manner a new creation’ (EPM appendix 1.21; SBN 294). ‘To have the sense of virtue, is nothing but to *feel* a satisfaction of a particular kind from the contemplation of a character. The very *feeling* constitutes our praise or admiration. We go no farther; nor do we enquire into the cause of the satisfaction’ (T 3.1.2.3; SBN 471). This is because ‘there is just so much vice or virtue in any character, as every one places in it, and [. . .] ’tis impossible in this particular we can ever be mistaken’ (T 3.2.8.8; SBN 547; see also ‘The Sceptic’, 103).

These passages in Hume’s texts seem to justify the conclusion that for Hume the evaluative dimension is a sentimental representation—not an intellectual one—that human beings cast on things as a result of the activity of their passions—not a state of affairs that is perceived, and with which the virtuous person becomes attuned. True, he says that in morality ‘*reason* and *sentiment* concur in almost all moral determinations and conclusions’ (EPM 1.9; SBN 241); but this ‘reason’ Hume refers to here is to be translated in terms of calm passions (T 3.3.1.18; SBN 583). In a sense human beings can sometimes be said to be ‘morally blind’ to the relevant ethical features of situations.<sup>11</sup> If what has been said so far is correct though, reference to moral blindness (and, conversely, to moral vision) is to be taken figuratively. Human beings may be morally blind for Hume because they are primarily morally insensible, that is, because they are endowed with a poor sentimental equipment, incapable of being affected by sympathetic exchanges among people. There is not really anything to be seen out there; ‘seeing’ makes sense if taken as a metaphor for ‘feeling’ in a proper way, given a human nature described in sentimental terms, which presents itself as the benchmark for stating what the virtues and vices are.

### III

This interpretation of the way Hume conceives the sphere of value, and the role played by sentiment in it, does not go without criticism. Sentimentalism may be defined very broadly as ‘the thesis that evaluation is to be understood

by way of emotional response',<sup>12</sup> and some scholars have recently argued that Hume presents a kind of sentimentalist virtue ethics very close in its results to the neo-Aristotelian one that has been presented as non-Humean so far. For example, Christine Swanton considers Hume 'as being part of both the sentimentalist and the virtue ethical traditions'<sup>13</sup> in maintaining a response-dependent theory whereby 'a virtue or a vice is a power in an object to elicit relevant responses in qualified actors'.<sup>14</sup> In turn, a qualified actor is someone in possession of certain emotional dispositions that make him or her sensible and reactive to the powers in the object, which are the virtues. In this sense, in Swanton's interpretation of Hume, 'morality is not a matter of fact *about* our sentiments, it is a matter of fact about virtue and vice, which are in objects';<sup>15</sup> 'virtues are response-dependent properties, and are therefore not projections as some commentators claim'.<sup>16</sup> By appropriately exercising their moral sense, human beings can thus track the moral truths that allegedly compose the ethical reality.<sup>17</sup> A partly similar conclusion has been recently given also by Michael Slote in his sentimentalist ethics of care.<sup>18</sup>

This response-dependent reading of Hume is a fascinating way of assessing his ethical sentimentalism in the light of virtue ethics, but doubts can legitimately be raised both about whether it corresponds to Hume's own intentions and also, more generally, about whether this is the correct way to frame a Humean virtue ethics.<sup>19</sup> It is indicative, for example, that both Swanton and Slote make reference to the work of David Wiggins. Wiggins presents a 'sensible subjectivism', according to which moral properties and appropriate human sentiments are mutually correlated in <property, response> associations, so that 'x is good/right/beautiful if and only if x is such as to make a certain sentiment of approbation appropriate'.<sup>20</sup> By appealing to nothing more fundamental than human sentiments, Wiggins aims at giving a cognitivist account of the sphere of morality in which the claim to objectivity that appears to be deeply rooted in the very concept of morality finds its proper vindication.<sup>21</sup> In developing his sensiblist model, Wiggins mentions Hume as one of the authors with whom he has a close affinity. But whereas Swanton says that Hume's virtue ethics corresponds to a response-dependent theory matching Wiggins' sensiblistism, Wiggins, on his part, admits instead that his sensible subjectivism *diverges* from Hume's 'official theory'.<sup>22</sup> Wiggins says that we can (and indeed we should) progressively move from '[The real] *David Hume*' (who roughly corresponds to the projectivist description given above) to '[A possible] *David Hume*: x is good if and only if x is such as to arouse approbation', and eventually end up with a '*Refined Humean subjectivism*: x is good if and only if x is such as to *deserve* (N.B.) or *merit* approbation'.<sup>23</sup> But this is not what the real Hume does. So why should Hume (and those of us who want to develop a Humean virtue ethics) make this move?

A revealing answer is given by Swanton herself:

a Humean response-dependent virtue ethics can account for the reason-giving force of ethics, and in particular for our justification about the

status of traits as virtues and vices. If we can show this, we will have refuted Philippa Foot's view that Hume's theory about moral sentiment 'commits him to a subjectivist theory of ethics,' and that for him there is no 'method of deciding in the case of disagreement, whether one man's opinion or another's was correct'.<sup>24</sup>

The concern expressed by Foot,<sup>25</sup> and echoed by Swanton, is that of ending up with a theory incapable of determining which moral answers are truly fitting, thus deserving authentic approbation. That is, Hume's ethics, if it is seen as just focusing on nothing else but emotional states of the subjects, would be devoid of any stable criterion for determining what really deserves to be considered 'moral' (such as, for example, traits of character that are real virtues and vices) and what is just pleasant or unpleasant, but morally neutral (such as, for example, traits of character that end up being mere talents or defects).<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, it is odd that Foot's blow against Hume should be warded off by adopting a strategy that is unlikely to be Humean and that finds a better, and maybe more natural, formulation from within a neo-Aristotelian perspective. Nowhere does Hume speak of ethics as an area where moral truths should be discovered. Nor does his 'moral sense' appear as a capacity to track moral truths of any kind.<sup>27</sup> What is more, it is disputable that Hume's purpose is that of providing an objective ethical theory, or that he has any specific problem with objectivity in ethics. As Rachel Cohon observes, 'It is a little misleading to call Humean moral evaluation objective, since it is based on felt sentiment, but there is a very high degree of *convergence* in all moral assessments that are properly formed'.<sup>28</sup> Hume is surely interested in explaining the convergence in moral judgments and, above all, in accounting for the practical dimension of morality (EPM 1.7–8; SBN 172),<sup>29</sup> while he appears not to be concerned with giving an explanation in terms of the supposed objectivity of moral judgments. In this light, both Foot's criticism of Hume's subjectivism, and Wiggins's proposal—taken up by Swanton—to reinterpret it in terms of a 'sensible' subjectivism, seem to be grounded in the worry that the lack of such an objectivist ethical criterion in Hume opens the door to ethical nihilism. A danger that is to be blocked either by rejecting Hume's conception of morality as a whole (as Foot does), or by radically reformulating it (as Wiggins and Swanton do). Nonetheless, as I'll try to argue, such a Humean convergence without objectivity provides in any case a canon of ethical correctness by grounding it in our human practices. A different interpretation of Hume as a virtue ethicist can be developed that does not focus on moral properties to be found in the world, but on individuals as owners of virtuous or vicious characters. To see how, let me address briefly Hume's strategy for distinguishing between virtues and vices, in relation to a criticism moved against it by Rosalind Hursthouse.

## IV

For Hume,

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

So human beings recognize as virtues those character traits that are useful to their possessors or to others, or immediately agreeable to their possessors or to others. Vices are the opposite. In turn, thanks to sympathy, which is considered by Hume as the principle of sentimental communication among human beings, we can approve those traits of character that produce pleasure or advantage for other people or for their possessors themselves and disapprove those traits of character that give pain or prove to be disadvantageous for other people or their possessors themselves. Specifically, we have a properly moral approval (or disapproval) when these sympathetic judgments on traits of character are given from what Hume calls a 'steady and general', or 'common', point of view (T 3.3.1.15–16 and 30; SBN 581–582 and 591. EPM 9.6; SBN 272), from which it is possible to determine a stable and as much as possible impartial perspective on virtues and vices.

Now, like Swanton and Slote, Rosalind Hursthouse, too, takes into consideration Hume as a possible representative of virtue ethics, but she discards his moral theory as defective at the very root. In particular, she criticizes Hume's four sources of pleasure and pain as a correct standard for defining which character traits should be appreciated and which not, since these four sources would correspond to a disjunctive claim, whose upshot is the impossibility of defending a single measure of virtue and vice. Justice *and* injustice, courage *and* cowardice, generosity *and* meanness would all turn out to be virtues.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the steady and general point of view cannot be a correct standard for moral judgments because it would be defined by Hume as 'uninfluenced by distances in time: it can respond to the virtues of the ancient Greeks as competently as it can respond to those of its possessor's contemporaries'.<sup>31</sup> This would make the Humean steady and general point of view too abstract and distant from those who must endorse it for it to become a reliable standard in ethics. According to Hursthouse, to save Hume's theory from collapsing, it has to be, so to speak, 'Aristotelized;' the steady and general point of view should be discarded as a reliable ethical yardstick and replaced with the good 'critic' in morals as it is expressed by Hume in his essay *Of the Standard of Taste*.<sup>32</sup> Such a good critic is interpreted by Hursthouse as the well-trained person, who is immersed in a particular

reality of which he or she is able to recognize the relevant moral aspects, thus representing the closest approximation to the *phronimos* we can arrive at within a Humean framework.

Yet what should be noted is that Hursthouse moves her objections against Hume while taking for granted from the very beginning the Aristotelian perfectionist conception of human nature she endorses as normatively sound. For Hursthouse, in fact, ‘the standard neo-Aristotelian completion claims that a virtue is a character trait a human being needs for *eudaimonia*, to flourish or live well’.<sup>33</sup> And she defines what it means to ‘live well’ by making reference to those distinctive functions characteristic of human beings whose fulfillment allow human beings to live in the right way, as they are required qua human beings, and thus to obtain the real happiness, or the sort of happiness worth having.<sup>34</sup> By presupposing such a unit of measurement—human nature as she conceives it—Hursthouse can present a notion of the *phronimos* that corresponds to somebody who shows practical wisdom, gathering coherently in himself or herself all the virtues at once, hence embodying in himself or herself the criterion for objectivity that has been looked for so far.

However, Hume has never professed the need to single out a criterion of good and right that has to be valid in advance and that guarantees something like the unity of the virtues. Nor does the Humean steady and general point of view correspond, as Hursthouse seems to believe, to a timeless ‘point of view of the universe’, or a ‘view from nowhere’. It is, rather, a point of view that develops *within* human history as the result of people’s sympathetic exchanges, that is, of a moral sentiment where ‘is displayed the force of many sympathies’ (EPM 9.11; SBN 276). It is a reflective stance resulting from that moral conversation human beings entertain because of their sentimental constitution that assures a convergence in moral judgments, but does not provide that single, definitive measure of objectivity neo-Aristotelians are looking for. On the contrary, Hume’s steady and general point of view evolves through time and space, leaning on a fixed human nature whose constancy is nothing but the product of a generalization (EHU 8.7; SBN 83–84).<sup>35</sup> Hume’s way of establishing what constitutes human flourishing is always an *a posteriori* operation, the consequence of empirical ascertainment. Which character traits happen to be agreeable or useful to their possessors or to others can be derived from ‘a cautious observation of human life’, and the list of virtues we will come up with is the outcome of ‘experiments [. . .] as they appear in the common course of the world, by men’s behaviour in company, in affairs, and in their pleasures’ (T Intro. 10; SBN xix). His quadripartite standard works contingently in the course of human history by considering how human nature expresses itself in the multiplicity of situations in which people find themselves. So Hume is far from presupposing a finalistic notion of human nature and then stating which character traits fully realize human nature’s peculiar ends. In turn, the Humean good critic is precisely someone who puts himself or herself, and reflects, from

the perspective of the steady and general point of view. That is to say, the good critic can be seen as the criterion for judging what is virtuous or vicious only insofar as he or she has embraced that very point of view. His or her practical wisdom does not reflect any *phronesis* whatsoever, but is the consequence of having adopted that contingent position that is the product of the continuous corrections human beings progressively bring to their moral assessments, thanks to their uninterrupted passionate exchanges, and to their imaginative efforts to get in touch with their fellow men. In this sense the Humean good critic is a human being like anyone else, but one who has educated himself or herself to be more sentimentally attentive, less prone to prejudice, more willing to engage in specifically moral arguments, and thus to recognize moral distinctions established from the steady and general point of view as sound and to be pursued.

## V

From a Humean perspective, unlike from a neo-Aristotelian one, there is no ontological commitment regarding the nature of the virtuous agent. Neo-Aristotelians<sup>36</sup> long for a unity of the virtues that can be stated only by presupposing an idealized notion of human nature, and hence by presupposing a notion of virtuous person—the one who is in possession of all the virtues—that presents an ideal of perfection that in fact is at risk of never being fulfilled by anybody real. Instead, what interests Hume is the determination of virtuous characters that are always specified *a posteriori* and can be referred back to the passions of the persons. Hume presents a picture according to which people become aware of themselves as particular persons insofar as they possess firm characters; being conscious of their own individual character is the element by which agents gain that unity that allows them to stand before others as identifiable individuals.<sup>37</sup> And becoming conscious of one's own character is possible for Hume due to the passion of pride (T 3.3.2.8; SBN 596–597 and T 3.3.2.11; SBN 599). What comes out from Hume's explanation of pride is that the proud person ends up coinciding with the virtuous person. More specifically, the Humean virtuous person is someone endowed with a stable, 'moralized' pride, that is, with a stable sense of himself or herself as an individual who plays a role in the particular context he or she lives in and who is recognized and positively valued by those around him or her.<sup>38</sup>

But is not this the same as the Aristotelian *phronimos*? Not at all, for the Humean virtuous person is proud of precisely those character traits that are praised from that steady and general point of view that neo-Aristotelian perspectives like Hursthouse's have excluded: a point of view that, even if it always reveals itself within human affairs, does not necessarily correspond to the point of view shared by a specific society. The Humean virtue ethics proposal is far from relativistic; by making reference to the sentimental



imagination of human beings, which is exercised in continual confrontations that take place within human history, Hume proves to possess the philosophical instruments for explaining how moral progress is possible. In contrast, the neo-Aristotelian model is stuck with a conception of the *phronimos* that comes to be rigid and hardly helpful for contemporary ethics. On the one hand, it is disputable whether the authentic notion of the Aristotelian *phronimos* is ever applicable to our contemporary liberal societies. On the other, by being defined through a notion of human nature whose proper goals are finalistically presupposed from the outside and not subject to any modification, the modern version of the *phronimos* ends up being relativized to the particular contingency in which he or she is able to exercise his or her perceptual capacity—with the result that it lays itself open to the criticism of having a skeptical outcome in ethics, and a communitarian one in politics.

## VI

The picture of the virtuous person as the proud person allows Hume to present his own peculiar notion of human excellence—a notion that competes with the one belonging to the classical, that is, ancient Greek tradition of virtue ethics.<sup>39</sup> This Humean conception of human excellence takes the form of ‘greatness of mind’—which for Hume is nothing but a steady and well-established pride and self esteem—which displays traits of character such as courage, ambition, love of glory, magnanimity, explicitly presented by Hume as closely related to the classical world, and in opposition to the distorted values of the Christian tradition (T 3.3.2.13; SBN 599–600). Now, greatness of mind may well reveal itself also in the form of heroism and military glory. And even though ‘men of cool reflexion are not so sanguine in their praise of it’, because of the great damages it may cause to society,

when we fix our view on the person himself, who is the author of all this mischief, there is something so dazzling in his character, the mere contemplation of it so elevates the mind, that we cannot refuse it our admiration. The pain, which we receive from its tendency to the prejudice of society, is over-power’d by a stronger and more immediate sympathy. (T 3.3.2.15; SBN 601)

Here Hume touches a point that has been acknowledged and accepted by present-day virtue ethicists such as Slote and Swanton, namely, the idea that there may exist an ‘admirable immorality’<sup>40</sup> and that we frequently esteem virtues that do not bring any benefit to humankind.<sup>41</sup> In doing that, Hume develops a virtue ethics that could be defined as ‘pluralistic’, to use Swanton’s expression.<sup>42</sup> However, Hume’s ethics can be said to be pluralistic in a different way from Swanton’s. She conceives her pluralistic virtue ethics along with a response-dependent line, and the interpretation of Hume’s

ethics presented so far goes in another direction. Nonetheless, describing Hume's virtue ethics in pluralistic terms makes sense if we take Hume as having as his core moral interest not so much an objective criterion to distinguish virtues and vices, but rather the individuality of persons. Individuality stands out as a value that should be pursued and promoted precisely because Hume has a pluralistic conception concerning virtues and vices, which does not look for the unity of the virtues, but instead for the unity of character.<sup>43</sup> Hume does not have a problem of consistency among the virtues; consistency becomes a problem only if we decide to embrace an 'absolute' conception such as the neo-Aristotelian one. Rather, from Hume's *a posteriori* perspective, we may well admit the existence of people whose characters are mixtures of a plurality of traits,<sup>44</sup> some of which are virtues when seen from the steady and general point of view, while others turn out to be vices.<sup>45</sup> What counts is character in its totality, as reflecting the individuality of a given person, not the determination of an objective perspective from which to label virtues and vices—a perspective that, Humeanly, runs the risk of being nothing but a philosophical chimera. In a sense, this allows Humeans to regain that notion of an end of human beings that the neo-Aristotelians are so fond of. But in a Humean perspective this notion—as with all the other fundamental notions of the virtue ethics vocabulary—acquires a new meaning. It ceases to stand for a *télos* of humanity taken as a species, but instead is always used in the plural form, to refer to the most different ends individuals pursue. This is not to be understood as an approximation of the ideal of the *phronimos*, but instead as the realization of a unified character in the light of the steady and general point of view.

Finally, what should also be emphasized is that Hume mentions as an integral part of human excellence the virtue of benevolence (T 3.3.3; EPM 2). This is one of the differences between the Humean conception of a virtuous life and the classical one. What is peculiar to the alternative offered by Hume is that a life can be virtuous only if it is open to others, considered as different persons who deserve our respect. Such moral relevance of benevolence has nothing to do with Christian piety, but again is explained by Hume with reference to the sentimental mechanisms of human psychology. Greatness of mind and benevolence weigh each other out and are virtues insofar as they reveal the social nature of human beings, defining the virtuous person as someone who stands as a morally laudable individual because of his or her connections with other people (T 3.3.3.9; SBN 606). So it turns out that even though greatness of mind is indeed a virtue for Hume, it may not, in his own terms, be appropriately ascribed to common people. Greatness of mind suits soldiers or noblemen well; it represents an aristocratic way of being virtuous that is certainly accepted by Hume but that he does not consider to be the only or the best way of behaving virtuously. The peculiarity of Hume's conception of the virtuous person is that it appears to be, as it were, 'democratized;' his virtue ethics is not addressed to heroes, even less to saints, but to people as they are commonly found in the world. That is, we do not need

to be heroes nor saints to be justly proud of ourselves since the steady and general point of view is set on that ‘middle station of life’ that, according to Hume, qualifies the condition of the greatest part of human beings, ‘affording the fullest *security* for virtue’, and giving opportunity ‘for the most ample *exercise* of it’.<sup>46</sup> Hence according to Hume, virtue emerges as a process of continuous self-improvement in which people develop stable characters they can be proud of, thus conceiving themselves as unitary individuals, without having to presuppose an end-state of ideal or absolute perfection. In the end, it may well happen that, when regarded *a posteriori*, a certain virtuous person turns out to possess all the virtues. If so, this cannot be but a contingent result. But, from a Humean perspective, this is more than enough.<sup>47</sup>

## NOTES

1. Christine Swanton, ‘Can Hume Be Read as a Virtue Ethicist?’.
2. Rosalind Hursthouse, ‘Virtue Ethics and Human Nature’.
3. Hereafter I shall refer to both Hume’s *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals: A Critical Edition* and *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and the Principles of Morals*, mentioned as ‘EPM’ and cited by section and paragraph number, followed by ‘SBN’ and page number in the Selby-Bigge’s edition.
4. The *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* presents four sections (from 5 to 8) and one appendix (app. 4) explicitly dedicated to this enterprise. If we go back to *A Treatise of Human Nature*, we find something similar in the discussion about the difference between natural and artificial virtues.
5. Hereafter I shall refer to both the Selby-Bigge edition and the Norton and Norton edition of Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature*, mentioned as ‘T’ and cited by book, part, section, and paragraph number, followed by ‘SBN’ and page number in the Selby-Bigge’s edition.
6. See also David Hume, ‘The Sceptic’, 159–180, esp. 170. On the importance of the education of the virtuous character for Hume see Russell, ‘Moral Sense and Virtue in Hume’s Ethics’.
7. See Lovibond, *Ethical Formation*.
8. On Hume’s notion of strength of mind, see McIntyre, ‘Hume’s Passions: Direct and Indirect’, and Wright, ‘Butler and Hume on Habit and Moral Character’.
9. See Hursthouse, ‘Normative Virtue Ethics’; Hursthouse, ‘Virtue Ethics and Human Nature’; Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*; McDowell, ‘The Role of Eudaimonia in Aristotle’s Ethics’; McDowell, ‘Virtue and Reason’; McDowell, ‘Values and Secondary Qualities’.
10. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1139b.
11. As Hume notes, ‘An action, or sentiment, or character is virtuous or vicious; why? because its *view* causes a pleasure or uneasiness of a particular kind’ (T 3.2.1.3; SBN 471, italics mine). On Hume’s moral blindness, see Abramson, ‘Hume on Cultural Conflicts of Values’; Taylor, ‘Humean Humanity versus Hate’.
12. D’Arms and Jacobson, ‘Sensibility Theory and Projectivism’, 187–188.
13. Swanton, ‘Can Hume Be Read as a Virtue Ethicist?’, 92.
14. *Ibid.*, 93.
15. *Ibid.*, 96.
16. *Ibid.*, 97.
17. Swanton’s own position is in fact more complex than this. In *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, discussing Christine Korsgaard’s theses, Swanton recognizes

that ‘the central practical task of ethics is not *simply* the search for truth. That search is constrained by an even more fundamental problem: of our needing to live together, solving our problems in ways consistent with this end. Dialogue does not *just* serve an epistemic truth-seeking goal, it serves also the social goal of solving problems’ (250–251; italics by Swanton). But notwithstanding the importance ascribed to dialogue, the search for (ethical) truths remains for Swanton an integral part of doing ethics.

18. Slote, *Moral Sentimentalism*.
19. Slote, for example, admits that Hume’s work gives way to different interpretations: ‘It seems to me that you can find large bodies of emotivism in Hume, of subjectivism, of projectivism, of error theory, of ideal observer theory, of response-dependence theory. You can find passages which support each of these forms of metaethics. But it is not clear to me which of these Hume actually believes’ (Slote, ‘Moral Sentimentalism’, 8–9).
20. Wiggins, ‘A Sensible Subjectivism?’, 187.
21. See Wiggins, *Ethics: Twelve Lectures on the Philosophy of Morality*, 331–333.
22. Wiggins, ‘A Sensible Subjectivism?’, 194.
23. Wiggins, *Ethics*, 371.
24. Swanton, ‘Can Hume Be read as a Virtue Ethicist?’, 101.
25. Philippa Foot, ‘Hume on Moral Judgement’.
26. Note that Hume never draws a clear distinction between virtues and vices, on one side, and talents and defects, on the other (EPM app. 4).
27. This reading of Hume makes him a ‘moral sense theorist’ very similar to Francis Hutcheson, and there are strong reasons to believe that Hume’s moral sentimentalism is to be framed differently. See Gill, *The British Moralists on Human Nature and the Birth of Secular Ethics*, chap. 19.
28. Cohon, *Hume’s Morality: Feeling and Fabrication*, 242, italics mine. For attempts to interpret Hume’s ethics as objectivist, see Norton, *David Hume: Common Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician*; Swain, ‘Passionate Objectivity’.
29. It is precisely this preference that is criticized by Foot. But perhaps we should take Hume literally when he tells us that ‘when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it’ (T 3.1.1.26; SBN 469).
30. Hursthouse, ‘Virtue Ethics and Human Nature’, 73.
31. *Ibid.*, 78–79.
32. Hume, ‘Of the Standard of Taste’.
33. Hursthouse, ‘Normative Virtue Ethics’, 23.
34. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, part 3.
35. I shall refer to both Hume’s *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding: A Critical Edition* and *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and the Principles of Morals*, mentioned as ‘EHU’ and cited by section and paragraph number, followed by ‘SBN’ and page number in the Selby-Bigge edition.
36. See, for example, McDowell, ‘Virtue and Reason’. See also Foot, ‘Virtues and Vices’. Rosalind Hursthouse embraces a ‘limited’ or ‘weak’ view on the unity of the virtues in Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 153–157.
37. I discuss this point in Greco, *L’io morale: David Hume e l’etica contemporanea*, parts 2 and 3.
38. On the notion of a moralized pride, see Baier, ‘Master Passions’; Herdt, *Religion and Faction in Hume’s Moral Philosophy*, chap. 2; Rorty, ‘The Vanishing Subject: The Many Faces of Subjectivity’.
39. On Hume’s conception of human excellence, see Martin, ‘Hume on Human Excellence’.

40. Swanton, *Virtue Ethics*, 102.
41. Slote, *From Morality to Virtue*, chap. 14.
42. See Swanton, 'Profiles of the Virtues'; Swanton, 'Nietzschean Virtue Ethics'.
43. On the idea that Hume's ethics is pluralistic, see Abramson, 'Hume on Cultural Conflicts of Values'; King, 'Hume on Artificial Lives with a Rejoinder to A. C. MacIntyre'.
44. On 'the person of mixed character' see Cohon, *Hume's Morality*, 149 ff.
45. This aspect is well explained by Dees, 'Hume on the Characters of Virtue'.
46. Hume, 'Of the Middle Station of Life', 546.
47. This paper was presented at the following conferences: New Perspectives on Virtues and Vices, Center for Advanced Studies, LMU Munich, Munich Competence Center for Ethics (MKE), February 4–5, 2011; Le legs de Hume dans la philosophie contemporaine, Institut Catholique de Paris, Faculté de Philosophie, September 13–14, 2011; Hume and the Virtues, International Hume Workshop, Oxford Brookes University, May 2, 2012, organized by Julia Peters, Ronan Sharkey, and Daniel O'Brien, respectively. A very early draft had originally been discussed at the 34th International Hume Conference, Boston University, August 7–12, 2007. I would like to thank all the participants at these events who contributed to this paper with their useful comments, and particularly Roger Crisp, Michael Gill, Eugenio Lecaldano, Alison MacIntyre, Jacqueline Taylor, and David Wiggins.

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