From Where Are Moral Distinctions Derived?

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I. Feeling, Sympathy and Utility.

There are two elements of human nature. One is reason. The other is feeling. From where are moral distinctions derived? Hume raises the question ".....concerning the general foundation of Morals; Whether they be derived from Reason, or from Sentiment; Whether we attain the knowledge of them by chain of argument and induction, or by an immediate feeling and finer internal sense." Hume’s answer is feeling, not reason.

Hume regards his moral theory as his major work. He wishes to discover the fundamental principles which operate in man’s moral life, and uses the term ‘moral philosophy’ to mean the science of human nature. Hume applies the method of experimental reasoning to moral subjects. He hopes to lay the foundation of moral science. Further he extends his theory of moral judgements to other judgements.

Hume’s theory of morality, however, is derived from Francis Hutcheson who holds a theory of moral sense and is one of the earliest utilitarian. Hume develops Hutcheson’s argument. Adam Smith who is Hume’s friend develops Hume’s ideas and publishes The Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759). Hume’s utilitarian element is developed by Jeremy Bentham who is the founder of utilitarianism and makes the formula of ‘the greatest happiness of the greatest number’, and John Stuart Mill who establishes the principle of utility and holds that happiness is made from the maximization of pleasure and minimization of pain.

If pleasure is maximized and pain is minimized, happiness is promoted. Hume declares that philosophy must be of utility to men, as well as to society. Utility contributes to the happiness of society and is related to justice. Justice is founded on a sense of utility. Hume’s arguments for the utilitarian foundation of justice consist in the fact that “the useful qualities of the mind are virtuous, because of their utility.” Justice is artificial virtue. “justice is a moral virtue, merely because it has that tendency to the good of mankind; and, indeed, is nothing but an artificial invention to that purpose.” Tendency to usefulness is virtuous because of utility. Usefulness with others is agreeable. For, “the pleasure of a stranger for whom we have no friendship, pleases us only by sympathy.” Sympathy with public interest is the source of the moral approbation. Hume clarifies the nature and force of sympathy. “The minds of all men are similar in their feelings and
operations, nor can any one be actuated by any affection, of which all others are not, in some degree, susceptible."⁵ Thus, Hume figures that the thought of the pleasure and pain of other people arouses the sentiment of humanity. Pleasure includes many different kinds of feeling. The feeling is affected by pleasantness or unpleasantness, by usefulness or harmfulness. Consequently, sympathy is grounded on feeling.

The opposite concept of 'feeling' is the concept 'reason'. Hume is an anti-rationalist. But one of the difficulties in understanding Hume's argument is that of understanding the rationalist views he opposes. Nevertheless it is possible at least to understand the reasoning he employed in his argument. The next section will turn to this reasoning.

II. Reason [versus Feeling]

Reason is not the source of the moral distinction. Hume says that "Reason judges either of matter of fact or of relation."⁶ and "the operations of human understanding divide themselves into two kinds, the comparing of ideas, and the inferring of matter of fact."⁷ According to Hume, reason is involved in demonstration and probable reasoning. He cannot conclude that morals are founded on demonstration and probable reasoning. Moral judgement arises from moral distinction. Moral distinction arises from feeling. So, moral judgement is based on feeling of approval or disapproval.

Firstly, moral distinction is not derived from reason as concerned with matter of fact. Hume illustrates with the example "Willful murder, for instance, Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call vice. In which-ever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. Here is a matter of fact; but 'tis the object of feeling, not of reason. It lies in yourself, not in the object."⁸

Secondly, moral distinctions are not derived from reason as concerned with relations. Hume argues that "There has been an opinion very industriously propagated by certain philosophers, that morality is susceptible of demonstration."⁹ In this case vice and virtue consist in some relations. That is, "morality, like truth, is discerned merely by ideas, and by their juxta-position and comparison."¹⁰

Hume emphasizes that reason does not enter directly into the activation of actions. According
to Hume, "Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular." Since reason does not move one into action, moral action is not a product of reason. He maintains that "reason is perfectly inert, and [therefore] can never either prevent or produce any action or affection." He explains that "An action or sentiment or character is virtuous or vicious, why? because its view causes a pleasure or uneasiness of a particular kind." And "Since morals, therefore, have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows that they cannot be derived from reason; that because reason alone, as we have already prov'd, can never have any such influence." Reason does not activate moral actions and is involved in morality indirectly. Hume considers that reason is essentially subordinate to passions in matters of morality. Nevertheless, rational reasoning influences human conduct and behaviour "Either when [reason] excites a passion by informing us of the existence of something which is a proper object of it; or when it discovers the connection of causes and effects, so as to afford us means of exerting any passion."

Hume insists that the pleasure caused by virtue and the pain caused by vice are pleasure and pain of a special kind. Moral distinction is a feeling of approbation or disapprobation. "Our approbation is imply'd in the immediate pleasure they convey to us."

Hume's discussion on reason is contrasted with feeling and is chosen between the two. The next section will turn to the problem of alternative judgement.

III. The Presentation of a Problem.

Hume proves the truth of two propositions. The first proposition is that reason cannot be motive to any action of the will. The second proposition is that reason cannot oppose feeling in the direction of the will.

In the first place he asserts that in the first proposition "I believe it scare will be asserted, that the first species of reasoning alone is ever the cause of any action. As its proper province is the world of ideas, and the will always places us in that of realities, demonstration and volition seem, upon that account, to be totally remov'd, from each other." After all, moral distinctions are not derived from reason.

It is important to note that Humes theory of moral judgements is similar to his theory of belief about object. Hume's theory of belief is construed as the faculty of imagination. However, imagination is apt to become illusion, fiction and fallacy. To avoid fallacy, is reason not required for the establishment of imagination? Hume describes that "imagination is source of general rules." Are the rules not derived from reason?
Also, it is important to note that in his theory of moral judgements the concept ‘justice’ is artifice. Justice gives rise to contracts and promises. Is reason not required for the establishment of contracts and promises? The rules of justice are artificial. Are the rules not derived from reason? In the final analysis, is Hume’s assertion that moral distinctions are not derived from reason, therefore moral distinctions are derived from feeling, correct?

In the second place he asserts that in the second proposition “Reason 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.”¹⁹ After all, reason is the slave of feeling.

Is it so evident that in Hume’s theory of belief about causality reason serves and obeys feeling for the establishment of belief about causality?

Is it so obvious that in Hume’s theory of moral judgement reason serves and obeys feeling for the establishment of moral judgement, though Hume does not use the word ‘judgement’ so often? In the end, is Hume’s assertion that reason is the slave of feeling, correct?

It should be noted whether the category of reason and feeling is fundamental or not. Is there the distinction between reason and feeling? This serious question must be considered. The illustrations are written below.

(i) One is composed of the two.

The dark, new moon and the bright, full moon are interchangeable.

( apparently )

( substantially )

The moon changes its phase. Apparently man call one phase of the moon a crescent moon. However it is one and always the same substantially. Similarly, human nature is composed of reason and feeling in reality. Reason and feeling are interchangeable with each other.
(ii) The two are not parallel.

The two lines intersect.

(apparently) (substantially)

Theoretically, through a point outside a line, only one line can be drawn through that point and still be parallel to the original line. However, practically no one can prove this postulate by any measurement. Einstein had to assume a non-Euclidean geometry to explain what is observed in nature. Likewise, reason and feeling are not parallel to each other. Reason and feeling are interdependent on each other.

It is interesting to note that if Hume’s supposition is false, the anti-supposition is true. Also, it is interesting to replace Hume’s concept ‘feeling’ with the concept ‘reason’ in his assertions.

Hume’s supposition:

(a) ‘Moral distinctions are not derived from reason’

\[ \text{Therefore moral distinctions are derived from feeling} \]

〈Hume’s assertion〉

“nothing is ever present to the mind but its perceptions, that all the actions of seeing, hearing, judging, loving, hating, and thinking, fall under this denomination. The mind can never exert itself in any action, which we may not comprehend under the term of perception; and consequently that term is no less applicable to those judgements, by which we distinguish moral good and evil, than to every other operation of the mind. To approve of one character, to condemn another, are only so many different perceptions”.
Anti-Supposition:

(b) [Moral distinctions are not derived from feeling.]

\[ \rightarrow \text{Therefore moral distinctions are derived from reason.} \]

\langle \text{the substituted assertion} \rangle

"nothing is ever present to the mind but its reason that all the actions of seeing, hearing, judging, loving, hating, and thinking, fall under this denomination. The mind can never exert itself in any action, which we may not comprehend under the term of reason; and consequently that term is no less applicable to those judgements, by which we distinguish moral good and evil, than to every other operation of the mind. To approve of one character, to condemn another, are only so many different reason."

Consequently, in the practical sphere (a) and (b) are not parallel, and compatible. (a) and (b) are interchangeable.

\[
\begin{array}{c|c}
A & A \\
\text{versus} & \text{versus} \\
\text{non-A} & \text{anti-A} \\
(\text{theoretically}) & (\text{practically}) \\
(\text{apparently}) & (\text{substantially}) \\
\end{array}
\]

Accordingly, A versus non-A is in the theoretical sphere, and A versus anti-A is in the practical sphere. Hume’s assertion is in the theoretical sphere, and not in the practical sphere. Therefore it may be given as a conclusion that there would be raised the problem of whether Hume’s supposition about moral distinction is correct.

Is reason the slave of feeling or the partner?

Last but not least, symbolically, Buddha’s teaching leads us to non-duality, from the
discriminating concept of two conflicting points of view. It is a mistake for people to seek a thing supposed to be good and right, and to flee from another thing supposed to be bad and evil.

Notes
3. Ibid. P.577
4. Ibid. P.576
5. Ibid. P.576
6. Enquiry, P.287
7. Treatise, P463
8. Ibid. P.469
9. Ibid. P.463
10. Ibid. P.456
11. Ibid. P.457
12. Ibid. P.457
13. Ibid. P.471
14. Ibid. P.457
15. Ibid. P.459
16. Ibid. P.471
17. Ibid. P.413
18. Ibid. P.213
19. Ibid. P.415
20. Ibid. P.456