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Narrative Epistemology and the Variability of Virtue:
Hume on Character and Moral Epistemology

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of
Philosophy

in

Philosophy

by

Erin Amanda Frykholm

Committee in charge:

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2011

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Co-Chair

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University of California, San Diego

2011

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Narrative Epistemology and the Variability of Virtue:
Hume on Character and Moral Epistemology

by

Erin Amanda Frykholm

Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy

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Professor Donald Rutherford, Chair
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This dissertation reconstructs David Hume’s largely overlooked account of character, examines its role in his theory of virtue and moral philosophy, and explores its relevance for contemporary moral theory. The thesis addresses three issues surrounding Hume’s view of character, including what character traits are, how we identify them, and what Hume’s account offers to current debates about character and virtue.

Previous interpretations of character in Hume require a more robust account of personhood than Hume articulates. In contrast, I argue that a trait is a disposition rooted in the strength of associations between the impressions and ideas that make up the self. This account makes traits real qualities, attributable to persons, without requiring metaphysical claims beyond what Hume makes in his reductionist account of the self. Moreover, I show that a focus on Hume’s account of character reveals features of his moral epistemology that have escaped notice. I argue that Hume’s moral epistemology requires not only the oft-discussed “general point of view” but also a narrative account of character. That is, inferring character traits from

actions requires viewing actions as part of a narrative, making reference to social circumstances, personal beliefs and intentions of the agent, past actions and/or other pieces of relevant contextual information to make a particular action intelligible. I also argue that our assessments of virtue and vice derived from these narrative accounts reveal that traits assessed as virtues or vices vary substantially, according to a person's social and cultural circumstances.

This dissertation provides a significant contribution to an area of Hume scholarship by illuminating Hume's often neglected, and poorly understood, conception of the nature of character traits. It also argues that the standard account of Hume's moral epistemology is lacking a necessary feature, namely the emphasis on narrative accounts of character. This reading of Hume poses new challenges, and rewarding answers, to standard questions about virtue and vice. Finally, it proposes a new solution to troubling skepticism about character and virtue.

Introduction

Hume holds that a person's "character" is the only proper object of moral evaluation. We cannot judge a single action as morally right or wrong, according to Hume, but rather only the lasting traits of individuals. What is morally relevant is the long-term behavior of an individual as directed by his or her dominant motivations. Commentators recognize that character is the proper object of moral evaluation for Hume, but a full account of what he means by "character" is not at the forefront of the Hume literature. Focus is more often given, for obvious reasons of interest and complexity, to his meta-ethical claims, including his sentimentalism and his naturalism. But character is the basis of Humean moral judgments, and his view of character, though not always obvious, is also not conventional. Unlike Aristotle's, for example, Hume's notion of good character is not derived from a list of the virtues. Character is primary for Hume since he holds that having some virtues may preclude one from having other virtues, which entails that having good character is not defined by embodying all the virtues. Another claim that does not accord with many traditional notions of character is that what counts as "good character" is variable according to situations and subjects. Given these unorthodox conclusions, we cannot just assume that we know what Hume means by "character."

Hume describes traits as "durable principles of the mind" or "mental qualities" (T3.3.1..3-4 / SBN 575) and suggests that these "dispositions" are more "constant," or lasting, than passing whims (T2.3.2.6 / SBN 411). However, in Book One of his *Treatise*, Hume tells us there is nothing lasting or permanent about the mind (T1.4.6.4-6 / SBN 252-5). This leaves us with an apparent dilemma, which is that we attribute durable characteristics to an ephemeral object. So an immediate question, which has gone largely unaddressed in the literature, is whether Hume has the ontological means to talk about character traits as real properties of

persons. This problem makes it even more clear that we need to understand what Hume means by his reference to character if we are to accept his theory as coherent. From the point of view of historical interest, since the idea of character plays such a fundamental role in Hume's ethics, becoming clear about what he means by character, and what the implications of his view are, will give us a fuller picture of his ethical theory and its consequences. There is a gap in the literature regarding this feature of Hume's view, but it is central for a full understanding of his ethical theory. The two main goals of this dissertation are to outline an account of character that is coherent with Hume's metaphysical and epistemological claims about persons, and to develop the unique features of Hume's account of virtue when it is actually put to use.

From a contemporary philosophical standpoint, we can hope that the view he puts forward, when fully understood, can offer insights for further discussions of virtue and character. There has been a recent resurgence of interest in virtue ethics, and understanding Hume's view as a coherent virtue ethic with unique commitments and consequences adds a valuable dimension to that debate. While I do not explore the breadth of these consequences in the dissertation, the reader will note gestures toward them, and the argument in Chapter Five, in particular, highlights the uniqueness of Hume's view among theories of virtue. Chapter Six offers an argument for one important consequence that Hume's account of character offers for contemporary debates about character. The promise of this dissertation reaches beyond its exegetical value.

In this introduction, I have three goals. First, I will give an overview of three general features of Hume's view as they inform his discussion of character and moral evaluation. These are his empiricism, his sentimentalism, and his subjectivism. The second aim is to elaborate why Hume focuses on character as the object of moral evaluations. Finally, I will provide an outline of the following chapters, and a general statement of my intent.

1. Hume's Philosophical Commitments

There are three main facets of Hume's philosophical outlook that are assumed in the dissertation, and which require some brief exposition here. These are his empiricism about morality, his sentimentalism, and the subjectivism that results. As an empiricist, Hume looks to facts about human behavior as the source of our moral standards, and specifically he looks at human sentiments since, he argues, these are the only source of value judgments. So his moral theory follows from empirical data about human sentiments. This leads to a qualified subjectivism about morality, since human sentiment provides the standard of value. His commitments to sentimentalism and consequently a particular sort of subjectivism about virtue inform the development of his ethical theory. Each of these is a fairly contentious philosophical claim, so they need some defense at the outset. Understanding these general features of Hume's view should enable the reader to better appreciate why Hume focuses on sentiments as fundamental for action, responsibility, and evaluation.

1.1 *The Empirical foundation of Hume's project*

Hume's empiricism and his focus on facts about human nature drive his philosophy. The full title of the *Treatise* is, *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects*. In the introduction to his *Treatise*, Hume notes five philosophers whom he deems to have "begun to put the science of man on a new footing" (T Intro.7 / SBN xvi-xvii, and note). These five are Locke, Shaftesbury, Mandeville, Hutcheson, and Butler. Though just a footnote in an introduction, this specific reference—a rarity for Hume—gives us insight into the figures Hume views as prominent in the project in which he is engaged. Hume sees his project as fundamentally based in empirical facts and evidence, and sees the figures listed above as having moved our understanding of human nature forward some way in this regard. Hume's primary goal is to make progress in "the

science of man,” particularly in the arena of moral theory, by beginning with observations about human understanding and sentiment.

Hume came to his project out of frustration with past philosophy. In a letter he wrote to a doctor in 1734, out of concern for his current state of fatigue and distraction with regard to his studies, Hume describes, in addition to his physical symptoms, some of his thought processes during this time. He tells the doctor how he began his studies with admiration for ancient moralists, attempting to take the advice of the Stoics in particular:

[H]aving read many Books of Morality, such as Cicero, Seneca & Plutarch, & being smit with their beautiful Representations of Virtue & Philosophy, I undertook the Improvement of my Temper & Will, along with my Reason & Understanding. I was continually fortifying myself with Reflections against Death, & Poverty, & Shame, & Pain, & all the other Calamities of Life. (*Letters* I.14²)

On more recent reflection, however, Hume tells the doctor that he has discovered a fundamental frustration with ancient moral philosophy:

I found that the moral Philosophy transmitted to us by Antiquity, labor'd under the same Inconvenience that has been found in their natural Philosophy, of being entirely Hypothetical, & depending more upon Invention than Experience. Every one consulted his Fancy in erecting Schemes of Virtue & of Happiness, without regarding human Nature, upon which every moral Conclusion must depend. (HL I.16)

In other words, just as Bacon argued that the natural philosophy of Aristotle lacked empirical rigor, so, Hume argues, the moral philosophy of the ancients lacks an empirical foundation.³

James Moore rightly notes this transition, as explained in this letter, as fundamental to Hume's view of his own coming work.⁴ As empirical methods have informed natural science, so, Hume suggests, they should inform moral philosophy.

² Hereafter “HL” (Hume's Letters)

³ Hume maintains respect for certain features of the ancients' views of virtue (see, e.g. *EPM* App. 4.11 (SBN 318-9), where he agrees with Cicero's lack of distinction between natural abilities and traditional virtues), but this does not discount his frustration with them.

⁴ Moore, “Hume and Hutcheson”, in *Hume and Hume's Connexions*.

In a letter to Francis Hutcheson, Hume describes the nature of his work with an analogy. He says that one can look at the mind “as an Anatomist or as a Painter; either to discover its most secret Springs & Principles or to describe the Grace & Beauty of its Actions” (HL I.32). He says that the two views are fundamentally distinct, though as an anatomist can inform a painter, so a scientist of human nature can inform a moralist. Nevertheless, these are two distinct viewpoints, and Hume sees himself as a scientist first. Hume wants to begin without a moral agenda to examine how human beings think and to what we react with approval and disapproval, which, he hopes, will inform the “artist” (the “moralist”), and help the latter depict the movements of the human mind in evocative ways.

This analogy may be some of the motivation for the general understanding of Hume’s view as descriptive rather than prescriptive. Hume explicitly distinguishes his own project from the practical/normative project of Hutcheson, and so in one sense clearly does not intend to be offering a normative ethical account.⁵ As an analogy, we can consider the difference between Da Vinci’s anatomical drawings and his figure paintings. Even if one wants to say that there is something artistic in the anatomical undertakings, it’s clear that the aim was to depict arms, hands, and feet as they *are*, rather than to engender an emotive effect through some stylized portrayal of them. Hume sees his project in the same way; that is, he sees his work as the detailed anatomical drawings that can enable a moralist to elaborate moral precepts.

Still, just as a matter of consistency, certain normative conclusions can be drawn from understanding the “anatomy” behind the moralizing. Hume comes back to this analogy in the final paragraph of the *Treatise*, where he nicely sums up the relationship between moral theory and practical morality:

⁵ Shaftesbury, one of Hume’s sentimentalist predecessors, even included engravings in his text to encourage readers’ meditation on the virtues. These are reprinted in the Liberty Fund edition of his *Characteristicks*.

The anatomist ought never to emulate the painter.... An anatomist, however, is admirably fitted to give advice to a painter; and 'tis even impracticable to excel in the latter art, without the assistance of the former.... And thus the most abstract speculations concerning human nature, however cold and unentertaining, become subservient to *practical morality*; and may render this latter science more correct in its precepts, and more persuasive in its exhortations. (T3.3.6.6 / SBN 620-1)

In sum, Hume sees his project as an empirical inquiry into facts about human nature, specifically what we value and how we evaluate; but, he also sees the product of this work, that is, an outline of these facts about human nature, to be a new starting point for further practical morality. He fully expects that moral theory is the underpinning for the amendment of behavior and the construction of normative guides. In the first passage quoted above from his letter to the doctor, Hume declares his aim in studying moral philosophy to be “the Improvement of [his] Temper & Will.” So while his project might not be one of prescriptive morality, he certainly sees it as crucial for further practical projects and as directly informing such projects. Reading Hume’s theory as a type of virtue ethic, which I do in Chapter Five, presumes that there is a clear connection between his descriptive account and its normative consequences.⁶

Chapter One will offer insight into the influence of the philosophers Hume listed in the above cited footnote, specifically as they tell us something about the novel features of his empirical moral project. Many of these predecessors were offering prescriptive as well as descriptive accounts of human nature, and some of the consequences of combining these projects are illuminating for why Hume thought one needed to be undertaken independently and prior to the other. Assumptions made for the prescriptive projects lead to descriptive accounts that Hume finds problematic; as we will see in the following chapters, starting with the

⁶ My reading accords with Cohon’s reading of Hume on this point. In reading the anatomist/ painter analogy this way, she offers an analogy of the product engineer and the advertiser: “The product is genuine virtue. The engineer enumerates its parts and how they work together; the advertiser entices us to buy it” (*Hume’s Morality*, p. 241 *ff*). Cohon’s brief account of the prescriptive/descriptive debate is a helpful iteration of the view that I am offering (see Cohon, pp.239-41).

latter account allows Hume to offer more reliable empirical insights to a subsequent prescriptive account.

1.2 Hume's sentimentalism

Hume follows in a tradition of sentimentalism espoused by Shaftesbury and Hutcheson.⁷ All three philosophers hold the view that only sentiments (affections) motivate; reason by itself does not. We can call this shared view “motivational sentimentalism.” They also all hold the view that we only have knowledge of morality by means of the sentiments, and not by reason alone. We can call this view “epistemological sentimentalism.” In a third respect, Hume differs from Shaftesbury and Hutcheson in also arguing that morality is determined by the sentiments, and not by an independent standard of the good. We can call this feature his “metaphysical sentimentalism.”⁸ It is with the addition of this third sentimentalist tenet that Hume’s view becomes subjective—and potentially relativistic—so I leave discussion of this feature for the next section. Here, I will outline the primary commitments that follow from the first two. Two sets of concerns arise from these commitments, which I will briefly address in what follows; the first has to do with the diminished role given to reason in moral action, and the second the prominent role of the passions in our recognition of and motivation toward virtue.

1.2.1 Motivational sentimentalism

Let us consider Hume’s motivational sentimentalism first. He says that we are always and only ever motivated by passions. Reason by itself is incapable of motivating, Hume thinks, because it cannot set ends. Reason is instrumental for achieving the ends that we value, but it cannot itself give value to ends. By reason we know that x actions achieve y results, but the value

⁷ Hume’s anti-rationalist arguments appear in T2.3.3 / SBN 413-18 and 3.1.1 / SBN 455-70.

⁸ Thanks to Sam Rickless for this helpful tripartite distinction.

or disvalue of achieving y results depends on the passions. Hume says it is always some prospect of pain or pleasure that brings us to adopt some end:

’Tis from the prospect of pain or pleasure that the aversion or propensity arises towards any object.... It can never in the least concern us to know, that such objects are causes, and such others effects, if both the causes and effects be indifferent to us. Where the objects themselves do not affect us, their connexion can never give them any influence; and ’tis plain, that reason is nothing but the discovery of this connexion, it cannot be by its means that the objects are able to affect us. (T 2.3.3.3 / SBN 414)

There is something intuitively plausible about this account, though it has raised questions about the value of reason. While some commentators take Hume to be rejecting any role for reason in decision-making and in moral judgment, many others have argued that this is not the case. I will return to the specific role reason does play later, but for now there is more to say about Hume’s requisite passions.

On the intuitive level, we might just interpret Hume to be saying that in order for anything to count for us as a “reason” for acting, it has to be connected to something we already care about, in some sense, where caring is understood as having some affective response to the object (we can care about something insofar as we care about avoiding it, so this needn’t be restricted to positive emotions). There can still be a long chain between what we care about and what can count as a reason for acting, but Hume’s point here, which I think is plausible, is that there has to be some connection between a possible action and something that already draws some affective reaction from us. When we tell a child that he has to go to school in order to be able to get a job that he wants when he is older, and he responds that he really just wants to be a monster truck driver, then unless we can explain to him why getting an education is important for becoming a monster truck driver, our argument is going to have no pull with him. There is no objective appeal to its being rational to go to school that will motivate him—it has to be connected to something he already wants for himself. Usually we do attempt to establish some connection to the objects of the child’s desires before giving up and resorting to exertion of

brute authority. The only way that something can be a reason for acting, on Hume's view, is that it is in some way a means toward achieving something we care about.⁹

While the above example might be read as true for pre- or semi-rational persons (i.e. children), we might maintain that adults possess a greater capacity to govern their passions using reason. Hume argues against this reading, saying (in no uncertain terms), "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" (T2.3.3.4). The phenomenon that we might describe as acting on reasons, *rather than* passions, is explained in Humean terms in Chapter Two, in an extended discussion of passions and their motivational force.

The passions also play a role in the argument of Chapter Three, where I account for what it means to say that a person has a character trait. A trait is taken to be a disposition to act in certain ways, or we might say a disposition to act on certain motives rather than others. Since passions alone motivate, whatever grounds our consistent patterns of motivation must incorporate passions. As we will see, however, this leaves room for the operation of belief as it influences our passions and forms our character.

1.2.2 Epistemological sentimentalism

In addition to being a motivational sentimentalist—arguing that we are only motivated by passions—Hume is also an epistemological sentimentalist, arguing that we know or recognize value only by sentiments. We know virtue by the pleasing sentiment of approval, and vice by the displeasing sentiment of disapproval. He offers several arguments for this claim in the first section of the third book of the *Treatise*. The theme of these arguments is that for many actions that we perceive as vicious, there are parallel relations amongst other objects or animals in the

⁹Henry Sidgwick attempted to argue for the motivational force of reason, against Hume's account (*Methods*; see also Shaver, Robert. "Sidgwick on Moral Motivation." (2006)). More recently, J. L. Mackie has questioned the success of Hume's motivational anti-rationalist arguments (*Hume's Moral Theory* (1980), Ch. 3).

world, and we do not judge those relations as vicious. An acorn can grow to overtake its parent tree, but we do not view this in the same way that we view parricide; animals may commit incest, but we do not judge them to be vicious. Hume argues that no fact about the relations of the objects in question can account for the difference between these cases and cases of parricide or human incest, which clearly are vicious. We know this because of the painful feeling of disapproval we experience when we observe these actions, or the pleasurable feeling of approval when we observe virtuous actions. By reason we compare ideas, but the ideas compared in the acorn/tree example and those in the child/parent example have the same relations; the difference is felt by sentiment, not understood by reason.¹⁰ Reason still plays an essential and decisive role in moral evaluation, but the foundation upon which our evaluations are based comes from our sentiments.¹¹

Because of the role that pleasure and pain play in motivation, and because the observation of virtue itself brings a kind of pleasure (a sentiment of approval), we might think

¹⁰ One further interpretation of Hume's claim that we evaluate facts according to our inner constitution, which is the source of their value, is suggested by Nicholas Capaldi. He argues that Hume is an "epistemological Copernican," meaning that "our knowledge is always and necessarily a reflection of the structure of the understanding we as agents bring to the world," and so our interaction with the world is directed by our practical interests such that "there can be no ultimate distinction between fact and value" (Capaldi, *Hume's Place in Moral Philosophy* (1989), p.298). In other words, our assessment of the world, in the process of encountering it, is inexorably guided and informed by our interests. On this reading, our own aims and ends are not separable from our perception of facts. It is also clear that the distinction being made does not leave us "subject to" desires—rather, it simply suggests that our desires play a necessary role in our understanding of the world.

¹¹ Rachel Cohon gives a helpful re-reading of what "reason" means for Hume that might be viewed as an extreme reinterpretation, but I find it quite plausible. Since reason produces truth-evaluable claims, and moral judgments are not the result of reason, many read Hume as arguing that moral judgments are not truth-evaluable (a non-cognitivist reading of his moral theory). Reid challenged Hume on this point (Reid, *Inquiry*), and it has been an issue of debate throughout Hume scholarship. Cohon, for reasons I think are quite insightful, argues against this reading of Hume. Following Hume's own claims, she argues that for Hume, "reason" is more like "reasoning"—it is the process of comparing ideas and impressions, rather than a name for a faculty. Reason includes the processes of intuition, demonstration, and causal inference, and the outcome of reason is an affirmation or denial of truth. If we understand Hume in this way, and add his claim that there are no evaluative facts (the acorn/parricide contrast), we can see why reason alone cannot be the source of value judgments. Reason, for Hume, is a means of comparing ideas, but no comparisons will produce value. Rather, comparison can only produce a conclusion about which option has more value based on an already established standard of value. (Cohon, *Hume's Morality* (2008), Ch. 3 (pp.63-95).) Her view has been challenged by Don Garrett and Elizabeth Radcliffe (*Hume Studies* 34.2, pp. 257-66 and pp.267-76, respectively).

Hume is a hedonist about motivation (i.e. a “psychological hedonist”).¹² The observation of virtue produces pleasure (in the form of approval), and so anytime I am virtuous I can take pleasure in my virtue. If being virtuous allows me to feel pleasure, we might think it is the promise of this pleasure that motivates me to be virtuous. However, we do not need to read Hume as a psychological hedonist. It is clear that Hume does not think our motives to virtue do reduce to self-interest.¹³ In his essay “On the Dignity or Meanness of Human Nature,” Hume argues that even if actions falling under the “natural virtues,” such as concern for one’s family and friends, are motivated by self-interest (“self-love”), it is not the pernicious egoistic self-interest we might assume:

That species of self-love, which displays itself in kindness to others, you must allow to have great influence over human actions, and even greater, on many occasions, than that which remains in its original shape and form. For how few are there, who, having a family, children, and relations, do not spend more on the maintenance and education of these than on their own pleasures? (*Essays* 1.11.9)¹⁴

Our virtuous actions might begin in self-interest but clearly extend far beyond the limits of our interest. Pleasure, then, follows from virtue but is not necessarily the motive toward being virtuous. He goes on to point out that the pleasure felt in reflecting upon our own virtuous action is not itself our motivation to be virtuous: “The virtuous sentiment or passion produces

¹² By “psychological hedonist” I mean one who believes that only the prospect of one’s own pleasure or pain can motivate. Hobbes and Locke may be read as examples of psychological hedonists.

¹³ Gill, *British Moralists* (2006), p. 238. Gill argues that Hume worked to disprove Mandeville’s egoism, and also, for the same reasons, to deny Shaftesbury’s and Hutcheson’s arguments for benevolent human nature. Gill argues that Hume offers a progressive, as opposed to static, account of human motivation, importantly showing that we may have both self-interested and benevolent motives, but neither must constitute a full account of human nature, since human beings can develop new motivations for the same behaviors. His account of our motives to justice is one example of this “progressive” account of human motivation. With this reading, Gill successfully shows that Hume is intentionally distinguishing his account from the egoist view. (See Gill, Chapter 18)

Norton discusses the relationship between motives and virtue, as well as Hume’s response to Mandeville in “The Foundations of Morality” (“The Foundations of Morality in Hume’s Treatise”, 2008). He argues that for Hume, we develop our moral approval of artificial virtues such as justice, as an “*other-regarding concern* that these conventions be followed” (p.300). His discussion focuses on the moral approval, rather than the original motive.

¹⁴ Hutcheson also used the parent/child relationship to argue against egoism (*An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, pp.155-58; noted also in Gill, p.147).

the pleasure, and does not arise from it. I feel a pleasure in doing good to my friend, because I love him; but do not love him for the sake of that pleasure” (*Essays* 1.9.10). While pleasure is a consequence of our virtuous action, it is not the original motive for it.

Furthermore, virtues promote pleasure, but not necessarily *my* pleasure. I feel pleasure in recognizing someone’s virtue, and I feel this even when I stand in no position to benefit from that virtue, so the pleasing sentiment of approval I feel in observing virtue is not derived from hope of any personal benefit.¹⁵ In particular, Hume argues that people take pleasure in an attractive person regardless of their proximity to him: “the ability of such a person to give enjoyment, is the real source of that love and esteem he meets with... at the same time that the [people], who love and esteem him, have no prospect of receiving that enjoyment themselves” (T3.3.5.2 / SBN 615).¹⁶ The extent to which Hume sets aside debates about self-interested motivation in his definition of virtue is elaborated in Chapter One.

Because virtue is only known by an inward reflection on our sentiments, it is incumbent upon Hume to provide a method for identifying those sentiments that properly reflect virtue and those that merely reflect our private interests. While moral sentiments are distinguished by their peculiar feeling, beginning in Chapter Two we will see that Hume also sets out specific criteria that are essential for the generation of moral sentiments, and so these special sentiments are distinguishable, though not simply defined by, the conditions that produce them. Only in

¹⁵ See Chapter One, section five for a further discussion of how Hume distinguishes between self-interested motivation and virtuous action.

¹⁶ Árdal has also noted that Hume would have accepted Butler’s refutation of psychological egoism (Árdal, 79). In addition, he argues at length against the claims that Hume is either an ethical egoist or a psychological egoist, based on (a) the role that sympathy plays in his account of evaluation, and (b) Hume’s account of the objects of passions. He notes that Hume’s account of sympathy with other people’s pleasures and pains could lead us to wonder whether it is our own pleasure and pain, felt by sympathy, that drives us to maximize other people’s pleasure and minimize their pain. Against this, Árdal argues that some passions may *produce* pleasure without *proceeding* from it; the *object* of passions is, importantly, someone else’s joy or grief, and “sympathy is not needed to account for the fact that it is not the agent’s own pleasure but someone else’s which is the object. The agent’s own pleasure is produced by their satisfaction, but cannot in the nature of the case be their original object” (79). See Árdal, *Passion and Value* (1966) pp.69-79 for his full argument.

certain conditions, including the observation of a proper object and this object viewed from a general perspective, do moral sentiments arise. In Chapter Four I argue that there is a further dimension to these conditions that is required in order for us to identify the object, a character trait, that gives rise to these sentiments.

1.3 Hume's subjectivism

According to Hume, virtue is not determined according to features of objects or states of affairs, or the fittingness of actions, but rather according to our affective attitudes toward objects and actions, so his account of virtue is in an important sense subjective. It cannot be defined independently of features of human psychology or attitudes. Subsequent to the acorn/tree argument, Hume claims that the vice of an action is not found in the objective relations of the person(s) involved, but from the feelings we have toward them:

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 reflection into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation. (T3.1.1.26 / SBN 468-9).

In short, Hume's sentimentalism is rooted in the claims that value is determined by our affective responses to the world, rather than by objects in the world on their own, and that in particular our pleasing and displeasing sentiments in response to actions are the determining factors for evaluation. This argument, along with his definition of virtue and vice as simply the power of producing certain sentiments (e.g. T3.1.2.3 / SBN 471, T3.3.1.3 / SBN 574-5), establish his metaphysical sentimentalism, the claim that virtue is determined by human sentiment.¹⁷

¹⁷ We might distinguish between a view that bases morality on our *actual* sentiments, versus one that bases it on our *appropriate* sentiments. The latter implies a standard of moral evaluation. For Hume, since virtue is not only judged by sentiments but defined by them, we could only account for certain sentiments as "appropriate" if at least some people actually felt them, some of the time. This is all that Hume requires for his argument that we can find a shared standard of judgment. How he constructs this standard such that we can either share these sentiments or imagine sharing them is explained in Chapter 2, in the discussion of sympathy.

Philosophers often worry that subjectivist accounts of morality can have the following consequence: Actions I like are virtuous, and actions I don't like are vicious (if we disagree widely, we might stipulate that actions I like are virtuous *for me*). If this is how virtue is defined, how can one person impose her account of virtue on another person? That is, how can we agree, or intelligibly disagree, on what is virtuous? Philippa Foot finds Hume's theory questionable for this reason: "Such a theory does not look at all plausible. We are not inclined to think that when a man says that an action is virtuous, or vicious, he is talking about his own feelings rather than a quality which he must show really to belong to what is done" (1978, p.77). Subjectivist accounts that allow for too much agent-relativity in determining virtue face particular difficulties in accounting for interpersonal agreement on virtue. The intuitive concern is that we expect our moral judgments to be standardized and shared in important interpersonal ways. But if our moral judgments are based on empirical facts about subjective attitudes, then it is possible that our judgments will vary widely.

Though Hume holds that human sentiments of approval and disapproval determine virtue and vice, his account of virtue or moral goodness is not entirely agent-relative. In his essay "On the Standard of Taste," he argues that there is a standard of aesthetic beauty that we hold in common, and by which we can gauge the appropriateness or inappropriateness of our individual aesthetic sentiments; this is true, in parallel, for morality. He is explicitly arguing against the more vicious subjectivism that allows for the correctness of every individual sentiment. This pernicious view, as Hume paraphrases, claims that "a thousand different sentiments, excited by the same object, are all right: Because no sentiment represents what is really in the object. It only marks a certain conformity or relation between the object and the organs or faculties of the mind" (*E* 1.23.7). If sentiments represent my relation to an object, rather than anything about the object itself, so the argument goes, then I can't be wrong about my relation to the object—I am the way I am. There is no need, on this view, to seek any standard outside myself: "every

individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others” (ibid.). Hume explicitly rejects this view in favor of a standard-based subjectivism, where sentiments still determine value, but these are not the individual sentiments of particular people.

In the *Treatise*, Hume explicitly claims that human sentiment sets the standard for moral judgments, and it cannot be wrong:

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... pleasure or pain... 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 'tis impossible in this particular we can ever be mistaken. (T3.2.8.8 / SBN 546-7)

Hume is careful to follow this passage with a footnote, however, which allows that *individuals* can be mistaken:

This proposition must hold strictly true, with regard to every quality, that is determin'd merely by sentiment. In what sense we can talk either of a *right* or a *wrong* taste in morals... shall be consider'd afterwards. In the meantime, it may be observ'd, that there is such an uniformity in the *general* sentiments of mankind, as to render such questions of but small importance.

A general consensus is enough to show that people who disagree could be found to be *wrong* in their peculiar tastes, and in arguing for the subjectivity of value judgments Hume is in no way implying that any particular subjective value judgment is, on the whole, morally correct.

On Hume's view, there is a social process of approximation toward a standard of taste. When I have an aversive reaction to a painting, or to a person's behavior, I might assume that the painting is ugly, or the person vicious, but if I notice that no one else seems to have that reaction, I have reason to reevaluate my own sentiment. Likewise, when we have sentiments that we mistake for moral approval but are really mixed with some self-interested approval, “we find so many contradictions to our sentiments in society and conversation, and such an uncertainty from the incessant changes of our situation, that we seek some other standard of merit and

demerit” (T3.3.1.18 / SBN 583).¹⁸ We find widespread disagreement problematic and try to account for disagreement by reassessing situations. Hume is clear that there is a standard of moral approval, as there is for aesthetic approval, by which we evaluate and reevaluate our own sentiments. It is more appropriate, then, to categorize Hume’s view as an *intersubjective* account of morality.¹⁹

Though cultural standards of behavior do vary widely across cultures, Hume maintains a commitment to the universality of our most basic desires and aversions. In “A Dialogue,” appended to the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hume elaborates the extent of this agreement, and how far we should be concerned about proving it:

the principles upon which men reason in morals are always the same; though the conclusions which they draw are often very different. That they all reason aright with regard to this subject, more than with regard to any other, it is not incumbent on any moralist to show. It is sufficient, that the original principles of censure or blame are uniform, and that the erroneous conclusions can be corrected by sounder reasoning and larger experience. (EPM “A Dialogue” 36 / SBN 335-6)

In other words, the standards are basic and shared, and only their interpretation varies (to better and worse approximations) across cultures.²⁰

Insofar as basic communication and comparison of norms is possible, we can seek a common moral standard. We may still lack any meaningful shared moral standards with small isolated tribes in the Amazon, but that is due to our existence in essentially a separate society from theirs. As our sympathies extend, these people become persons for whom we have

¹⁸ For a further discussion of what lies behind these “contradictions” and how Hume justifies his particular standard for the moral point of view, see Sayre-McCord, “Hume’s ‘General Point of View’” (1996), pp. 215-17.

¹⁹ C. D. Broad makes this suggestion as well (*Five Types of Ethical Theory* (1959), p.85). Nicholas Capaldi also uses this term, suggesting that intersubjectivity is as much objectivity as “a modern or contemporary theorist” expects (1989, pp.15-16). My use of the term is not simply derivative of his account, however. While this latter claim may not be universally satisfying, I agree that it is at least *objective enough* to eschew major worries about subjectivism.

²⁰ For a more detailed argument for why “A Dialogue” does not commit Hume to a relativistic point of view—or to an entirely non-relativistic point of view—see Kate Abramson, “Hume on Cultural Conflicts of Values” (1999).

sympathy and concern, and therefore toward whom we expect virtuous behavior to be directed. It is conceptually possible, by Hume's account, that we might encounter a society of people who approve of only those actions that are detrimental to themselves or others, but this possibility is so remote and frankly implausible that it is of no real concern.²¹ The only conditions necessary for us to be able to meaningfully interact morally with another group of people are that such people have affinities toward their own good and the good of others in their group, and that we can communicate our subjective views to them (and vice versa). With these conditions satisfied, Hume's view of virtues as progressive and malleable allows for further conversation to help a common moral language evolve from our moral sentiments.²²

Through an extended empirical argument, based on observations about what human beings in fact approve and disapprove, Hume concludes that there is a standard according to which judgments of virtue and vice can be assessed. This standard is his disjunctive account of virtue as traits that are useful or agreeable either to the agent herself or to people with whom she interacts (those in her "narrow circle") (T3.3.1.30 / SBN 590-1). So while it still holds that metaphysically, virtue is determined by human sentiment and would not be virtue if human sentiment did not respond to it in certain ways, as a matter of empirical fact, virtue is understood as that which is useful or agreeable. Hume is even more adamant about this fact in the second *Enquiry* than he was in the *Treatise*: "Usefulness is agreeable, and engages our approbation. This is a matter of fact, confirmed by daily observation... By opening up this principle, we shall discover one great source of moral distinctions" (EPM 515 / SBN 218). This account gives us a robust standard by which to assess virtue that removes us from our actual, biased feelings.

Hume's metaphysical sentimentalism makes it even more requisite that he be able to provide some standard of judgment if we can hope to share moral evaluations. The discussion

²¹ This concern is explored—and allayed—by Sayre-McCord (1996), pp.226-7.

²² The argument I give in Chapter 4 for the narrative component to evaluation gives further insight into how Hume expects we can better understand the moral practices of other cultures.

of the general point of view in Chapter Two introduces his answer to this challenge. Part of Chapter Five further elaborates the boundaries of whose concerns weigh in our considerations, and so offers further criteria requisite for moral evaluations that will be intersubjectively valid. I do not give a full account of how, according to Hume, we come to moral agreement because my focus in this dissertation is on what we are evaluating—character—and what factors are required for evaluation; this does not have direct consequences for how we understand the working of sympathy and the process of moral evaluations. However, the discussion of the narrow circle in Chapter Five does, as I say, give some insight into what such an account must consider. For the purposes of the rest of the dissertation, I take it for granted that Hume can provide some account of how moral agreement is possible on a wide scale.

2. Why does Hume Focus on Character?

From the perspectives of empiricism and sentimentalism, Hume begins the presentation of his philosophy with a discussion of human epistemology, explaining the origin of our ideas, the proper use of reason, and the scope of our knowledge. While this preliminary work is often taken as independently philosophically interesting, I would like to advance in this section one way in which it directly informs his moral theory, particularly his focus on motivation and character. There is historical precedent, in the work of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, for Hume to focus on a person's motives as the object of moral evaluation, but he also has his own philosophical reasons for this focus.

Hume's primary reason for focusing on character is a matter of empirical fact. Our moral sentiments respond to character traits, specifically: "from a primary constitution of nature certain character and passions, by the very view and contemplation, produce a pain, and others in like manner excite a pleasure. The uneasiness and satisfaction are not only inseparable from vice and virtue, but constitute their very nature and essence" (T2.1.7.5). In other words, our

moral sentiments, by nature, are caused by people's characters. Hume also argues that we approve and disapprove of people's actions only to the extent that these actions reflect their character.

Men are less blam'd for such evil actions, as they perform hastily and unpremeditatedly, than for such as proceed from thought and deliberation. For what reason? But because a hasty temper, tho' a constant cause in the mind, operates only by intervals, and infects not the whole character. Again, repentance wipes off every crime, especially if attended with an evident reformation of life and manners. How is this to be accounted for? But by asserting that actions render a person criminal, merely as they are proofs of criminal passions or principles in the mind; and when by any alteration of these principles they cease to be just proofs, they likewise cease to be criminal (T2.3.2.7 / SBN 412)

This empirical evidence, if correct, is in itself reason for Hume to focus on character.

However, in addition to this empirical fact about our sentimental responses, Hume's focus on character is importantly related to his account of our knowledge of the world, generally. Though there may not be a strict logical relation between Hume's epistemological commitments and his focus on character, there is a clear connection between the two. And insofar as the epistemology is intended to be in the service of moral theory, we are justified in looking for such a connection. The strong relation Hume observes between moral praise and blame and a person's character, including the quote above, is elaborated in Book Two of the *Treatise*, "Of Liberty and Necessity" (T2.3.1 / SBN 399-407). Clear evidence that this relation is grounded in Hume's epistemology is that when he published the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (which is essentially a reiteration of the Book One of the *Treatise*) eleven years later, he included in this discussion his account of liberty and necessity (EHU 8) as a corollary to his discussion of our ideas of cause and effect. The connection between a person's motives and her actions is as strong, for Hume, as the connection between gravity and objects falling to the ground. He argues in the *Enquiry* that this assumption of the necessary connection between motives and actions is essential for the continuance of human communication and activity.

Because of this correlation between Hume's causal theory and his focus on character, I will offer a brief discussion of why these subjects are connected in Hume's theory. This is not intended to stand as a complete, formal argument for his focus on character, but it offers support for this focus, given these earlier commitments.²³

For Hume, we attribute causal relations by noting constant conjunction. Due to the constant conjunction of events, such as the transference of motion from one moving object to another, or the heat we feel when near fire, we assume that the same effects result from the same causes; while we have no rational, certain proof of these causal relations, Hume argues that we must assume them if we are to get along in the world. Even in terms of the behavior of other people, which provides a foundation for our own practical judgments, this regularity must be assumed:

Hence likewise the benefit of that experience, acquired by long life and a variety of business and company, in order to instruct us in the principles of human nature, and regulate our future conduct, as well as speculation. By means of this guide, we mount up to the knowledge of men's inclinations and motives, from their actions, expressions, and even gestures; and again, descend to the interpretation of their actions from our knowledge of their motives and inclinations.... But were there no uniformity in human actions... it were impossible to collect any general observations concerning mankind. (EHU 8.9 / SBN 84-5)

Admittedly, we'd be at a loss in how to go about our daily business without some reasonable expectations of how other people will behave. It is a practical matter of life that we make assumptions and have expectations about how people will behave in certain circumstances. In the *Treatise* and again in the first *Enquiry*, Hume sets out to show "that as the *union* betwixt motives and actions has the same constancy, as that in any natural operations, so its influence on the understanding is also the same, in *determining* us to infer the existence of one from that of another" (T2.3.1.14 / SBN 404). Hume cites numerous examples of everyday behavior in which

²³ Richard Dees also has a brief discussion of the link between Hume's doctrine of necessity and his focus on character traits. My lengthier argument here is compatible with his claims. ("Hume on the Characters of Virtue" (1997), pp.47-8).

we rely on the expectations we have of people's behavior, and with these examples shows a pattern of constancy in these expectations being met. He then claims that given that we act on these expectations regularly, we assume that there is a regularity in human action.

Hume thinks that this assumption is as strong as any other causal assumption. There is no less a sense of necessity with the cause of voluntary action than there is with gravity or any other physical necessity:

[A] prisoner, when conducted to the scaffold, foresees his death as certainly from the constancy and fidelity of his guards, as from the operation of the ax or wheel. His mind runs along a certain train of ideas: The refusal of the soldiers to consent to his escape; the action of the executioner; the separation of the head and body; bleeding, convulsive motions, and death. Here is a connected chain of natural causes and voluntary actions; but the mind feels no difference between them, in passing from one link to another: Nor is he less certain of the future event than if it were connected....by a train of causes, cemented together by what we are pleased to call a *physical* necessity. (EHU 8.19 / SBN 90-1²⁴)

The prisoner's expectations for the behavior of the guards, given their dedication to their jobs, are felt to be as certain as the expectation that when his head comes off, he will bleed. The results of voluntary action are seen to be as certain as the effects of natural causes.

The constant conjunction between motive and action allows us to call motives the cause of actions. Hume is clear in his discussion "Of Liberty and Necessity" that this causal relation holds: "The same motives always produce the same actions; the same events follow from the same causes" (EHU 8.6, / SBN 83). Given his arguments for necessity in both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*, Hume concludes that we can (at least in principle) ascribe causes to a person's actions with enough information about her. Despite our sense of freedom, he says, "a spectator can commonly infer our actions from our motives and character; and even where he cannot, he concludes in general, that he might, were he perfectly acquainted with every circumstance of our situation and temper, and the most secret springs of our complexion and disposition" (T2.3.2.2

²⁴ The same argument appears in the *Treatise* at 2.3.1.17 / SBN 406-7.

/ SBN 408-9). Without this assumption of necessary connections, we would be unable to explain people's actions, and also unable to predict them.

On Hume's view, our ability to get along in the world is entirely dependent on these causal assumptions that we make. We know which motives produce which actions, so to the extent that we know people's motivations, we can predict their actions. Given the significance of the regularity of human behavior, we value this regularity in people's actions. The more regularity we can uncover, the better we can predict their behavior. If we can make generalizations about the motivations that people generally act from, we can make generalizations about what they will do.

The move from recognizing motives as the causes of action to focusing moral attributions on traits is arguably a practical maneuver, based on the fact that we do not always know the motivation from which a person is acting. Though we know that the same cause generally produces the same effect, it clearly does not follow that some effect can only be produced by some specific cause. Hume recognizes that depending on circumstances, very different motivations can manifest themselves in the same resulting action, so the action is not decisive evidence of what motivation produced it. As I see it, the fact that the same action can be performed for very different reasons explains the focus on character traits. Knowing someone's actions over time gives us more evidence for attributing one motive to that person rather than another. Seeing a person picking up trash to clean up the park doesn't tell us much about the person, but if we know that the person has a history of engaging in nefarious activities, we can assume it's more likely that she is there cleaning out of civic mandate than out of charity. It is possible that a person's motivation on a particular instance is a passing motive and not characteristic of her, so generally the more we know about a person the more accurately we can infer her motives. On Hume's view, our sentiments naturally respond to character, and not to single actions. This is arguably because single actions do not give us reliable information from

which to form causal connections, and so the observation of a single action does not by itself tell us why the person performed that action. We need to know people's motivations in order to be able to predict their actions and so plan our own, and the best evidence for their motivations is if we know their characters.

This reading also explains Hume's willingness to retract blame. When a person sincerely repents and reforms her life, we think that she has recalibrated her own motivational impulses. Either she has rid herself of her criminal inclinations, or at least she has learned to override them with other motivations. If we accept Hume's view that our moral evaluations are aimed at *persons*, which follows from his empirical observations of our attributions of praise and blame, then the only actions for which a person is blameworthy are actions that tell us something about her *as a person*, which are those traceable to her character. On Hume's view, we consider "the quality or character" from which an action proceeded because "[t]hese alone are *durable* enough to affect our sentiments concerning the person" (T3.3.1.5 / SBN 575). This is because of the location of the *cause* of her action in *her* in a lasting way; when the cause is something temporary or passing, it does not tell us anything about how she will act in the future. A true reformation of character, to the extent that we can be sure it has occurred, changes our causal knowledge of this person's motivation and changes our predictions for her future actions.

Chapters Three and Four will expand on the connection between motivation and character. Chapter Three shows how character traits are manifested as propensities to act on certain motivations relatively consistently. Chapter Four will address the practical question of why we focus on traits over time rather than specific instances of motivation. I will argue that the function of narrative (accounts that relay behaviors stretching over a period of time) in evaluating character gives us justification for our evaluations, but this will also show that our evaluations gain accuracy when made according to experience over time and patterns of behavior that we simply cannot be sure of in many or most single instances of action.

3. Outline and Statement of Purpose

With these fundamental features of Hume's view in the background, we can proceed to the main arguments of the dissertation, in the following progression.

3.1 Outline of chapters

Chapter One will put Hume's account of virtue in relief with reference to the philosophers he cites as having been engaged in the project he is embarking upon (specifically, Shaftesbury, Mandeville, Hutcheson, and Butler). Hume's account of virtue is strikingly dissimilar to those of the predecessors he cites, and by looking at the debate among them we can better appreciate the novelty of Hume's view. Specifically, I argue that Hume's account of virtue in terms of the *effects* of traits, which locates the criteria for virtue importantly in spectators rather than in the motivations of the agent, stands in noteworthy contrast to his immediate predecessors.

Chapter Two offers a general discussion of the passions as they operate in Hume's epistemology, with special attention to the motivational role of passions and to the moral sentiments. I explain Hume's account of how certain passions have specific objects that give rise to them, and to which they are directed. Because virtue and vice find their origin in the sentiments of spectators, I outline the conditions required for moral evaluation by describing the conditions required for moral sentiments to arise. These conditions include the detection of traits in persons, a certain perspective from which we make assessments (a "general point of view"), and the operation of sympathy in helping us place ourselves in this point of view. This discussion is expository and draws largely on extant Hume literature. It provides a necessary background to my own arguments for what conditions are required for character ascription and assessment.

In Chapter Three, I give a new reading of the ontology of character traits in Hume. This reading explains how Hume can attribute lasting mental qualities to persons in spite of his reductionist account of the self that entails no lasting elements that constitute the mind. I argue that the few accounts available are unsatisfactory, but that there is a clear way in which a person's beliefs and mental associations, which can be accommodated by the fluctuating elements of the mind, can ground motivational dispositions properly referred to as character traits.

In Chapter Four, I argue that the conditions required for trait assessment require a narrative epistemology as the only reliable means of accurately attributing traits to persons. Character traits, as the objects that give rise to these sentiments, are not immediately apparent in people's actions and must be recognized by means of constructing a narrative. I draw on Hume's *History of England* and his philosophy of history to show that this is a consistent feature of his own practices of moral assessment. In doing so, I provide new motivation to consider Hume's *History* as a source for enlightenment on his moral theory. While the use of a narrative is to *pick out* the traits about which we subsequently have moral sentiments, it may also—though I do not argue at length for this—be understood as a means for sympathizing with relevant people and so a means of helping us adopt the proper moral point of view.

Chapter Five gives a reading of Hume's account of virtue which shows that virtue is variable along a variety of dimensions, including one's society, one's social position or occupation, and various features of one's individual situation. I argue that Hume's "narrow circle," which is the frame of reference by which we judge the usefulness and agreeableness of traits, is also variable in scope. This discussion has direct implications for Hume's criterion that we adopt a general point of view, since delimiting the domain of the relevant persons with whom we are expected to sympathize also delimits the scope of the general point of view. This reading provides us with a richer understanding of the criteria by which we establish virtue and vice.

Chapter Six takes the account of character as I have constructed it and engages the recent challenge by John Doris that there is no viable account of character that can function as a basis for a moral theory. Doris argues that situationist evidence makes any account of character unworkable in explanations of people's behavior and attribution of moral responsibility. In contrast, I argue that Hume's account accommodates the concerns Doris provides, and so the latter's inference from empirical evidence to a lack of character is false.

3.2 Argumentative aims

The primary goal of this dissertation is to give a full account of Hume's view of character. Insofar as he does not offer a succinct exposition, but rather makes disparate claims and assumptions, this requires piecing together various elements of his view in an attempt to understand what he could or must mean in reference to character, with the aim of capturing what seem to be the most crucial features of his reference to character and not violating other claims to which he adheres. This is a project that is independent of the question of what we might think Hume *should* have said, or whether we want to *accept* the best reading we can establish of what he did or could say as our own view.

Nevertheless, the normative view that arises from this historical project has some interesting features. The arguments given in Chapters Four through Six highlight the features of Hume's view that I take to be most innovative. On the whole, the ways in which we might take up these features are compatible, as I understand them, with holding a different ontology than Hume, and some even with a different epistemology (if, for example we wanted to deny sentimentalism). So the claims worth attending to independently of exegetical interest do not require that we accept all of Hume's view, as it is presented here.

The only caveat to this is the argument of Chapter Four, which suggests a narrative epistemology for character assessment. As it is presented, this account presupposes that we do

in fact care about locating lasting traits of persons, rather than single instances of the motives upon which they act, as morally significant. Other virtue ethics might have a theory of right action and claim that a person's motivation matters in assessing praise or blame, but that it does not matter whether this motivation indicates something lasting about the person or not. We might, on such a view, want to say that the person acted rightly on such and such occasion, by acting on the motive that the virtuous agent would have acted on. This does not require the depth of character traits that Hume requires, and allows us to make assessments of right action regarding individual acts and motives.²⁵ However, there might be an amended narrative epistemology that even an account such as this could accept; insofar as it is not always clear what motive a person acts on, even to that person, we might find that our best way of establishing what her motive was requires some narrative, though not one that entails that the motive on this occasion is one that indicates something lasting about her.

Because of the historical focus here, I do not provide independent arguments that we should accept Hume's view of character, either ontologically or epistemologically. The argument in Chapter Six, which shows that Hume's account captures Doris's situationist concerns about moral responsibility, is not intended to independently argue that these are the right concerns about moral responsibility. I offer some initial motivation for why one might adopt such a view, but this is not intended to stand as a full defense of such a view. It is, rather, only intended to show that *if* we focus on character, we are not in a worse position than Doris (who denies character) for establishing moral responsibility.

What I do argue is that without amending any of Hume's philosophical commitments, we can understand him as defending a coherent theory of character and character traits, one which entails novel and interesting accounts of narrative epistemology and of the traits we call virtues and vices. What we might do with these accounts, whether or not we accept Hume's full

²⁵ Such a view is held by Rosalind Hursthouse, for example. (*On Virtue Ethics* (1999)).

view of character, is an open question. What I hope to show is that the possibilities offered by taking up some of these views are worth considering. Chapter Six serves as an example in this regard, demonstrating what can be said about situationist evidence when we accept a narrative account of moral evaluation. This is one of many possibilities that might be pursued in a rich debate about the nature of virtue and the moral evaluation of persons.

Chapter 1

Hume's Empiricism and the Debate about Human Sentiments

As an empiricist and a sentimentalist, Hume has a primary goal of offering an accurate description of human sentiments, including moral sentiments, as they arise in response to people's actions. Hume argues that human beings have an innate attraction to pleasure and aversion to pain, whether it is our own pleasure and pain or that of a stranger. All things being equal, we prefer that people experience pleasure. Our moral sentiments—sentiments of approval and disapproval—respond to traits that are useful or agreeable (approval), or harmful or disagreeable (disapproval). But while our natural preference for people's pleasure and aversion to their pain plays a role in our moral *evaluation* of agents, this does not mean, for Hume, that we assess agents' virtue or vice based on their *motivation* to act with the aim of promoting pleasure or avoiding pain. Vices and virtues are defined according to the *tendencies* of traits to promote pleasure or pain, but not the *intentions* of the agent to produce pleasure or pain.

As noted in the Introduction, Hume took his empiricist and sentimentalist cues from Shaftesbury, Mandeville, Hutcheson and Butler. But interestingly, in their moral philosophy these four philosophers were engaged in a fierce debate about the relationship between self-interest, benevolence, and virtue—a topic Hume barely discusses except to dismiss it: “It seems a happiness in the present theory, that it enters not into that vulgar dispute concerning the *degrees* of benevolence or self-love, which prevail in human nature; a dispute which is never likely to have any issue” (EPM 9.4 / SBN 270-1). So why does Hume not even discuss this question, when it so preoccupied the predecessors whose moral philosophy he views as having made important progress?

Shaftesbury, Mandeville and Butler share similar definitions of virtue that explicitly refer to the virtuous agent's benevolent intentions. According to Shaftesbury, virtue consists in

“a certain just Disposition, or proportionable Affection of a rational Creature towards the moral Objects of Right and Wrong” (*Inquiry* I.iii.i.1²⁶). According to Hutcheson, a morally good action is defined as one which “flows from benevolent Affection, or Intention of absolute Good to others” (*Essay* 38). Even their interlocutor Mandeville, who ultimately denies that virtue exists, defines it as “every Performance, by which Man, ... should endeavour the Benefit of others... out of a Rational Ambition of being good” (*Fable of the Bees*, 34). Reference to benevolent or selfish motivation is notably absent in Hume’s description of virtue and vice: “every quality of the mind, which is *useful* or *agreeable* to the *person himself* or to *others*, communicates a pleasure to the spectator, engages his esteem, and is admitted under the honourable denomination of virtue or merit” (EPM 9.12 / SBN 277). This criterion makes no reference to the virtuous person’s intentions or motivational aims.

Though Hume takes many cues from Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, his view diverges from theirs on this key point. The agent’s own interest, or disinterested concern for others, is not a factor in her traits being vices or virtues; only the general *effects* of these traits are considered. Whereas most virtue ethics are agent-centered, Hume’s is, in Kate Abramson’s words, “spectator-centered.”²⁷ In moral evaluations, “we consider the tendency of any passion to the advantage or harm of those, who have any immediate connexion or intercourse with the

²⁶ Citations from Shaftesbury’s *Inquiry Concerning Virtue and Merit* (IVM) refer to Book, Part, Section, paragraph. The IVM comprises Volume II of the *Characteristics*, but for the sake of precise reference I refer to the IVM specifically. Page numbers refer to *Characteristics* Vol. II, Liberty Fund edition.

²⁷ Abramson, “Hume’s Spectator-Centered Theory” (2008). The notion that Hume’s view is “spectator-centered” is elaborated in the discussion of the general point of view, in Chapter Two, and prominently in the discussion of the virtues, in Chapter Five. As Abramson initially introduces the term, Shaftesbury and Hutcheson’s views would also be spectator-centered in the sense that virtue is determined by spectators; however, I use the term to include the additional spectatorial features of Hume’s view that Abramson elaborates throughout her paper, with particular emphasis on the spectator standard of virtue as noted in the passage from Hume above. Louis Loeb uses the term “agent-centered” to describe Humean moral sentiments, but this is a bit of a misnomer in this context. What he means by suggesting this is that the spectator adopts the perspective of the agent as the appropriate means of sympathizing with the agent’s relations, but this account is still spectator-centered in the way that Abramson describes: whether or not a trait is virtuous or vicious depends on a spectator’s evaluations of its effects. (Loeb, “Hume’s Agent-Centered Sentimentalism” (2003)).

person possess'd of it" (T3.3.3.2 / SBN 602-3). Judgments of virtue are determined not according to, for example, an account of what reasons and deliberation produced the agent's action, but rather according to what the judicious spectator would conclude about the effects of a person's traits.²⁸ Since Hume explicitly takes himself to be pursuing the empirical, sentimentalist project advanced by these predecessors, as is clear by his reference to them both in the "Introduction" and the "Abstract" to his *Treatise*, this point of divergence with them is notable.

The goal of this chapter is to give some historical background that will emphasize the novelty of Hume's view. In particular, I will highlight his explicit rejection of the self-interest/benevolence debate, in favor of the spectator-centered view, by showing first the reasons he rejects the arguments of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson regarding benevolence, and then his acceptance of Butler's view of self-interest. Understanding the reasons and the extent to which he liberates his account of virtue from the concerns of these predecessors serves to emphasize its unique features. On Hume's view, virtue is not defined by benevolent motivation, as opposed to self-interested motivation, because the two are not seen to be opposed. Hence, the interestedness of one's motivation does not become the deciding factor in whether or not it is virtuous, and instead the effects of one's characteristic motivations are evaluatively primary. In contrast to Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, Hume does not give a doctrine of the "moral sense" as the faculty by which we notice the moral qualities of motives; rather, our moral sentiments result from sympathy with those affected by a person's motives. This latter point is a consequence of his spectator-centered view as well, insofar as there is no distinct "moral quality" that virtuous motives have, and which we need a moral sense to perceive. Highlighting these features of Hume's view prepares us to appreciate its unique interest. Hume's distinct account of moral sentiments, and the perspective of the spectator, will be elaborated in Chapter Two, and the consequences of his definition of virtue are developed in Chapter Five.

²⁸ Abramson, (2008), p.249.

Though the argument in this chapter traverses a debate chronologically, I do not intend to imply any strong claim about the necessary development of Hume's view as a consequence of this debate. Hume's is not the only possible view that could arise from this background, but since my interest is in understanding the unique assets of Hume's view, I use this debate as an important background for appreciating his arguments. Modern theories of emotion, intention, and desire could offer very different ways of accommodating and rejecting various concerns that arise in this debate, but in this chapter I am only interested in understanding Hume's view from within a particular context, and from the standpoint of his primary interest and concerns as outlined in the Introduction.

This chapter will show the distinctiveness of Hume's account of virtue by elucidating the debate among his predecessors who had "begun to put the science of man on a new footing."²⁹ I will start by setting up the argument at issue regarding human motivation, and then address the positions of each of the four philosophers mentioned as they contribute to the debate (following the chronology of the texts). I will note key comparative points in Hume after the discussion of each philosopher, and these points will be synthesized in the final section of the chapter.

1. Framework of the Debate

In this section, I will outline an implicit argument that is up for debate by Hume's predecessors and highlight two sets of empirical claims that play a role in this debate. Hume's predecessors are engaged in a dispute about the nature of human motivation, and they all accept the premise that virtuous motivation is not self-interested. The argument, which only Mandeville accepts as sound, is this:

²⁹ *Treatise*, Introduction 7.

1. Virtuous motives are not self-interested.
 2. All motivation is desire-based.³⁰
 3. All desires are self-interested.
 4. All motives are self-interested. (2,3)
- C. There are no virtuous motives.

Let's call this the Egoist Argument.³¹ Only Mandeville is willing to accept this conclusion. Since virtuous action is typically understood as importantly not self-interested, he concludes that there is no such thing as virtue. The remaining philosophers set their sights on rejecting one of the premises. Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Mandeville all take the first premise to be true, and as sentimentalists, they all accept the second premise. Shaftesbury and Hutcheson both attempt to reject premise (3) by arguing for the existence of natural passions that are also disinterested. On their views, some desires are interested and some are not, and these latter ground our virtuous, benevolent actions. Butler also rejects premise (3), but unlike Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, his reasons for rejecting (3) also lead him to reject (1). By re-examining the basis of the relation between interest and desire, Butler argues that premise (3) is false and does not tell us anything about the virtue of our motives.

Hume also rejects the first premise outright. While his reasons for doing so do not depend on his ability to respond to this argument, it is clear that he is aware of the debate. For

³⁰ It might be helpful to think of motivation as essentially "conative" in these arguments. The term refers to motivating states of mind, sometimes called "pro-attitudes," which are distinct from mere rational thought or passive affection. I refrain from using the term because it denotes a category of mental activity distinct from reason and affection that these philosophers did not explicitly recognize. However, in their arguments for sentimentalism, holding that motivation requires the passions, I think this is implicitly what the sentimentalists were requiring. I will, to keep with the texts, constrain my discussion to desires, pleasures, and affections, but these should be understood as directive of action in the way the term "conative" suggests.

³¹ I use the term "egoist" in a very basic sense here. Philosophical egoists would likely reject the definition of virtue given in premise (1), but they might well redefine virtue with the aim of self-interest or self-perfection. I do not mean to imply that all egoists deny the existence of virtue. I use the term here because it captures the early modern concerns about egoism as they were expressed in reaction to, for example, Hobbes.

example, he explicitly argues against Hutcheson's account of benevolence, maintaining that it is both empirically and theoretically inaccurate. Yet, as indicated by the quote above, he does not see the denial of universally benevolent motives to be pertinent to his account of virtue. In addition, Hume clearly adopts Butler's account of self-interest, which led to the rejection of premise (3). This is good reason, albeit circumstantial, to think he was at least in part motivated by Butler's arguments to also reject premise (1). In contrast to Shaftesbury, Mandeville and Hutcheson, Hume makes very different claims about virtuous motivation and virtuous traits, including his definition of virtue that makes no mention of interested or disinterested motivations. As a further consequence of self-interested motivation being a non-issue, Hume is able to accept Mandeville's insightful empirical observations about public and private benefit without their entailing the above conclusion.

Within the debate over the Egoist Argument, there are two sets of empirical claims that are pertinent to Hume's divergent view. The first relates to our moral approval of motives, and the second relates to the set of traits or qualities known as virtues.³² The first is primary, developing from the above argument. The problem with the debate over self-interest and benevolence is that Shaftesbury, Mandeville and Hutcheson all accept an apparent association

³² On the issue of moral motivation, Michael Gill has recently provided an important argument for Hume's distinct position. (Gill, 2006. The culmination of this argument as paraphrased here is found on p.238.) Gill argues that Hume represents a turning point in what was up until his work a question of static human nature; debates about whether human beings are fundamentally self-interested or benevolent had assumed that the original motive to our action could be our only subsequent motive toward it. That is, whatever our original motive is to engage in a virtuous action fully accounts for our continuing motivation toward it. So, for example, if our original motive to justice is self-interested, then the entire foundation of justice as a moral practice reduces to self-interest. Shaftesbury and Hutcheson argued for a fundamentally benevolent human nature, and Mandeville (like Hobbes) argued for a fundamentally self-interested nature. According to Gill, these previous philosophers were conflating the chronological foundation of virtuous behavior—the original motive toward it—with the normative foundation—the motive that grounds its virtuousness. By contrast, he argues that Hume offers a “progressive” account of human nature that acknowledges that our motivations can change, and that a practice initially founded on self-interested motives does not need to be understood as perpetuated or maintained only by self-interested motives. I agree with Gill's account and consider it complementary to the argument I will give, which will emphasize the influence of Bishop Butler's arguments in Hume's work. Understanding the shift as Gill presents it is helpful, and looking at Butler's role in this debate further illuminates why and how Hume changes the debate.

of virtue with non-self-interested motivation; self-interested acts that happen to be good for other people are not actually virtuous. Hume argues on empirical grounds that our moral sentiments do not confirm this correlation: we approve of many traits that defy this association.

Traditionally, being virtuous requires having the right motivation, which is generally taken to be either benevolence or duty. But Hume argues that we approve of traits useful or agreeable only *to oneself*. What makes certain traits virtues is that they benefit the person who possesses them. A definition of virtue as other-regarding fails to capture these virtues. He also counts traits such as pride, wit and cleanliness among the virtues, none of which can be easily explained as stemming from benevolence or duty.³³ Because from an observer's point of view, Hume argues, we approve of these traits as virtuous, it is clear that he cannot define virtue according to benevolent motives.

The second set of empirical claims centers on what it means for an agent to be virtuous, in terms of possessing virtues. Philosophical debates about virtuous character have often centered on establishing what the virtues are, using traditional notions of piety, honesty, etc., and assuming that there is an objective set that, when embodied in an individual, establishes in that person a good character. The thesis that having one virtue entails having them all—that one *is a virtuous person*—is sometimes called the “unity of the virtues” thesis.³⁴ But Mandeville argues,

³³ Of course Hume is not the first to include such traits on a list of virtues—Aristotle, for example, discusses wittiness as a virtue. This is one reason Hume likes the ancients, for their willingness to list natural skills and dispositions as virtues. His differences with the ancients are on other grounds, namely his sentimentalism. (Chapter Five discusses more differences between Hume and Aristotelian virtue ethics.) In his own time, however, this emphasis on benevolence was pervasive, and so these claims distinguish him from his contemporaries.

³⁴ Susan Wolf has used empirical observations to argue against the traditional (Greek) conception of the unity of the virtues, arguing instead that what is unified—ideally—is a certain sort of knowledge (something like Aristotle's practical wisdom). According to Wolf, a person might be courageous, but she might further have knowledge of when it is and is not appropriate to risk one's life. For empirical reasons, she argues that we cannot require that one is only courageous if one is also generous; furthermore, we cannot even require that if one is courageous one has knowledge of when it is appropriate to risk one's life. However, we can understand that this knowledge would add to one's natural courage, and if perfected would be knowledge not only of when it is appropriate to risk one's life, but how this value measures

rather convincingly, that some virtues preclude other virtues, and that the social value of traits is often situation-specific (a “virtue” in certain circumstances is harmful). If we accept his account that these traits are virtues, as Hume does, then the consequences Mandeville draws out belie the unity of the virtues. Once we see that “virtuous character” is not determined by having a finite list of virtues, it becomes an independent question what “virtuous character” is, which goes beyond knowledge that, for example, an agent was acting from a pious motive. Hume does not have a theory of virtues from which we derive an account of good character. Rather, Hume concerns himself first with discussion of character, and derivatively with discussions of particular virtuous traits.³⁵ This is where Hume’s account of the spectator becomes primary, and the effects of traits determine their virtuousness or viciousness.

Hume’s predecessors, despite their empirical efforts, neglect crucial empirical evidence about moral approval. Furthermore, Mandeville notes other evidence that is important for Hume’s view, but draws false conclusions about it due to the aforementioned neglect. By looking at some of these earlier figures we can appreciate the significance of Hume’s departure from these discussions to a context-dependent, spectator-centered account of virtue.

against others. To possess the virtues perfectly, she argues, would entail possessing this unified or holistic knowledge of what matters (Wolf, “Moral Psychology and the Unity of the Virtues.” (2007)).

Wolf argues that her view can account for a certain amount of pluralism about individual ideals and about values, so that even with a unity of the virtues thesis, people could possess different sets of virtues according to their values and ideals. If this works, and she does not seem entirely sure yet that it does, then one might be able to work a unity theory into Hume’s account of virtue. However, if a unity of the virtues thesis just means that a person—depending on her ideals and personal situation—is most perfectly virtuous when all the relevant virtues and values are aligned, then I’m not convinced we’re talking about “unity of the virtues” in a very strong sense. Wolf also seems to share the worry that her account is a “weak” unity thesis.

Rosalind Hursthouse (*On Virtue Ethics*, 1999) argues for the unity of the virtues, claiming that we do not view virtues as discrete traits. Hume, I think, would deny this, but more can be said on this topic in Chapter Five.

³⁵ If further clarification is needed, consider this. We might have a list of “virtues”, something like Aristotle’s list (magnanimity, courage, pride, modesty, etc.), and note that when a person has these virtues, he is a person of good character. However, if it turns out that “modesty” is a virtue for some people, given their circumstances, but not for others, then it looks like we have to have an independent rubric for measuring a person’s character traits, since the presence of modesty does not necessarily translate to virtue and good character. The key distinction here is that we do not have a universal account of what virtues are, and so what counts as a “good character trait” is also not universal.

2. Shaftesbury

The influence of Shaftesbury's philosophy on Hume is in many respects obvious, and some aspects of this influence do not need detailed explanation or justification here. Shaftesbury was the first prominent sentimentalist about morality in the Modern period, and his *Characteristicks* was the most reprinted book in the 18th century.³⁶ It was also the prime target of Mandeville's arguments. Hume shares with Shaftesbury the claim that a person's motives are the morally relevant feature of her actions, as opposed to the particular consequences of her action—that is, we evaluate actions based on whether they reflect a certain motivation in the person. This is taken as an empirical fact, derived from our responses to intentional versus unintentional, and premeditated versus impulsive actions.³⁷ Despite this shared focus, however, Hume's account of which motives are virtuous is significantly different from Shaftesbury's in that the former focuses on the *effects* of motives *independently* of their intended aims. In this section, I will highlight Shaftesbury's definition of virtuous motives, and the assumptions that seem to lie behind it which Hume rejects.

Shaftesbury offers strict qualifications for which motivations qualify as virtues. The first is that morally virtuous motives are limited to those that are not self-interested. A good act does not make the actor virtuous unless it arises from the morally appropriate motivating sentiment: "Whatsoever therefore is done which happens to be advantageous to the Species, thro' an Affection merely towards Self-good, does not imply any more Goodness in the Creature than as the Affection it-self is good" (IVM I.ii.ii.8). Shaftesbury's account of the good is given in terms of viewing the world as a system, in which we are parts, and when parts fulfill their role and promote the good of the system, then they are good. For Shaftesbury, appropriate motives are

³⁶ "Foreward" to *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*. Ed. Douglas den Uyl (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001). 3 vols. Vol. 1. See also Hume, "An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding," section VIII.

³⁷ See, e.g. IVM I.ii.iii.15-16.

those that have the good of the species or system in view, and inappropriate motives are self-interested. A wrong action is one arising from an affection or motivation that does not show proper concern for others:

For, **WRONG** is not such **Action** as is barely the **Cause of Harm**, (since at this rate a dutiful **Son** aiming at an **Enemy**, but by mistake or ill chance happening to kill his **Father**, wou'd do a **Wrong**) but when any thing is done thro' insufficient or unequal **Affection**, (as when a **Son** shews no **Concern** for the **Safety** of a **Father** or, where there is need of **Succour**, prefers an indifferent **Person** to him, this is the nature of **Wrong**). (IVM I.ii.iii.13)

Virtuous and vicious motives are distinguished by their direction: self-regarding motives are not virtuous. Other-regarding motives are virtuous, as long as they are properly other-regarding (as in the passage above, partiality to family is morally appropriate). The proper amount of concern for other people, then, is required for a motive to be virtuous. For Shaftesbury, this does not simply reduce to benevolence, but to a motive toward virtue, specifically.

Shaftesbury calls these properly other-regarding motives “rational Affections” as opposed to “sensible Affections” (IVM I.ii.iii.15-16). As a sentimentalist, Shaftesbury argues that motivations are affective, but since “sensible affections” are shared with animals (we might think of them as appetites), and do not distinguish the good of others, they cannot qualify as virtuous; thus Shaftesbury has to discuss this separate type of “rational affections,” and argue that our motivation to virtue arises from the recognition and value of virtue itself. Virtue requires a certain independence from one’s sensibly affective, other-disregarding appetites.

He maintains that although we are generally inclined to attribute greater virtue to a person who is virtuous in the face of temptation, a person who refrains from acting on vicious impulses only deserves these accolades if he refrains because of a rational affection for the good: “Tho if that which restrains the **Person**, and holds him to a virtuous-like **Behaviour**, be no **Affection** towards **Goodness** or **Virtue** it-self, but towards private **Good** merely, he is not in reality the more virtuous; as has been shewn before” (IVM I.ii.iv.19). If the person has the

“*rational Objects* of moral good” in mind, and this is his motive for restraint, then he is more virtuous (IVM I.ii.iv.18). So not only must virtuous motivation be directed toward the good of others, it must also be aimed at their benefit *insofar as this is morally good*. The motivation to be virtuous is a significant factor in one’s qualifying as virtuous. It is only when we are motivated toward virtue itself that we are acting virtuously: a person or creature “only is suppos’d Good, when the Good or Ill of the System to which he has relation, is the immediate Object of some Passion or Affection moving him” (IVM I.ii.i.5).

Shaftesbury’s theory has been characterized as only partially sentimentalist, what Darwall calls a “*rationalist* theory of moral sense.”³⁸ This distinction is due to Shaftesbury’s reliance on a rational order in the universe that determines good and bad, which we then recognize by our moral sense. So we might say that epistemically he is a sentimentalist about morality (we know virtue via sentiment), but metaphysically he is not (virtue is not determined by our sentiments). Hume rejects Shaftesbury’s metaphysical account of virtue in denying that virtue exists independently of our moral sentiments.³⁹ He finds Shaftesbury’s definition of virtue incoherent, given this point of disagreement. Though I will not argue at length for this here, it merits mention that Hume’s metaphysical sentimentalism, which says that virtue just is that which we approve of (and it would not be virtue if we did not approve of it), leads him to argue that there must be a virtuous motive antecedent to a motive such as “doing *x* is virtuous, so I will do *x*.” He argues, “the first virtuous motive, which bestows a merit on any action, can never be a regard to the virtue of that action, but must be some other natural motive or principle. To suppose, that the mere regard to the virtue of the action, may be the first motive, which produc’d the action, and render’d it virtuous, is to reason in a circle” (T3.2.1.4 / SBN 478). One

³⁸ Darwall, *British Moralists* (1995), p.187.

³⁹ See, for example, T3.1.2.3 / SBN 471: “An action, or sentiment, or character is virtuous or vicious; why? because its view causes a pleasure or uneasiness of a particular kind.” Virtue and vice are, on Hume’s view, “determin’d by pleasure and pain” (T3.1.2.4 / SBN 471).

reason this statement would have to be true, for Hume, is that if the merit of a motive is derived solely from its being approved, the first motivation to that action (first in the sense of initial, natural, human motivation, not a particular person's first motivation) cannot be *that it is meritorious*—this is “to reason in a circle.” But whether this is his entire reason for rejecting Shaftesbury's account of virtue or not, we can certainly see it as a reason that Hume would have to disagree. Shaftesbury's account presupposes the independent reality of virtue (in his case, that which promotes the good of the system). This point will also prove to be relevant to Hume's “undoubted maxim”—his claim that nothing can be morally required of us that we do not have a natural motive for—when we discuss Butler.

Hutcheson also rejects Shaftesbury's claim that virtuous motives must have virtue or the good as their object, and so rejects the terminology of “rational affections,” but he maintains a qualitatively distinct set of passions that are disinterested in order to avoid the same concern Shaftesbury had about the equation of passions or affections and selfish motivations. Hume is not concerned with distinguishing a distinct category of disinterested passions because he rejects the notion that motives denominated virtuous must be disinterested.

3. Mandeville

Mandeville, in *The Fable of the Bees*, famously argues that all human motivation is self-interested, that there is no such thing as “real” virtue, understood as non-self-interested benevolent actions, and that “virtue” as we refer to it is merely a social construct built on the manipulation of people's self-interest to promote the good of the public. The text, written largely in response to Shaftesbury's account of virtuous motives as those directed at the public good, was incendiary. Hutcheson's arguments for disinterested passions of the “public sense,” as we will see, attempt to respond to this pernicious conclusion. Mandeville's conclusion trades on the strong association of vice with self-interest. But despite the rather unsavory conclusion, which

requires accepting all the premises of the Egoist Argument to succeed, Mandeville makes some insightful observations of human behavior which show the extent to which the public good is independent of the interestedness of people's motives.

Insofar as these observations support his conclusion, we may be wary of them, but once we see that they do not entail it, as Hume saw, we can consider them more seriously. Mandeville argues on empirical grounds that the instantiation of all virtues does not itself get us what we expect, and rather certain vices promote the good of society. Vices of consumption promote production, vices of infringement promote security services, etc. Some vices can work in tandem with other virtues to promote good. By these arguments, Mandeville is denying the claim that the fully virtuous life, defined by traditional virtues, necessarily promotes the good as we understand it.⁴⁰ If possessing all the virtues is not a necessary condition for a good life, then we need to rethink our reasons for setting these virtues out as good. In short, as already noted, Mandeville's argument denies the unity of the virtues often found in accounts of virtue ethics reaching back to Aristotle. Mandeville makes empirical observations about human approval and disapproval that Hume appreciates; only when these are bound up with the definition of virtue given in premise (1) of the Egoist Argument (which Hume rejects) do they become morally problematic.

Here I offer some arguments and suggestions from Mandeville's writing that lead to this conclusion about virtues, and which point to ideas that Hume takes up.⁴¹ In these arguments, we also see the further claims, which caused such frustration among philosophers such as

⁴⁰ Of course, for Aristotle it was also not true that being fully virtuous was sufficient for securing one's happiness—the ultimate goal—but it was necessary.

⁴¹ In *The British Moralists*, Michael Gill has an extensive discussion on the relationship between Hume and Mandeville on the issue of justice as an artificial virtue. As noted above, Gill gives a helpful account of why Hume does not accept the challenge of trying to decide whether human beings are fundamentally virtuous (ala Shaftesbury and Hutcheson) or vicious (ala Mandeville). On that issue, I will highlight the role of Butler's philosophy in helping Hume avoid this debate (which Gill does not discuss). My discussion of Mandeville here focuses on a different issue than that which Gill highlights, namely how his philosophy provides ground for the denial of the unity of the virtues.

Hutcheson, that our motivations reduce to self-interest. Mandeville was not alone in this contention, and its significance will be elaborated when we analyze Hutcheson's response.

Mandeville defines virtue and vice according to our motivation to public good. Vice, he says, is "every thing, which, without Regard to the Publick, Man should commit to gratify any of his Appetites," and virtue is "every Performance, by which Man, contrary to the impulse of Nature, should endeavour the Benefit of others, or the Conquest of his own Passions out of a Rational Ambition of being good" (Fable of the Bees, 34¹⁹). The primary claim in these definitions, which he shares with Shaftesbury, is that intention matters more than anything else; vice is anything done out of self-interested motivation, and virtue is either altruistic or at least rational with the aim of goodness. We also see that Mandeville assumes that actions taken with regard to the public good are "contrary to the impulse of Nature"; in other words, human beings are naturally self-interested. He goes on to show that actions done out of self-interest can in fact promote the public good, but since they are done out of self-interest they are not virtuous. We see a disconnect between the value of the public good and the value of virtuous (non-self-interested) motivation.

Throughout his text, Mandeville argues that the good of society (the "Publick") depends in many cases on "vices" such as alcohol consumption, theft, etc. For example, he argues that cheap gin ("Liquid Poison"), by which many live drunk and indolent lives, also creates employment and economic growth by its mass production, brings moderate pleasure to the poor who could not afford better liquor, and is even medicinal to some (FB 88-90). Were it not for the high demand created by the drunk and indolent, these benefits would not exist. If his arguments go through on this point, we get apparently absurd results, since these "vices" turn out to be for the "Benefit of others," and presumably one could act "viciously" (be a drunk) with

¹⁹ References from Mandeville refer to the original page numbers, noted in the margins of the modern text.

full “Regard to the Publick” and “the Benefit of others.” By his definitions of virtue and vice, intentions matter more than outcomes, so these behaviors, such as theft or drinking, considered vices in society, could, with proper (though unusual) motivation, be virtues. The Shaftesburian virtuous agent could, with an eye toward the public good and so a virtuous motive, live his life as a drunkard. Alternatively, one can act on selfish motives as a drunkard and—by accident, perhaps—benefit society.

In addition to this line of argument, Mandeville points out certain contradictions in popular conceptions of virtue. He recognizes that religious piety is a social virtue, as is a sense of honor, but, it turns out, these two virtues are at odds with each other: “Religion plainly forbids Murther, Honour openly justifies it: Religion bids you not shed Blood upon any Account whatever: Honour bids you fight for the least Trifle: Religion is built on Humility, and Honour upon Pride” (FB 425-6). Mandeville leaves the conclusion drawn from this point up to someone else to decipher, but clearly he is making the point that being considered “virtuous”, say as a religious, pious person, does not entail embodying all the virtues; in this case, two social virtues conflict, and honor is sacrificed for piety.

Mandeville further argues that the qualities good for an individual in a family are not necessarily good for the public at large, against what he calls “the gross Error of those, who imagine that the social Virtues and the amiable Qualities that are praise-worthy in us, are equally beneficial to the Publick as they are to the Individual Persons that are possess’d of them, and whatever conduces to the Welfare and real Happiness of private Families must have the same Effect upon the whole Society” (FB 409). What is good in the arena of private families is not necessarily good for society. In other words, though virtue is defined as that which aims at “the Benefit of others,” this will be a context-dependent evaluation, depending on which “others” we consider. More explicitly, the success of nations, perhaps also called the public good, is not always in accord with individual or private virtue: “He that gives most Trouble to thousands of

his Neighbours, and invents the most operose Manufactures is, right or wrong, the greatest Friend to the Society” (411). The good of society, in some cases, requires one to be less good toward those nearer by. In short, Mandeville goes on to say, “things are only Good and Evil in reference to something else, and according to the Light and Position they are placed in” (426). This conclusion may sound exaggeratedly relativistic, but it might also only be making the more modest point that what qualifies as a virtue in one person (a person with a particular position in relation to others), is not necessarily a virtue in another person (one who bears different relation to others). The “Light and Position” of the object under consideration has substantial bearing on the evaluation of it as good or evil.

Another line of argument that Mandeville uses to break down traditional views of virtue is to claim that when we look for virtue, we look for its outward reflection in people, rather than some hidden internal principle. We look for virtues of honor, courage, etc. in public figures, for example, but it turns out that all of these qualities can be attained from “vicious” motives (such as pride, or “vain-glory” (FB II, Dialogue 2, 48⁴³)). Mandeville even claims that all the virtues heralded by Cicero and Shaftesbury can be achieved by these means (FB II, Dialogue 2, 47-8). Money, he says, can earn honor, and in fact, “Riches of themselves are an honour to all those, who know how to use them fashionably” (FB II, Dialogue 6, 428-9). Mandeville is not trying to make the point that what we call virtues are not actually virtues, at least not explicitly; rather, he is making the point that what we really care about are the qualities openly exhibited by a person; we take these to be outward reflections of some kind of inner principle, but what we value, he seems to be claiming, is really mainly the manifest affects. Mandeville argues that it is from this external perspective, from the view available to the public, that we properly make our evaluations. He asks, “Where would you look for the Excellency of a Statue, but in that Part

⁴³ Mandeville published six dialogues as part of Volume II of the *Fable of the Bees*, which he published several years after the first.

which you see of it?” (FB 180). He draws out this analogy, calling out the absurdity of looking inside a statue for its beauty, and further noting that to do so would destroy it. He concludes, “This has often made me compare the Virtues of great Men to your large *China* Jars: they make a fine Shew... they might be very useful, but look into a thousand of them, and you’ll find nothing in them but Dust and Cobwebs” (FB 181). Implied here is also the point that China jars aren’t made for looking in, and so again all that we should be concerned with is the manifest affects.

An obvious response for the unsympathetic reader to give is that we care more about intentions than results, and though results are often all that are available to us, finding out facts about the internal principles that motivate the external affects is *really* what we’re after in evaluating someone’s virtue. External affects are just the most available material. At the very least, however, Mandeville has shown that to be Honorable, Courageous, Strong, etc., in a meaningful—that is, beneficial—public sense, does not require the selfless internal “virtue” (benevolence) we might have thought. The “greatness” that we praise doesn’t require the foundation we think it does, and yet it is this “greatness” that we really care about. He is also, by his analogy with the statue, questioning the reason for and the value of looking deeper for virtues.

If we accept Mandeville’s arguments, we can conclude that outward standards of virtue do not require the internal principles we assumed, and the relationship between virtue and vice is not as clear-cut as we had thought. Vices support virtues; “vices” (actions traditionally taken to be vicious) may be undertaken virtuously; virtues may be under-girded by “vices”; and virtues in one arena require the sacrifice of virtues in another. The attributes we think are virtues are not necessarily so, and likewise for vices. A quality considered virtuous as it contributes to the well-being of the family may be vicious as it detracts from the well-being of the state.

Hume sees Mandeville as having advanced “the science of man,” an attribution confirmed by Mandeville’s focus on facts about our evaluation and facts about our situations, with the notable absence of any agenda of moralism. Like Hume, Mandeville is discussing the anatomy, not the beauty of the figure—he doesn’t offer advice on what virtues people in society should exhibit, he merely sheds light on the facts about our reactions and evaluations. Hume is able to take away important conclusions from Mandeville’s work. First, he has reason to argue that virtue and vice are evaluated with reference to circumstances. Hume claims that our praise and blame are determined by “the influence of characters and qualities, upon those who have an intercourse with any person” (T3.3.1.17 / SBN 582), and that we “confine our view to that narrow circle, in which any person moves, in order to form a judgment of his moral character” (T3.3.3.2 / SBN 602). This point becomes crucial for Hume’s definition of virtue, and it does not have the pernicious consequences that it did for Mandeville since Hume does not, as Mandeville did, associate self-interest with vice.

With this focus on the *effects* of traits, Hume argues that our moral evaluations of public officials are different than those of, say, a grandparent, because what makes for a good grandparent does not necessarily make for a good politician; their relations to people around them differ and different qualities suit their positions. Hume recognizes these social relations as the “Light and Position” that Mandeville says we must recognize in making evaluations. As other Hume scholars have noted⁴⁴, the difference between public and private virtues is especially stark; Hume says that a due degree of pride is valuable—if not essential—for a good character, and yet it probably should not be outwardly shown. Humility should be shown on the surface. It is

⁴⁴Annette Baier, for one, examines Hume’s discussions of Caesar and Cato as exemplars of the virtues of goodness and greatness respectively, and notes that though both are considered virtuous, their various traits are disparate and not obviously compatible. (1991, pp.212-13). Hume’s distinction between “goodness” and “greatness”, or the qualities of a friend and the qualities of an epic or admirable individual, is one of the only contrasts of this sort that scholars seem to focus on. It is a clear example of the disparity in virtuous traits, but as I will argue in further chapters, is by no means the only example of such. See Chapter Five for more about this distinction.

disagreeable to others for one to be publicly proud, but nearly essential for oneself (T3.3.2.8-10 / SBN 596-8). This is not quite parallel to Mandeville's China jar metaphor, since Hume does care what's on the inside as well, but we care about the outside for different reasons, and the outside show of humility need not (and perhaps ought not) be indicative of inward humility.⁴⁵ In short, Mandeville offers evidence that suggests we might approve of certain traits due to their usefulness and agreeableness, independently of whether they are self-interested; evidence that we approve of such things is, for Hume, evidence against the notion that only benevolent actions are virtuous.

One distinction between Mandeville and Hume is that Mandeville appears to view all virtue as artificial, based only social flattery and pride (FB 37), whereas Hume argues that we have natural virtuous motives. Mandeville takes it as an empirical fact that all motivation is self-interested, so all behavior that is not naturally in our interest must be motivated by other self-interested concerns (e.g. by laws which dictate punishment for non-compliance) (FB 27). On his view, virtue (understood as benevolent action) is constructed by manipulating self-interest to promote the needs of a society. By Mandeville's argument, society manipulates people's concern for their self-interest to cultivate "virtues." Hume, on the contrary, views many virtues and vices to be natural, as he argues in Book III of the Treatise. Hume's second Appendix to the EPM might be seen as a diatribe against Mandeville. Entitled "Of Self-Love," it begins,

There is a principle, supposed to prevail among many, which is utterly incompatible with all virtue or moral sentiment.... This principle is, that all benevolence is mere hypocrisy, friendship a cheat, public spirit a farce, fidelity a snare to procure trust and confidence; and that, while all of us, at bottom, pursue only our private interest, we wear these fair disguises, in order to put others off their guard.... (EPM App. 2.1 / SBN 295)

So while Hume accepts some of Mandeville's conclusions, he clearly rejects the idea that all virtue is artificial, constructed on a foundation of self-interest.

⁴⁵ The extent to which Hume requires our evaluation of traits to be context-informed and the value of traits to be situation-specific will be the topics of Chapters Four and Five.

Mandeville is writing from within the constraints of the premises of the Egoist Argument. Recall his definition of vice as that which gratifies our appetites, and virtue as that which is “contrary to the impulse of Nature.” His wording indicates the presumed complete exclusivity between virtue and one’s own interests. As the rest of this chapter will show, Hume rejects this presumption entirely, and so can account for the social influence on the formation of virtue, and the contextual value of virtues, without these virtues reducing to artificial constructs relying on self-interested motives. And even when they do rely to self-interest, they are not necessarily vicious.

4. Hutcheson

Hutcheson attempts to revive virtue from Mandeville’s attack by arguing for natural benevolent motives. His view is closer to Hume’s because it allows virtue to be founded on natural, affective motives that we might have independently of a rational respect for virtue, but Hume will still differ with Hutcheson on the claim that these motives are disinterested.

In direct reaction to Mandeville’s arguments that all human motivation reduces to self-interest, Hutcheson argues that virtue is rooted in a “benevolent universal instinct” that, unlike self-love, is disinterested (IIBV II.III.xv.193⁴⁶). Importantly, he argues, this is an instinct, a *natural* human affection distinct from self-interest. It is only through this disinterested motive that we act virtuously, and it is this motive that we recognize as virtuous in others. Hutcheson does not fully agree with Shaftesbury, however, noting that a person need not be motivated by virtue—by knowledge of the goodness of what he is doing—in order to be virtuous. Hutcheson argues that although some philosophers require “that Merit supposes, beside kind Affection, that the Agent has a moral Sense, reflects upon his own Virtue, delights in it, and chases to

⁴⁶ Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*. Ed. Wolfgang Leidhold (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2004) Hereafter “IIBV.”

adhere to it for the Pleasure which attends it,... We need not debate the Use of this Word Merit: it is plain, we approve a generous kind Action, tho' the Agent had not made this Reflection" (EPA II.v.299/305).⁴⁷ While he requires benevolent motivation, he acknowledges that we can be motivated benevolently to bring another person pleasure without having the cognitive component of being aware that this act is virtuous—in Shaftesbury's terms, being aware that this act contributes to the good of the system. That is, we can have natural benevolent affections that have, for example, "the happiness of our parents" as their object, rather than "the happiness of our parents insofar as this promotes the good of the system" as the object of our motivation.

In response to Mandeville, Hutcheson is concerned to preserve a notion of motivation to virtue that does not reduce to self-interest. Because he is so concerned with distinguishing self-interested pleasures and desires from other pleasures and desires, Hutcheson, like Shaftesbury, posits a separate sense, which he calls the moral sense, by which we perceive moral value. He also posits what he calls a "Publick sense" by which we are pained by others' harm and desire their benefit—our natural benevolence. Both of these kinds of pleasure are distinct from "sensual pleasure" and "pleasures of the imagination" (EPA I.i.7-8/7-8).⁴⁸ These senses are as distinct from each other as are our external senses of vision, taste, and hearing. Just as by vision we perceive color and by taste we perceive flavor, by the public sense we perceive the good of others, and by the moral sense we perceive the moral qualities of actions.

⁴⁷ See also the EPA II.iii, where Hutcheson lists his definitions, and under the definition of a good action (definition 12) writes, "Men of much Reflection may actually intend universal absolute Good; but with the common rate of Men their Virtue consists in intending and pursuing particular absolute Good, not inconsistent with universal Good" (EPA II.iii.37/38).

⁴⁸ Pleasures of the imagination include pleasure taken in beauty and harmony. Hutcheson argues that the desires of the imagination such as the desire for beauty can be satisfied by contemplating nature, and so they are not in principle opposed to virtue (though they are at best morally neutral). They can be combined with other desires, however, such as the desire for possession, which then leads to our desires to have, say, fashionable clothes, and this combination does have the potential to be vicious. (EPA Liv.101/102-102/103).

Positing these (and other) different senses is unusual, and might sound arbitrary (should we posit a sense of texture, as opposed to a sense of solidity, to distinguish our sensations of tactile properties?), but I think Hutcheson, like Shaftesbury, does so for an explicit purpose. As a sentimentalist, he argues that we are only motivated by affections. However, he wants to argue against the Mandevillian view that all motivations are self-interested (see EPA I.i.13-14/13-14). By positing different senses, Hutcheson can say that we have desires that are not self-interested (thereby denying premise (3) of the Egoist Argument): “The Desires in which one intends or pursues what he apprehends advantageous to himself, we may call Selfish; and those in which we pursue what we apprehend advantageous to others, and do not apprehend advantageous to our selves, or do not pursue with this view, we may call Publick or Benevolent Desires” (EPA I, 13). Theorists are wrong, he argues, to consider all affective desires as self-interested. On Hutcheson’s view, we can have pleasures of the moral sense, and pleasures of the public sense, which are distinct from the selfish pleasures (any pleasures pursued for private advantage, potentially sensual pleasures or pleasures of the imagination⁴⁹). Hence, he can maintain his motivational sentimentalism (the claim that we are only motivated by sentiments) without reducing motivation to self-interest.

In the Preface to his *Essay*, his description of the public sense as a separate faculty clearly has this distinction as its aim:

We have got the Number Five fixed for our external Senses, tho Seven or Ten might as easily be defended. We have Multitudes of Perceptions which have no relation to any external Sensation; ... if by Reflection [philosophers] mean an inward Power of Perception, as I fancy they do, they had as carefully examin’d into the several kinds of internal Perceptions, as they have done into the external Sensations: that we might have seen whether the former be not as natural and necessary as the latter. Had they in like manner consider’d our Affections without a previous Notion, that they were all from Self-Love, they might have felt an ultimate Desire of the Happiness of others as easily

⁴⁹ We form desires based on the prospect of gaining the pleasure or avoiding the pain of any of these senses, and so we have desires that correspond to each of these senses. E I.i.13/13.

conceivable, and as certainly implanted in the human Breast, tho perhaps not so strong as Self-Love. (E x)

Hutcheson thinks that Mandeville and others, who focus exclusively on self-love as our affective motivation to action, recognize that we are only motivated by affections, but fail to recognize different types of affections. In contrast, he maintains that we have naturally benevolent affections—the pleasures of the public sense and our desires to pursue them—as well as (and distinct from) the pleasures of the moral sense, by which we approve of and desire virtue.⁵⁰ By positing these several senses, he is able to say we do have natural affections that are not self-interested. Not only does this allow for virtue, contra Mandeville, it also distinguishes Hutcheson’s view from Shaftesbury’s. While all virtuous action must be benevolent—that is, it must come from affections of the Public Sense—it need not all be from an explicit desire *for* virtue, as Shaftesbury had contended by positing the “rational affections.”

Nevertheless, Hutcheson, like Mandeville and Shaftesbury, is still operating within the framework that maintains that interest and virtue are mutually exclusive, and so maintains the opposition between benevolence and interest.⁵¹ Hence, although these affections of the public sense are affections, he still maintains that benevolence is *disinterested*, in order to distinguish it from self-interest. In the Inquiry he writes, “If there be any Benevolence at all, it must be disinterested; for the most useful Action imaginable, loses all appearance of Benevolence, as soon as we discern that it only flowed from Self-Love or Interest” (IIBV II.ii.140).⁵² This statement clearly assumes that interest is co-extensive with self-interest. Later, in elaborating on

⁵⁰ “Desires arise in our Mind, from the Frame of our Nature, upon Apprehension of Good or Evil in Objects, Actions, or Events, to obtain for our selves or others the agreeable Sensation, when the Object or Event is good; or to prevent the uneasy Sensation, when it is evil. Our original Desires and Aversions may therefore be divided into five Classes, answering to the Classes of our Senses” (E I.i.7/7).

⁵¹ As will be noted later, however, Hutcheson notes *some* relationship between benevolence and one’s interest. This relationship cannot be part of one’s motivation, however, if one’s motivation is to be considered virtuous.

⁵² See also IIBV II.II.iii.140: “As to the Love of Benevolence, the very Name excludes Self-Interest. We never call that Man benevolent, who is in fact useful to others, but at the same time only intends his own Interest, without any desire of, or delight in, the Good of others.”

the public sense, he claims that “there is in human Nature a disinterested ultimate Desire of the Happiness of others” (IIBV II.ii151). So while he has eschewed Shaftesbury’s language of “rational” vs. “sensible” desires, he still maintains some difference in the quality of self-interested vs. benevolent affections, namely that the latter are disinterested passions.

We see further evidence of this forced distinction in Hutcheson’s preface to the reprinted edition of his *Essay* (1742); here he notes that he does ultimately argue that being benevolent is better for us than being selfish, and this seems paradoxical given his aversion to allowing benevolence to be “interested.” He writes, “It may perhaps seem strange, that when in this Treatise Virtue is suppos’d disinterested; yet so much Pains is taken, by a Comparison of our several Pleasures, to prove the Pleasures of Virtue to be the greatest we are capable of, and that consequently it is our truest Interest to be virtuous” (EPA viii). Hutcheson maintains that while our benevolent desires are not interested in the sense that we are motivated by our own pleasure or pain in pursuing them (that is, benevolence is not simply the desire for pleasures of the public sense (EPA I.i.21-23/21-22)), they nonetheless ultimately serve our interests. Still, it cannot be the promise of the pleasure we feel upon satisfying our benevolent desires that leads to virtuous action.

From the Egoist argument, Hutcheson is denying premise (3) by arguing for the existence of some desires that are disinterested. Nevertheless, he recognizes that benevolence is in our interest in a general sense, and it cannot appear to compete with our interest if it is to motivate us. However, he still argues that benevolence is not interest-*ed*, that is, we do not act on benevolent motives for the sake of our interest. Hence, we can conclude, we act on these desires independently of our interest in their being satisfied. This is the only way in which our motivations can be considered virtuous.

Hume disagrees with Hutcheson on three fronts. First, Hume thinks the supposition that we are naturally universally benevolent is just empirically false, that “there is no such

passion in human minds, as the love of mankind, merely as such, independent of personal qualities, of services, or of relation to ourself” (T3.2.1.12 / SBN 481). We care about people according to our encounters with and relations to them. These relationships can be expanded through sympathy, but Hume is clear that he does not believe there is any universal “love among all human creatures” (ibid.). So we don’t have a general desire for the happiness of others, or for the public good as such, but rather a desire for the happiness of people close to us; by sympathy, we can see that other people have these desires for people close to them, and so can generalize our moral claims, but we do not have a natural sentiment of this sort.⁵³

Second, Hume recognizes virtues as including those actions that are useful or advantageous to *oneself*, which presumably are precluded by using benevolence as a criterion of virtue. (Hutcheson argues that actions that proceed from self-love and cause no harm to other people are entirely morally neutral, and draw no moral sentiments in the observer (IIBV II.iii.172).) If one can be motivated in a way that is useful to oneself and causes no harm to others, that can be virtuous on Hume’s view, but clearly there is no reason to stipulate that such a motive must be—or even could be—disinterestedly benevolent.

Third, and here I paraphrase the argument of James Moore⁵⁴, Hume says that benevolence cannot account for our adherence to artificial virtues, like justice. Not only is there

⁵³ James Moore offers, among many others, this particular juxtaposition of the two philosophers’ views. He argues that T3.2.1 is a direct attempt to argue against Hutcheson’s view of benevolence as the root of all virtue. In this section, Hume argues that a disinterested benevolence is already a moral notion, and that our attributions of “virtue” cannot presuppose “virtuous motives.” Virtue is an evaluative term, so we cannot say that the root of virtue is the motive of disinterested benevolence; this would be essentially to say that the root of virtue is virtue, which if course explains nothing. So, Hume argues, the motive of benevolence is not what makes an action virtuous. We must first have natural motives that we then regard as virtuous: “no action can be laudable or blameable, without some motives or impelling passions, distinct from the sense of morals” (T3.2.1.18 / SBN 483). In short, Hume argues, we have natural motivations toward different things, natural affections that, upon evaluation, we recognize as valuable and so regard as virtuous. We do not have an overarching disinterested motive of benevolence that determines our virtuous actions, but rather they are rooted in our evaluation of natural motives. (Moore, “Hume and Hutcheson,” in *Hume and Hume’s Connexions*)

⁵⁴ Ibid. Interestingly, Moore argues that Hume’s separation of justice from natural virtues is an Epicurean move, and Hutcheson was adamantly anti-Epicurus.

no such thing as universal benevolence, but even private benevolence, or benevolence directed at a particular person with whom we are engaged, does not explain all virtuous action. Hume argues that the only thing that makes us keep a promise to someone we dislike or distrust is the recognition of the social utility of the convention of justice, not any benevolent motive. We may know that it is not good for us in a particular case to keep a promise, that it does no good for the promisee, and that keeping it does no good for society if this person is, say, a “profligate debauchee” (T3.2.1.13 / SBN 482). Nevertheless, we recognize the value of the convention of justice and so act virtuously to keep our promise, though this is, then, only an artificial virtue. There is no value in being “just” in this particular case in isolation, and we do not act justly out of benevolence toward this individual whom we despise; the value of justice as a virtue, and our reason for acting accordingly, come from its status as an institution in society.⁵⁵

For all these reasons, Hume contends that Hutcheson’s view fails to accord with the facts of human sentiments and practice. There is a further manner in which Hume’s view is distinct from Hutcheson’s, in regard to the moral sense. Both argue that our moral judgments are based on sentiments that we feel when observing people’s actions. Hutcheson distinguishes these sentiments of approval as those felt from a separate sense, the moral sense; the moral sense responds to benevolent motives as virtuous and self-interested motives as vicious. The moral sense is a distinct sensibility, like the public sense, and it recognizes virtue and vice in people’s motivations. In particular, on Hutcheson’s view, it recognizes benevolence and self-interest. These are the objects that give rise to the feelings of the moral sense. Hume also argues that our moral sentiments arise when we have certain objects in view, but these objects do not

⁵⁵ Some readers of Hume see a problem here in that Hume’s “undoubted maxim” (T3.2.1.7 / SBN 479) appears to imply that our motive to virtuous action must always entail a more basic motive, one not directed toward an action *because* it is virtuous. I read this maxim differently, as only implying that in general, we must have natural motivation to act in such ways, but we need not have these motives in every particular case. So, we have natural motivations toward justice, particularly related to our sympathy, which ground the practice generally but needn’t be present every time we act justly. This is an important feature of the artificial virtues, I think, but not one I can take up here. Hume’s undoubted maxim will get some support from Butler’s arguments.

already have a moral valence (as do Hutcheson's benevolence and self-interest) but are simply the characters of persons.⁵⁶ Our sentiments of approval and disapproval depend on the useful/harmful and agreeable/disagreeable effects of these character traits on the person's sphere of influence. The moral attributions we give these traits are derivative of this benefit and agreeableness, and are not cast by Hume as separate "moral qualities" in the realist sense. Hutcheson maintains a strong moral realism, as did Shaftesbury, and so by his account the moral sense is the sense by which we pick out moral qualities, in the same way that our sense of sight is the sense by which we pick out visible properties. Hume, by contrast, distinguishes these sentiments simply by the objects that give rise to them, and not by their belonging to a distinct faculty.⁵⁷ As discussed earlier in response to Shaftesbury, Hume denies that there are moral qualities in the world independently of our approval of certain motives, and so to say that we have a sense dedicated to perceiving moral qualities is incoherent. Therefore, he distinguishes our moral sentiments not by a unique sense, nor by certain moral qualities they pick out, but rather merely the object that gives rise to them. In the same way that the feeling of anger requires another person as its object, moral approval requires a character trait as its object; and

⁵⁶ This feature of Hume's view is elaborated in Chapter Two.

⁵⁷ Hume does use the term "moral sense" in his arguments, but he does not distinguish it as a sense by which we perceive moral qualities, as distinct from senses by which we perceive other qualities. On Hume's view, as laid out most clearly in T3.1.2 (SBN 470-6), the impressions of the moral sense are distinguished by the object that gives rise to them, but this object is not independently morally significant. Whereas for Hutcheson, the object of the passions of the moral sense is the *moral quality* that something possesses, for Hume it is merely a person's character, as distinguished from other features of the person (see further discussion of this object in Chapter Two). The affections of the moral sense do feel different, Hume argues, but it is not merely this affective difference that distinguishes them as moral sentiments. Nor are they distinct because they pick up on a unique quality of their objects that is not perceived by other senses. So although Hume does use the term "moral sense," he does not use the term to refer to a separate faculty that picks up on unique qualities, as sight registers color, or touch registers texture. Our moral sentiments are feelings of approval and disapproval that have a person's character, rather than, say, her haircut, as their object.

we no more say that moral approval is perception by a different sense than we say that anger is such.⁵⁸

From these points of difference, we can generalize that Hume and Hutcheson differ on a fundamental point, namely whether interest can be incorporated into virtuous motivation. Given his assumption that benevolence is by definition disinterested, Hutcheson cannot make sense of interested motivation to virtue. And given the criterion that virtue lacks interest, no self-promoting motives can be virtuous. However, making use of Butler's arguments, Hume holds that virtue involves interest without any concerns about Mandevillian egoism. Butler, as we will now see, argues that this distinction between self-interest and benevolence does not parallel the distinction between vice and virtue.

5. Butler

The preceding accounts of virtue have been subject to assumptions about human motivation, particularly the assumption that if one has an interested motive, this motive must also be selfish and blind us to the interests of others. We've also seen the assumption that regard for others precludes interest and must be emotionally disinterested. In his *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, which have Hobbesian egoism as their primary target, Bishop Joseph Butler offers arguments that fundamentally change this debate. Like Hume, Butler thinks that the foundation for an account of morality should be "a matter of fact, namely, what the particular nature of man is, its several parts, their economy or constitution; from whence it proceeds to determine what course of life it is, which is correspondent to this whole nature"

⁵⁸ See also Abramson, "Sympathy and the Project of Hume's Second Enquiry" (2001), and Taylor, "Hume on the Standard of Virtue" (2002) (p.49 and n23), for the claim that Hume does not hold an independent "moral sense" as Hutcheson does (pp.52-3, 61-3). Brown gives another reason for Hume to challenge Hutcheson on this point: since benevolence is not the only virtue, on Hume's view, to posit distinct "instincts" that dispose us to approve of each individually (as the moral sense is said to do in regard to benevolence) would violate a principle of economy ("Hume on Moral Rationalism" (2008), p.232).

(Preface, 188⁵⁹). In the interest of empirical accuracy, Butler argues that interest and benevolence are not opposed. One can have various desires that may or may not be benevolent, and independently may or may not be in accord with self-love, or one's interest. So, Butler is also denying premise (3) of the Egoist Argument, but not by classifying distinct sorts of passions. Rather, he is re-examining the way in which desires are interested at all, and will argue that all of our particular desires, considered on their own, are equally interested or disinterested. We can see his influence on Hume, particularly in his appendix "On Self-Love" at the end of his second *Enquiry*, and it is clear that Butler's arguments are significant for Hume's understanding of self-interest and desire.

In his sermon "Upon the Love of Our Neighbor," Butler argues against the claim that self-love and benevolence are fundamentally opposed.⁶⁰ He takes this opposition to be rooted in an assumption that self-love is (obviously) interested, and benevolence is disinterested. However, Butler makes a distinction between particular desires, toward particular aims and objects, and general desires toward one's own interest. He argues that there are two ways in which our desires are directed toward objects; we have general affections directed toward ourselves (toward our own interest), and we have idiosyncratic affections toward particular things that we desire: "Every man hath a general desire of his own happiness; and likewise a variety of particular affections, passions, and appetites to particular external objects" (*OLN* 228). He argues that the former does not direct us toward any particular action, but rather it has our happiness as its goal, and the satisfaction of our various particular affections are what potentially bring us happiness. So, for example, I have a general affection toward myself, which we can call self-love. This is a general desire for my own happiness, but what brings me happiness is

⁵⁹ All Butler references give paragraph numbers, as given in the Selby-Bigge edition.

⁶⁰ As I noted earlier, Michael Gill highlights this feature of Hume's view, that is, his departure from this debate on the true motives of human nature as either benevolent or self-interested. His discussion of why this is important is helpful in understanding Hume. Here I wish to highlight how Hume might well have gotten some of the material to make this shift from Butler's work.

pursuing particular desires that I have, such as growing a successful garden or taking a canoe trip with my dad. These latter sorts of desires are those upon which I act, not my general affection for myself; they are directed not at my happiness but at their particular ends, though I may also expect that the gratification of these particular desires will bring me some measure of happiness. The love of our neighbor and the love of ourselves are clearly not the same thing, but neither are general self-love and any other particular affections toward objects, Butler argues. My desire to take a canoe trip is as distinct from my general self-love as is my desire to help my neighbor.

On the level of particular desires, Butler argues that all of our particular desires are equally interested or disinterested. He notes that the other-directedness of these desires does not distinguish what we might call selfish versus benevolent desires, because both hatred and benevolence are intensely focused on the welfare of another person: “Thus the principles, from which men rush upon certain ruin for the destruction of an enemy, and for the preservation of a friend, have the same respect to the private affection, and are equally interested or equally disinterested” (232). Butler views benevolence as a passion, one as interested or disinterested as “ambition” or “revenge” (229); since each of these is properly my desire, but is also a desire to achieve or attain something else, they are all equally interested or disinterested.

Butler argues that all particular desires are directed at particular objects, and can only subsequently be understood to be in or not in our interest. For example, I might be very hungry and have a particular desire for food. But perhaps I am fasting and it is not in my interest to have food, since this would mean I’ve failed at my project. Alternatively, I might have a desire for a good meal because I believe it will bring me happiness, in which case this particular desire is in my interest to pursue. Either way, the question of what *interested* desires I have—which desires are in my interest or promote my happiness—is separate from the particular desire for food. The particular desires are all directed at external objects, and are satisfied upon achieving

these objects. Whether achieving the object of my desires is in my interest is a separate question, and depends on my first having these particular desires:

That all particular appetites and passions are towards external things themselves, distinct from the pleasure arising from them, is manifested from hence; that there could not be this pleasure, were it not for that prior suitableness between the object and the passion: there could be no enjoyment or delight from one thing more than another, from eating food more than from swallowing a stone, if there were not an affection or appetite to one thing more than another. (229)

In other words, the pleasure we take in eating food requires a preceding desire that has food, not our pleasure, as its object. This framework applies to all particular desires, including hunger, benevolence, vengeance, etc. These particular desires are, by themselves, neutral on the issue of interest, according to Butler.

Butler describes the interaction between particular and general desires according to interest. We have all sorts of particular desires, and might be said to pursue them indiscriminately (that is, whether or not they are in our interests). Hence, he calls these “disinterested,” but puts little weight on the term:

The most intelligible way of speaking of it seems to be this: that self-love and the actions done in consequence of it (for these will presently appear to be the same as to this question) are interested; that particular affections towards external objects, and the actions done in consequence of those affections, are not so. But every one is at liberty to use words as he pleases. All that is here insisted upon is, that ambition, revenge, benevolence, all particular passions whatever, and the actions they produce, are equally interested or disinterested. (233)

The distinction he is concerned with making is that any of these particular desires can be understood as in our interest to pursue, and so we can have interested desires toward them insofar as we expect them to promote our happiness. However, this consideration of them as in our interest comes from our general desires, and so is distinct from the particular desires directed at objects or other people.

The key point for Butler’s argument amounts to a denial of premise (3) from our Egoist Argument, but for a different reason that Shaftesbury and Hutcheson denied it. *None* of my

particular desires are interested because all of them are directed at some object external to me. Whether I desire a cupcake, my enemy's failure, or my neighbor's welfare, the immediate desire is directed at an object outside of myself. The degree to which any of these desires also serves my interest is a distinct question. Any particular desires are distinct from our general self-love (or what promotes our interest), and any can be aligned with or opposed to it. This is why benevolence, or love of one's neighbor, is no more opposed to self-love than any other desire. Disinterestedness, or opposition to self-love, is not the criterion by which benevolence differs from hatred. It is not disinterestedness that distinguishes my desire to be kind to my neighbor from my desire to kill all the bamboo in his yard so it stops invading my lawn. (The difference will be in the perspective by which we reflectively approve or disapprove of each desire, but we'll come to that shortly.)

Hume picks up on this same point—that we have particular interests that may or may not oppose our own true interest—in the second Appendix to the *EPM* (“On Self-Love”). With an argument remarkably similar to Butler's, he claims that we have desires or appetites which are immediately directed at their objects, such as hunger and thirst toward food and drink, or fame and vengeance toward achieving their ends. We might call these first-order desires which are directed at particular objects:

There are bodily wants or appetites... which necessarily precede all sensual enjoyment, and carry us directly to seek possession of the object. Thus, hunger and thirst have eating and drinking for their end.... In the same manner there are mental passions by which we are impelled immediately to seek particular objects, such as fame or power, or vengeance without any regard to interest. (*EPM* App. 2.12 / SBN 301)

Upon reflection, Hume argues, we can recognize any of these desires as conducive to our interest (or not) and then pursue them as being in our interest: “from the gratification of these primary appetites arises a pleasure, which may become the object of another species of desire or inclination that is secondary and interested” (*ibid.*). We might also recognize that they are not in

our interest: “Who sees not that vengeance, from the force alone of passion, may be so eagerly pursued, as to make us knowingly neglect every consideration of ease, interest, or safety...?” (ibid.) It is only what Hume calls “secondary passions,” which tell us that pursuing these desires is in our interest, that are themselves interested desires: “there is a passion, which points immediately to the object, and constitutes it our good or happiness; as there are other secondary passions, which afterwards arise, and pursue it as a part of our happiness, when once it is constituted such by our original affections” (ibid.). We have this particular passion, vengeance, the gratification of which will bring us some pleasure, but it is no more self-interested than is benevolence. Vengeance is opposed to benevolence, but it is equally independent of (and likely opposed to) our own ultimate interest. Furthermore, like Butler, Hume argues that these particular pleasures are necessarily antecedent to any pleasure of self-interest (ibid.).

Clearly we have natural passions that are not always in our self-interest to gratify, which we nonetheless seek to satisfy. If natural passions are not necessarily self-interested, then there is no need to require benevolence to be distinct from natural passions in order to make it distinct from self-interest (contra Mandeville). Furthermore, because our particular desires for benevolence can also be in our interest, we need not characterize benevolence as always disinterested (contra Shaftesbury and Hutcheson). Hence, there is no need to argue that benevolence is any more independent of our natural passions, nor do we need to argue that benevolent desires must be disinterested.

The determination of which motivating desires are virtuous is not made according to which are interested or disinterested. Rather, for both Butler and Hume, it is made according to which desires we approve of from a certain general perspective. Our particular affections direct us to their particular objects for satisfaction, and any of them, when achieved, bring a certain enjoyment; but determining which are on the whole in our interest, Butler argues, requires us to

not simply act on our particular desires indiscriminately, but consider them in comparison to each other:

The mind can take a view of what passes within itself, its propensions, aversions, passions, affections, as respecting such objects, and in such degrees; and of the several actions consequent thereupon. In this survey it approves of one, disapproves of another, and towards a third is affected in neither of these ways, but is quite indifferent. This principle in man, by which he approves or disapproves his heart, temper, and actions, is conscience. (392)

As a matter of fact, Butler believes that benevolent actions are in our best interest, but we need not concern ourselves with this empirical point at present. The bigger point to note is his account of our reflective consideration of our particular desires, and how they conform to general desires. I might have motivations to help my friend, to eat cupcakes, and to kill my neighbor's bamboo; none of these has virtue as its object, but recognition that upon reflection I approve of the first, am indifferent toward the second, and disapprove of the third, gives me further motivation to act on the first.⁶¹

So, Butler argues, self-interest can coincide with benevolence, and the gratification of our natural benevolence may well be in our own interest. Which motives or desires are virtuous depends on our considered approval of them, an account Hume shares with him. We have particular desires toward objects and general desires for which our particular desires are more or less suited; it is our reflection on this latter point by which we determine which particular desires are good or bad. One important consequence of this view is that good acts are rooted in natural affections. The distinction between acting to satisfy our particular desires and further recognizing that satisfying those desires is in our interest is a significant one for Butler and for Hume. Acting on natural affection can develop into moral action by our approval of such an action. We have a

⁶¹ In his introduction to Hume's *Treatise*, T. H. Green argues that Butler's account of reflective approval is circular because he fails to give us the criteria by which, upon reflection, we approve of actions. Nevertheless, we can see how Hume might use this account so that, with his given criteria, we have a clear account of reflective approval. (*Treatise* ed. Green (2003), p.27)

natural affection that we seek to gratify, and upon further reflection, Butler argues, we recognize the value of acting on this affection and so come to see it as a duty:

Thus a parent has the affection of love to his children: this leads him to take care of, to educate, to make due provision for them; *the natural affection leads to this: but the reflection that it is his proper business, what belongs to him, that it is right and commendable so to do; this added to the affection becomes a much more settled principle, and carries him on through more labour and difficulties for the sake of his children, than he would undergo from that affection alone*, if he thought it, and the course of action it led to, either indifferent or criminal. This indeed is impossible, to do that which is good and not to approve of it; for which reason they are frequently not considered as distinct, though they really are... (206, my emphasis⁶²)

Parents have a natural desire for their children's happiness. The sorts of parental care that goes beyond our natural interests, to push parents to do even that which they'd rather not do, for the sake of their children, builds upon this natural interest. Once we see the action as good, we have more motivation to pursue it, and in fact, Butler argues, more "settled" motivation. Our initial motive to such action is not our approval of it as virtuous, but the latter does add additional motivation. And acting on this motive whether or not we have reflectively approved of it is virtuous.

This idea is echoed in Hume's *Treatise*, a passage sometimes referred to as his "undoubted maxim," where he argues that natural affection necessarily precedes our sense of moral duty:

We blame a father for neglecting his child. Why? because it shows a want of natural affection, which is the duty of every parent. Were not natural affection a duty, the care of children cou'd not be a duty; and 'twere impossible we cou'd have the duty in our eye in the attention we give to our offspring. In this case, therefore, all men suppose a motive to the action distinct from a sense of duty..... In short, it may be establish'd as an undoubted maxim, *that no action can be virtuous, or morally good, unless there be in human nature some motive to produce it, distinct from the sense of its morality.* (T3.2.1.5,7 / SBN 478, 479)⁶³

⁶² From Butler's "Sermon Upon the Social Nature of Man"

⁶³ Hume reiterates this point in T3.2.5.6 / SBN 518: "No action can be requir'd of us as our duty, unless there be implanted in human nature some actuating passion or motive, capable of producing the action."

The motive in question here is a natural affection. In Hume, as in Butler, the principle of reflection brings us to approve of this natural affection, and this approval indicates to us that it is right and good to act on it; thus, we have a sense of the virtue of this natural affection. The goodness (virtuousness) of this act is not only not disinterested, but it is in fact *rooted* in the natural affection we seek to gratify, and the act is understood to be a duty by our reflection upon this affection.⁶⁴ At this point, Hume goes further than Butler with the *necessity* of virtue's being rooted in natural affection, but Butler clearly lays the groundwork for the very *possibility* that natural affection can be the basis of virtuous action.⁶⁵

Hume's claim in the above passage, that an action cannot be virtuous unless there is a distinct natural motivation toward it, draws on his metaphysical sentimentalism noted earlier. Hume argues that Shaftesbury's account of virtuous motivation is circular, because to be motivated to do something *because* it is virtuous can only follow upon our observing a motive and approving of it. Since virtues, on Hume's account, just are those natural motives of which we approve (from the appropriately general point of view), we cannot call an action or motive virtuous, implying that people should act on it, unless people have in fact acted on it prior to its

⁶⁴ Penelhum discusses this issue at length in his article "Butler and Hume" (1988). He argues that whereas Butler sees such a benevolence to be quintessentially natural, Hume uses conscientiousness as a substitute for a natural motivation. It may be that Butler thinks our natural benevolence extends further than Hume thinks it extends, but I do not see in these passages strong reason to think that Hume thinks our natural affection peters out. I don't think anything hangs on this distinction here, although I would argue that there is a sense in which this reflective sense of duty is still natural for Hume. There might be more to say in the case of justice, which is clearly seen as "artificial" for Hume, but again, nothing here hangs on this distinction.

⁶⁵ Given his view of the passions and their satisfaction, Butler is perfectly willing to claim that we cannot be motivated to do something that is clearly opposed to our own happiness. There has to be some incentive of our own gratification in the motivation to do anything: "Let it be allowed, though virtue and moral rectitude does indeed consist in affection to and pursuit of what is right and good, as such; yet, that when we sit down in a cool hour, we can neither justify to ourselves this or any other pursuit, till we are convinced that it will be for our happiness, or at least not contrary to it" (497). So, our motivation for doing something is never going to be simply because doing so is virtuous, or it is the right thing to do. We inevitably recognize that doing so does in some way also contribute to our own happiness. With this additional criterion, we might think Butler's view is even closer to Hume's. If we interpret "happiness" here as the result of the satisfaction of desires or affections, then it looks like Butler is arguing that we cannot have a duty to do anything unless we have an affection toward it that we will find gratification in pursuing. In other words, Butler might also hold Hume's "undoubted maxim."

being approved as virtuous. Hume's account of virtue is derivative of an account of natural motivations, and interestingly, his undoubted maxim seems to follow from his metaphysical sentimentalism.

The significant piece in Butler's arguments, in reference to Hume, is this denial that self-love and benevolence are necessarily opposed. Butler gives a clear and concise summary of the argument I have highlighted:

it has been proved, that there is no peculiar rivalship or competition between self-love and benevolence; that as there may be a competition between these two, so there may also between any particular affection whatever and self-love; that every particular affection, benevolence among the rest, is subservient to self-love, by being the instrument of private enjoyment; and that in one respect benevolence contributes more to private interest, *i.e.*, enjoyment or satisfaction, than any other of the particular common affections, as it is in a degree its own gratification. (496)

There is nothing about our natural self-love that denies the possibility of natural benevolence, so we needn't argue that human nature is oriented around one or the other exclusively. Butler rejects premise (3) from the Egoist Argument because none of our particular desires are interested; and yet because any of them could also, in principle, be interested, the difference between an interested and a disinterested desire cannot be used to distinguish virtue. Hence, premise (1) is also rejected. In short, the presence of self-love as a general motive does not preclude virtue.

What we get from Butler is an account of natural desires toward a variety of particular objects, including benevolent desires toward the happiness of others, plus a further general desire toward our own happiness. The latter can help us structure and prioritize our particular desires according to which desires will in fact promote our happiness if satisfied. Furthermore, insofar as any of these particular desires have the potential to bring me enjoyment when satisfied, none are in principle opposed to self-love. Finally, since our general principle for pursuing some particular desires and not others just is our own happiness—and here Butler

takes this natural self-love as a fact—the question of virtuous motives being disinterested (that is, not self-interested) is at the level of particular desires irrelevant, and at the level of general desires incoherent. What he has accomplished, however, is a denial of any attempts to distinguish benevolent actions from, for example, desires for cupcakes and vengeance *in terms of interest and disinterest*. Hence, what makes the former virtuous, and the latter not, is not a question of self-interest.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate some of the consequences of this debate for Hume's view, and further elaborate how it influences his account of virtues. The most immediate consequence of accepting Butler's arguments is that Hume has good reason not to engage in a debate about whether people's motivations are benevolent or self-interested. Assuming these terms of debate, and assuming they are mutually exclusive, Shaftesbury and Hutcheson were forced to posit disinterested passions, "rational affections" and distinct affective senses to accommodate virtuous motivation. Insofar as these positions draw on elements not obviously available in a straightforward "science of human nature," they are not acceptable for Hume. Making use of Butler's argument, he claims that people have both these sorts of motivations, and may even have both toward the same end (e.g. helping one's neighbor), and this fact is not relevant for determining the virtue of an action. With this in mind, Hume can argue that we act from affection toward certain objects (that is, from natural motivating passions) with the further claim that we act virtuously by acting on this affection. This is an important advance for Hume's sentimental account because it enables arguments that base a real (as opposed to merely conventional, à la Mandeville) account of virtue and vice on natural sentiments of pleasure and pain without such an argument collapsing into a view fundamentally

based on self-interest. Acting on one's natural affections and desires does not entail a lack of virtue, even when these affections are self-interested.

As we have seen, Mandeville highlights significant conflicts between virtuous motives and the public good. Still, Mandeville, like the earlier sentimentalists, is focused on the rivalry between self-interest and benevolence, and argues that vice is to do things out of self-interest while virtue is to do things for the benefit of others, or for the reason that it is good to do so. This leads to the conclusion that, since all we do is self-interested, "virtue" is only a convention. Butler after him argues that this is the wrong way to define virtue and vice, since self-interest and benevolence can often coincide. The notion of self-interest that Mandeville uses is not a general self-interest, but an account that the satisfaction of our particular desires always brings us pleasure; he concludes that this makes all of our natural motivations self-interested, but Butler argues that this conclusion is unwarranted. Plenty of our particular desires are not in our self-interest, even though they are our own natural desires. Furthermore, according to Butler doing something out of benevolence can very well also be doing something in which we have particular interest, and so in which we find enjoyment. By Butler's arguments on self-interest, Mandeville's conclusions about virtue don't follow from his observations about public benefit.

Hume takes his cue from Butler in the Appendix to the *EPM*, "On Self-Love," using similar arguments about particular and general desires to set aside the question of self-interested motivation in his discussion of virtue. This leaves open the question of what does make generosity virtuous and gluttony vicious. Hume distinguishes virtuous actions not by asking whether our desire to perform them is in our interest or independent of our interest, but whether their effects are on the whole useful or agreeable. These are the criteria that Hume argues we distinguish in our reflective approval and disapproval. We have particular desires and motivations that we may or may not approve of upon reflection, and virtuous motives are those that will not only serve a particular desire but will also pass the test of secondary approval.

Unlike what we might term selfish pleasures, such as killing my neighbor's bamboo, which are pleasurable to us from our individual perspectives, virtues produce pleasures that are appreciated from the wider scope. This is not the same as saying they are disinterested (vs. self-interested), because I might reflectively approve of my own pride in my accomplishments, for example. My pride is not disinterested, and my approval recognizes that this pride is useful and agreeable to me. Hence I can have a self-interested passion that also passes the test of approval. When we reflect on our desires, we see that some accord with our general interest and some do not, and thereby approve or disapprove of them accordingly.

In the second *Enquiry*, Hume rejects the self-interest/benevolence debate and distinguishes vice and virtue according to intersubjective approval. He argues that affections relating to our narrow (private) interests belong only to us, whereas affections relating to the interest of all are shared. He says that certain passions cannot be considered virtuous motivations, not because they are self-interested, but because they are privately held: "Avarice, ambition, vanity, and all passions vulgarly, though improperly, comprised under the denomination of *self-love*, are here excluded from our theory concerning the origin of morals.... The notion of morals, implies some sentiment common to all mankind, which recommends the same object to general approbation" (ibid.). With this distinction, Hume can argue that morality is based in our motivating passions—even the self-interested ones—without having to offer an egoist account of morality.

Once the question of whether a motive is virtuous becomes distinct from the question of its interestedness, Hume can offer a new criterion for virtue. The criterion he offers, based on the empirical premise that human beings have an innate attraction to happiness and aversion to pain, both our own and that of other people, is that traits be either useful or agreeable, either to ourselves or others. Without the requirement that motives are benevolent, this allows that non-other-regarding motives can potentially be virtuous, motives such as temperance,

cleanliness, and pride. These are traits useful and agreeable to the person who has them, which is enough to make them virtuous.

Another important consequence of Hume's new criterion of virtue is that it is possible that virtuous traits might conflict, in the ways that Mandeville mentions. Mandeville's arguments entail that there is no unity of the virtues, and that on occasion a vice in one place can advance a virtue in another; or, a vice in one aspect of a person's character allows for greater virtue in another aspect. Mandeville used the examples of piety and honor, and of private versus public virtues. If virtues are those traits useful and agreeable to oneself or others, then we can well imagine that a trait might be useful to others but harmful to oneself, or vice versa, or that one agreeable trait might come at the expense of another (say, when being a good daughter or a good parent requires some sacrifice in being good at one's job). The notion that all benevolent motives are virtuous and all self-interested motives are vicious could not account for conflicting virtues. This potential for conflict might be undesirable, but it also seems importantly realistic, in part for the reasons Mandeville mentions. So on Hume's view, we see that benevolence is a virtue, but not the source of all virtue.⁶⁶

A third consequence of this criterion of virtue is that whether a trait is useful or agreeable to others depends on who is affected by that person's actions as a result of that trait. Hume says that we consider the narrow circle in which a person has influence to consider whether her traits are virtuous or vicious. But since not everyone lives within the same or similar spheres of influence, a trait that might be useful in one environment might be harmful in

⁶⁶ In his *Dissertation on the Nature of Virtue*, Butler also argues that not all virtue is rooted in benevolence. He gives the following example: If two strangers both seek the same thing, it is absurd to think that we should make an effort to help one attain it rather than the other. However, if the two persons are a stranger and a friend, then we are expected to help our friend. Since we are not expected to help in the first case, it is not simply benevolence, or concern for others, that makes it virtuous in the second case. This argument further divorces our understanding of virtue from a notion of disinterested benevolence. (*Dissertation*, 249).

another. Or, one that is agreeable in one social circle might be disagreeable in another. Hume's claims echo Mandeville's arguments on these points.

Noting the references to these philosophers, and particularly to Mandeville and Butler, we can see how Hume takes his discussion of virtue and character in new directions. Since Mandeville has shown that traits like "humility" or "piety" are no longer virtues across the board in every case, Hume can argue that our task is to evaluate character traits in certain contexts to decide which are virtues, according to which traits we approve of. He does not first have to justify the independent, universal value of particular virtues, such as honesty or generosity, but rather can look at traits in context and evaluate them accordingly. In addition, he is now in a position to extricate talk of virtuous motivation from the false dilemma between self-interest and benevolence. By Butler's arguments, any particular desire or motive can be self-interested or not, and so whether a desire is self-interested is not a useful tool for distinguishing virtue from vice. In contrast, Hume looks to how motives affect the person acting on them and the people around her, defining virtue according to the usefulness or agreeableness of an agent's motives.

Chapter 2

The Role of the Passions in Hume's Moral Theory

The passions play a fundamental role in Hume's account of virtue and character. This role is two-fold, both as the foundation of character traits (in explaining actions) and as our means of evaluating the moral valence of those traits. First, our passions are what motivate us, and so they are the causes of actions on Hume's view (T 2.3.2 / SBN 407-13). Hume also says that we are responsible for our actions to the extent that they have their cause "in the characters and disposition of the person, who perform'd them" (T 2.3.2.6 / SBN 410-11). Since the causes are attributed to a person's character, and passions (as motives) are the direct causes of action, the passions play a foundational role in responsibility. Hence, understanding what character traits are depends on understanding the passions and how they operate as causes of action.

Second, passions are our means of recognizing virtue in ourselves and in other people. We distinguish between virtuous and vicious character traits by our passions, particularly the moral sentiments (which are a subset of passions).⁶⁷ So, the evaluation of a character also depends on understanding the passions. This chapter will focus on recounting Hume's theory of the passions. By becoming clearer on what the passions are, and the subclass of passions known as the moral sentiments, we will be in a better position to discuss in the following chapters the role of passions in constituting traits, as well as how our moral sentiments arise, and thereby how we make moral evaluations.

⁶⁷ Most readers take the moral sentiments to be a subset of the passions. Louis Loeb has argued otherwise, saying that they are calm impressions of reflection, and passions are violent impressions of reflection (1977). Árdal *Passion and Value* (1966) and "Another Look" (1977); Baier, *Progress of Sentiments* (1991); Cohon "Hume's Indirect Sentiments" (2008a), Radcliffe "Love and Benevolence" (2004); and many others take the moral sentiments to be passions, interpreting Hume as categorizing all impressions of reflection as passions. I follow this more common reading. Further details will be discussed in section two.

Though Hume's theory of the passions has been the subject of debate in the past, his most fundamental claims about the passions are largely agreed upon. My recounting will rely primarily on Hume's text itself, but unless otherwise noted, this understanding of his view is widely shared. I will note interpretive debates throughout, as well as places where my reading makes a difference for the arguments of the larger project. What follows from this relatively uncontroversial account for character and virtue, and thereby for moral obligation, has not historically been given much attention, and by developing these consequences in subsequent chapters I expect to add a valuable dimension to our understanding of Hume's moral philosophy. The aim of this chapter is to explain the role of the passions both in motivating action, and in evaluating character. Certain features of this account of the passions lead to further questions that subsequent chapters will address.

I have already discussed Hume's view that only passions motivate in the Introduction. This chapter gives a more detailed account of what the passions are and variations among different types of passions. The first section explains Hume's analysis of the passions in detail, with particular attention to what circumstances give rise to certain passions. The second section addresses a key feature of Hume's view about how passions interact to bring about actions, which is his distinction between calm and violent passions. Section three will explain how the moral sentiments, specifically, arise and establish moral value, and why they require a specific object, namely, a character trait, in order to arise. Given his account of the moral sentiments, Hume requires that character traits be real, distinguishable features of individuals. In subsequent chapters, I will offer arguments for exactly what these traits are (Chapter Three), how they are discovered or recognized (Chapter Four), and the criteria by which they are evaluated (Chapter Five).

1. What Passions Are

According to Hume, at the most fundamental level, passions are impressions, as distinct from ideas. Hume argues that all of our perceptions are either impressions or ideas, the latter being copies of the former. Passions are a particular sort of impression that Hume calls “impressions of reflection” or “secondary” impressions. These are contrasted with “original” impressions such as physical sensations of heat, cold, brightness, whiteness, etc., as well as immediate pains and pleasures, such as the prick of a pin or the warmth of a bath. Because passions are impressions, they are not, Hume argues, subject to judgments of reason. That is, passions cannot properly be said to be reasonable or unreasonable. While reason allows us to compare ideas, the passions as phenomenological simples cannot themselves be opposed by ideas. No passion can be said to be contrary to reason, and they cannot be produced or thwarted by reason alone.⁶⁸

Though there is historically some controversy in the literature over this issue, it seems clear that Hume sees passions as nevertheless able to interact with our reason and belief (ideas).⁶⁹ That is, they are not merely immediate desires and aversions; rather, I will argue, they are complex sets of impressions informed or influenced by beliefs about the world. In this

⁶⁸ See T2.3.3.3-7 for Hume’s argument.

⁶⁹ Árdal *Passion and Value* (1966); Baier, *Progress of Sentiments* (1991); Cohon *Hume’s Morality* (2008b); Schmidt *David Hume* (2003); the idea that Hume’s account of passions relies merely on feelings and excludes belief might be originally attributed to Reid, or at least Reid had a primary role in polarizing this view. Though all of the above acknowledge *some* connection between belief and passions, how this connection is made differs. Cohon argues that passions can arise out of beliefs, or that beliefs can actually cause passions, which is consistent with my reading of Hume. Don Garrett and Elizabeth Radcliffe have challenged Cohon on this question, arguing that if reason can produce belief, and belief can produce passions, then, by the law of transitivity, reason can produce passions. If this is true, they argue, it seems reason *can* motivate, which Hume adamantly denies; hence, they question her account of whether belief can cause passions. Nothing I argue is incompatible with Cohon’s view on this point, but I do not argue for the strong claim that beliefs as the bare products of reason can cause passions. In the next chapter, I argue that there is a way in which beliefs play a role in giving rise to motivating passions, but whether these beliefs are direct products of reason and solely responsible for causing the passions is not a concern for my argument. What I argue is consistent with beliefs requiring immediate impressions in order to produce passions, and so remains neutral on the issue of whether a process of reasoning can directly lead to the production of a passion. See Cohon, Garrett, and Radcliffe in *Hume Studies* 34.2 “Symposium: Rachel Cohon, *Hume’s Morality: Feeling and Fabrication*” (2008).

sense, there is a cognitive (reasonable or rational) element involved in the production of the passions, though nevertheless they themselves are not rational or reasonable. In order to see how this interaction works, we need to look at Hume's description of the passions in the *Treatise*.

Reflective, or "secondary" impressions are those that "proceed from some of these original ones, either immediately or by the interposition of an idea" (T 2.1.1.1 / SBN 275). (Recall that original impressions are sensations such as pain and pleasure, and are not passions.) These two ways in which passions relate to original impressions account for Hume's two sub-categories of secondary impressions, direct and indirect passions. Direct passions "arise immediately from good or evil, from pain or pleasure" ("good and evil" are used here in an amoral sense, equivalent to "pain or pleasure" (T 2.3.9.8 / SBN 439)), and they include "desire, aversion, grief, joy" etc. (T 2.1.1.4 / SBN 276-7). These are passions that arise upon the prospect of any basic pleasure or pain, from gazing at tasty-looking chocolates to watching heart surgery on television. Direct passions are inherently motivating: "when we have the prospect of pain or pleasure from any object, we feel a consequent emotion of aversion or propensity, and are carry'd to avoid or embrace what will give us this uneasiness or satisfaction" (T2.3.3.3). Indirect passions "proceed from the same principles, but by the conjunction of other qualities," and include "pride, humility, ambition, vanity, love, hatred" etc. (ibid.). Indirect passions are not by themselves motivating, but they often have associated direct passions (love has an association with benevolence (T2.2.6.3 / SBN 367)), and they reinforce direct passions (T2.3.9.4 / SBN 439).⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Nancy Schaubert raises a legitimate concern that though Hume holds that morality is inherently motivating, if the moral sentiments are indirect passions then he cannot account for how the moral sentiments motivate. She argues that although love is found to be attended by a desire for benevolence, moral approval is not properly love (see more on this distinction below). There might still be room for a parallel account of a moral sentiment as being accompanied by a desire, but I leave this issue aside. This is a serious concern, but it does not pose a burden for my project because I am not concerned with an

To recap, there are two types of impressions: original and secondary (also called reflective). Secondary impressions are further divided into two categories, direct and indirect impressions. Passions are secondary impressions, and there can be both direct and indirect passions. The latter are those we are concerned with in regard to moral evaluation.⁷¹

Hume argues for a very specific relationship between the cause of an indirect passion and the passion that is produced. The details of this account, which explain what the “other qualities” are and how they are “conjoined” with the passion, give a clear picture of how we differentiate particular indirect passions. A double relation of impressions and ideas holds between the cause of a passion and the passion itself, as explained in T 2.1.5 (SBN 285-90). Hume starts this section by laying out what the causes of passions are, using pride and humility as examples. Taking pride as an example, there are many things a person can be proud of: one might be proud of one’s wealth, physical appearance, creative accomplishments, musical talent, of one’s children and their accomplishments, of one’s personal characteristics such as generosity or good humor, of one’s new house or new dress, etc. Any of these could cause one to feel pride, and each of these causes shares two common features: (1) They produce pleasure, and do so independently of pride or humility; for example, a beautiful dress produces aesthetic pleasure in the viewer, independently of the further fact that the dress belongs to the viewer herself. (2) The subject of the causes of pride is either some part of ourselves or something closely related to us—the causes are *one’s own* wealth, children, property, etc. In short, the cause of pride is something associated with oneself that has the tendency to produce pleasure. Humility has as its

agent’s motivation to be moral, and so am not concerned with whether Hume’s view successfully defends his claim that morality is inherently motivating. Schaubert, “Hume on Moral Motivation,” (1999).

⁷¹ Norman Kemp Smith and Thomas Hearn have argued that the moral sentiments are direct passions, and so would also not accept this reading. However, my reading is consistent with most interpretations of Hume, including those of Árdal (1966, 1977), Baier (1991), and Cohon (2008a, 2008b). There is further disagreement, which I will discuss below, about the relationship between indirect passions and the moral sentiments, but aside from a few outliers, most Hume scholars agree that there is some deep connection between the two, such that understanding the first is essential for understanding the second.

cause something that is associated with oneself and tends to produce pain. Love and hate have something about another person as the causes which tend to produce pleasure or pain, respectively.

With this in mind, Hume examines the passions themselves. Pride and humility are naturally associated with the self: “the peculiar object of pride and humility is determin’d by an original and natural instinct,” an association which he also refers to as an “original quality” (T 2.1.5.3 / SBN 285-6). It just is true that one only feels pride about things that belong to or are closely related to oneself. We might admire a stranger’s children, but we don’t feel proud of them. Also, pride and humility entail particular sensations, pleasant and painful, respectively. So, these passions are a pleasure or pain that directs one’s attention to, or focus on, oneself. Love, hatred, esteem, etc. are pleasures or pains associated with another person.

From this examination of the properties of passions and their causes, Hume concludes that it is by a double relation of impressions and ideas that the causes produce the passions. He argues, “That cause, which excites the passion, is related to the object, which nature has attributed to the passion; the sensation, which the cause separately produces, is related to the sensation of the passion: From this double relation of ideas and impressions, the passion is deriv’d” (T 2.1.5.5 / SBN 286-7). Passions are impressions, but because they are secondary (reflective), they depend on prior original impressions. The indirect passions have a peculiar double relation to their causes—the association of an object and a feeling. For example, I may feel hatred toward my neighbor, but that hatred depends upon my prior (in this case repeated) impression of the sound of his loud, off-key singing carrying across the space between us. This impression is painful, like the prick of a pin. The indirect passion of hatred follows upon the pain, when I associate the pain with the person causing it. There is a double relation of ideas and impressions here: the association of ideas is that between my idea of the cause of this pain-inducing sound—my neighbor’s awful singing—and my idea of the object associated with hatred—

another person; the association of impressions is the pain I feel upon hearing him and the pain associated with the passion of hatred.⁷² Only when these relations hold do the indirect passions arise. The passion of hatred is not simply a sensation of pain, but rather it is this sensation coupled with the direction of my attention to the object. These passions have “two *establish’d* properties... viz. their object... and their sensation” (ibid.). Hatred is an impression of reflection because it arises from the double association of these two properties with the above idea (my neighbor’s singing) and impression (the painful sound).

Note also that this “association” of the cause of the pain with the object of the passion isn’t just the fact that it is a person (rather than an animal or other object) that is the cause of this sensation. I can experience different painful sounds, sometimes knowing the cause (perhaps the crows), sometimes having no idea where they come from. What is unique about the passion of hatred is that it only arises when we *recognize* the cause in (or associated with) another person, and according to Hume we always have that person in the forefront of our mind while we’re experiencing the passion. The passion is not just the sensation that arises from a particular source; rather, it is the impression produced by the combination of a sensation and the associated direction of our attention to this particular source, and Hume says that we cannot, “in that situation of mind, ever lose sight of the object” (T 2.1.5.3 / SBN 285-6). The passion of hatred, for example, always includes this engagement of the mind with the awareness of the source, and we cannot be feeling the passion without this attending direction of thought.

On a side note concerning interpretation, there has been a lot of discussion in the Hume literature regarding whether the relation between the passion and the object, such as pride and self, is merely contingent (that is, pride is essentially a simple feeling, which has a contingent relation to this object). Among those who have maintained this view are Páll Árdal,

⁷² In this case, my association of the sound with the person is probably combined with some belief about his knowledge that he has neighbors, and some presumed failure in him to appropriately acknowledge that fact; if I thought the pain he caused me was not within his control, I might not hate him for it.

Donald Davidson, and Anthony Kenny.⁷³ If the relationship is merely contingent, then this association does not tell us anything essential about the passion of pride, which remains an indefinable phenomenal entity. James Dietl⁷⁴ argues for a stronger connection between pride and its object; more recently, Amyas Merivale⁷⁵ has offered an interesting alternative account of Hume's meaning, arguing by reference to his *Dissertation* that the relationship between pride and self is conceptual, and so not contingent. These passions, he argues, are "complex perceptions" involving an impression and an idea. I do not take a stand on this debate here because the only claim I need to make is that there is a relation, contingent or otherwise, between pride and self, or between love and another person. All accounts recognize Hume's empirical claim, at least, that these passions are directed to particular objects, whether by necessity or not.⁷⁶

From this account of indirect passions, we get an important set of claims. These passions always bear a relation to an object and always involve a sensation. Particular passions bear relations to particular objects (e.g. pride to self) and involve particular sensations (e.g. pride is pleasurable). In other words, one cannot have a passion of pride not directed toward oneself, or of love not directed toward another person; likewise one cannot have a pleasant passion of humility. Also, clearly, belief influences passion in the following sense: only if I believe this other

⁷³ Árdal, "Hume and Davidson" (1989); Davidson, "Hume's Cognitive Theory of Pride" (1976); Kenny, *Action, Emotion and Will* (1963, p.24)

⁷⁴ "Hume on the Passions" (1968)

⁷⁵ "Hume's Mature Account" (2009)

⁷⁶ I take this debate to incorporate a concern Sam Rickless once raised in conversation, that virtue might be just the behavior that produces the immediate pleasure that, when then associated with the character produces the indirect passion of love. If this is true, he argues, then there could be another world in which virtue produced these pleasures, but this second step, the arousal of impressions of reflection, never occurred. If this is true, then virtue is what it is not because it produces love or pride, but simply because it produces the initial pleasant impression. It just so happens that this is conjoined with the latter process in our world, but that doesn't mean that the latter process is intrinsic to virtue. I do not see this as a problem for Hume, because for him, constant conjunction in this world is the basis of moral judgment. For present purposes, at least, insofar as it is true that virtue always does give rise to these impressions of reflection, in this world, we can proceed with an investigation of how we recognize virtue without getting mired in the metaphysical question.

person to be the cause of my discomfort does the passion of hatred arise. If I mistakenly believe the screeching sound to be caused by an animal, I feel pain but I do not feel hatred. The next section will give a brief overview of how direct passions interact in motivating us to act, particularly with reference to Hume's discussion of "calm" and "violent" passions. I will return to the indirect passions in the third section of this chapter.

2. Calm and Violent Passions

On Hume's view, only direct passions motivate, and our motivations are said to cause our actions. Some of our actions can be traced to our character, specifically, as their cause (T2.3.2.6 / SBN 410-11). In the next chapter, we will see exactly how character is related to the passions. A question that arises in that discussion is, by what means does one passion motivate us more strongly, or more consistently, than others (in a way that we can say it is "characteristic")? In preparation for that discussion, I will outline here Hume's account of "calm" and "violent" passions, which is sometimes used to explain consistency in an individual's motivation. In this chapter, I am only concerned to outline what these passions are, and how they interact. How and why they become consistent and their significance for grounding traits are left for the next chapter.⁷⁷

Hume makes this distinction between passions in terms of the sensible agitation that they cause in us. There is no fundamental difference between the two kinds, but rather

⁷⁷ There is some controversy about how to cross-categorize the calm and violent passions with the direct and indirect impressions. Kemp Smith has argued that only the direct passions are calm and violent (*The Philosophy of David Hume* (1941), p.168). Árdal that all categories of passions (primary and secondary, direct and indirect) can be either calm or violent (1966, pp.10-11), and Loeb that only violent passions are direct and indirect ("Hume's Moral Sentiments" (1977), p.375). A discussion of these can be found in Fieser ("Hume's Classification of the Passions" (1992), who accepts a qualified version of Loeb's view. But since only direct passions motivate, and we can, as we will see, be motivated by calm passions, the latter view seems difficult to defend. Passages such as T2.3.4.1 / SBN 418-19, cited below, make it obvious that calm passions have motivational force. I do not offer further argument for this reading here. For the purposes of this dissertation, this issue is not of major concern. The only assumption I make about calm and violent passions is that both motivate, and this claim is consistent with a variety of readings of their categorization (except the Fieser/Loeb view, as I understand it).

something more like a difference of degree; Hume says, “Both these kinds of passions pursue good, and avoid evil; and both of them are encreas’d or diminish’d by the encrease or diminution of the good or evil” (T 2.3.4.1 / SBN 419). The same object can cause either a calm or a violent passion: “The same good, when near, will cause a violent passion, which, when remote, produces only a calm one” (ibid.). Likewise, while a sense of beauty is generally a calm passion, “The raptures of poetry and music frequently rise to the greatest height; while those of other impressions, properly call’d *passions*, may decay into so soft an emotion, as to become, in a manner, imperceptible” (T 2.1.1.3 / SBN 276). In short, the difference between calm and violent passions is the degree to which we are emotionally agitated by them.

The most significant point to note about calm and violent passions is that the difference does not correlate with weak and strong passions. We can act on the motivation of either, even in the presence of the other. We can be motivated by violent immediate passions as opposed to our calm passions, which represent more remote (perhaps long-term) interests; likewise, our long-term concerns can override immediate passions:

Men often act knowingly against their interest: For which reason the view of the greatest possible good does not always influence them. Men often counter-act a violent passion in prosecution of their interests and designs: ’Tis 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. (T2.3.3.10 / SBN 418)

What determines whether I act on one rather than another is either features of my general character or of my current state of mind (present disposition). Again, this leaves us with the question of how we determine which motivation to act on, though already we see the suggestion that character plays a role in this determination. In point of fact, Hume thinks we often act according to calm passions even in the face of violent ones:

’Tis evident passions influence not the will in proportion to their violence, or the disorder they occasion in the temper; but on the contrary, that when a passion has once become a settled principle of action, and is the predominant

inclination of the soul, it commonly produces no longer any sensible agitation. As repeated custom and its own force have made every thing yield to it, it directs the actions and conduct without that opposition and emotion, which so naturally attend every momentary gust of passion. (T2.3.4.1 / SBN 418-19)

The task of the next chapter is to tease out how a passion becomes a “settled principle of action,” or what it means for it to be a “predominant inclination.” The very fact that Hume speaks in this language, though, is illuminating. What he suggests is that certain passions can become habitual for us, or primary, and that we will be motivated to act on those passions in the face of other, even more violent, passions. Indeed, it looks like the character trait of “strength of mind” is the developed ability to thus prioritize the passions we act on: “What we call strength of mind, implies the prevalence of the calm passions above the violent” (T2.3.3.10 / SBN 418).⁷⁸

An important feature of Hume’s account of the calm passions is his claim that our common talk of acting “for reasons” is really referring to these calm passions. When passions do not produce much agitation, they are not immediately recognized as passions:

Reason... exerts itself without producing any sensible emotion.... Hence it proceeds, that every action of the mind, which operates with the same calmness and tranquility, is confounded with reason by all those, who judge of things from the first view and appearance.... When any of these passions are calm, and cause no disorder in the soul, they are very readily taken for the determinations of reason, and are suppos’d to proceed from the same faculty, with that, which judges of truth and falsehood. (T2.3.3.8 / SBN 417)

We distinguish, affectively, when we act from inclination, or violent passion, and when we act from calm passions as steady principles. Hume later even uses “reason” interchangeably with “calm passions”: “By reason we mean affection of the very same kind with the former [violent passions]; but such as operate more calmly, and cause no disorder in the temper” (T2.3.9.13 /

⁷⁸ Note that strength of mind does not encompass the other virtues, as it might on other accounts of virtue. It is not the case for Hume that violent passions should never be acted on, or that acting only on calm passions ensures virtue. Nevertheless, a general tendency to act on calm passions—which we have time to cultivate and reflect on—is probably correlated with a general steadiness of character. This point is taken up in the next chapter.

SBN 441). On Hume's view, calm passions can influence us in the way we commonly say reasons should influence us in decision-making procedures.

Some see Hume's contention that these "calm passions" are in fact passions as requiring a defense that seems lacking in his text.⁷⁹ If we are using the term "calm passions" to refer to what we normally mean by "reasons," and the difference between these and "violent passions" (what we normally call "passions" or "emotions") is that the latter are strongly affective, some think Hume is just stacking the deck in his favor. But commentators have defended Hume's account, arguing that calm passions are still passions in an important sense. Baier argues that because at any moment a calm passion such as resentment could become violent, this is evidence that the calm passions are distinct from reasons.⁸⁰ Árdal offers important insight into why calm passions are not necessarily more reasonable or rational than violent passions, arguing against the interpretation that calm passions are those felt from a perspective of clearer or more accurate information. This view has recently resurfaced from Tito Magri, who argues that, at least in regard to the direct passions, "Calm passion responds to and motivates to action on the ground of 'the view of the greatest possible good.'"⁸¹ Acting on calm passions over violent passions, Árdal argues, has nothing to do with acting more rationally in the face of temporarily enthused emotion. Calm passions are *passions* just as violent passions are, and the only difference is the degree of agitation.⁸²

A further concern regarding the calm passions is whether they refer to a specific set of passions. This follows in part from interpretations like that of Magri, which consider the calm passions to be those such as benevolence that respond to a broader sense of the good. I share

⁷⁹ Barry Stroud, for example, challenges Hume's argument on this point (*Hume* (1977), pp.162-7).

⁸⁰ Baier (1991), pp. 167-8.

⁸¹ Magri, "Hume on the Direct Passions and Motivation" (2008), p.197

⁸² Árdal, *Passion and Value* (1966), Chapter Five (pp.93-108). Daniel Shaw has argued that we can understand calm passions as dispositional, as opposed to occurrent, passions, in a way that still captures their being distinct from reason (Shaw, "Hume's Theory of Motivation" (1989)).

the view expressed by both Schmidt and Fieser that although Hume initially categorizes calm and violent passions as distinct types, it is clear from passages such as T2.3.4.1 (cited above), that these are not hard and fast distinctions.⁸³ Some passions are more likely to be calm (benevolence) and some violent (love), but any particular passion can be felt calmly or violently. For present purposes, it is worth noting that there is often a correlation between calm and stable passions, but not an absolute correlation, and so while the calm passions help to explain certain features of what it means to have a character trait in the next chapter, I will not equate the two. One can have a stable passion, such as love, that is felt violently.

What this distinction tells us is that passions are always requisite for action, and they are present even when they produce little agitation. It also shows that our motives can be more or less violently felt, and that whether we act on those more or less violently felt can be determined, at least in part, by features of our character. The final section of this chapter will shift our focus back to the indirect passions to explain how moral sentiments are distinguished by the object that gives rise to them, namely a person's character. What this object is, specifically, and how it is distinguished, are the topics of the next two chapters, respectively.

3. Moral Sentiments

For Hume, moral sentiments are by most accounts some sort of passion, and by all accounts an affection of some sort. Virtue and vice are qualities that determine certain sentiments in observers. Hume equates virtue with the power to produce love or pride, and vice with the power to produce humility or hatred (T 3.3.1.3 / SBN 574-5). When we see behavior that produces pleasure in us and we connect this behavior to the person's character (a topic to be addressed shortly), a double relation of impressions and ideas produces approval in us. We approve of this type of behavior and call it virtuous. Likewise, if we relate this behavior to our

⁸³ Schmidt, pp.220-21; Fieser, pp.6-7.

own character—if it has the power to produce pride—then we see ourselves as virtuous. The same process works for vice. Virtue and vice are constituted by their drawing sentimental responses of a certain sort, as Hume describes in T3.1.1 (SBN 455-69). What makes human actions morally relevant, as opposed to the actions of animals, is that we respond to humans with moral approval and disapproval.

There is an interpretive debate here worth noting, regarding whether the moral sentiments of approval and disapproval are species of love and hate, or something distinct but similar, or an entirely different sort of affection. Given the definition of virtue already noted, and several similar iterations in Hume's text, I am inclined to read moral approval as a type of love, but one that arises only in certain circumstances. Árdal shares this view, as do Korsgaard, Russell, and Penelhum, but it is debated.⁸⁴ Elizabeth Radcliffe, for example, holds that approval is a distinct passion from love.⁸⁵ Nancy Schaubert also argues against the equation.⁸⁶ Abramson argues that the moral sentiments give rise to, and so are not identical with, love and hatred.⁸⁷ Baier argues that they are not indirect passions at all, but are importantly similar due to their being caused by features of persons and their directedness toward persons.⁸⁸ Claudia Schmidt articulates a view similar to Baier's.⁸⁹ As noted earlier, Kemp Smith and Hearn read the moral sentiments as direct passions, and so would also disagree.⁹⁰ But excepting the last, less widely held view, nothing in the current argument hangs on the question of whether moral sentiments

⁸⁴ Árdal *Passion and Value* (1966), "Another Look" (1977); Korsgaard (1999); Russell argues that approval and disapproval are described as "a particular way, or specific mode, of loving or hating that person" (1995, p.61; see pp.61-3); Penelhum "The Self" (1992) holds that "To approve a character is to love in a calm fashion, the person who *has* that character" (147; see pp. 147-9).

⁸⁵ Radcliffe, "Love and Benevolence" (2004): "moral approbation causes the passion of love" (p.641); previously, she equated the two ("Hume on Motivating Sentiments" (1994), p.57n22).

⁸⁶ Schaubert (1999).

⁸⁷ "Spectator-Centered" (2008), p.245

⁸⁸ *Progress of Sentiments* (1994), p.134 and note

⁸⁹ *David Hume* (2003), p.234

⁹⁰ Also noted earlier, Louis Loeb dissents for a different reason, holding that moral sentiments are calm impressions of reflection but that passions are all violent impressions (1977).

are forms of love and hatred, or distinct indirect passions, or even something only similar to indirect passions, if we accept the Baier/Schmidt reading. On any of these views, moral sentiments are still *distinguished by* the causes that produce them (as I will describe below) and by their peculiar feeling, and this is true regardless of what this feeling is affectively like.

Charlotte Brown shares the reading I favor with Árdal, but does not think the question can be answered definitively based on the text.⁹¹ I will proceed using love and pride interchangeably with approval, and hate or humility with disapproval, but my argument could be amended to suit other interpretations.

In order for our sentiments to generate reliable moral judgments, certain conditions must be satisfied.⁹² First, these moral sentiments only arise with a certain object in view, namely a person's character. Second, the general effects of a trait are the relevant factor, not its effect on a particular instance. Third, the effects of a character trait on a certain set of people—one's narrow circle, or those with whom one interacts—are the only relevant effects. Fourth, we must feel this sentiment from a "general point of view," which we reach by imagination and sympathy. Finally, though sympathy is naturally variable (we sympathize more strongly with those near to us), it should not be variable in moral evaluations. That is, moral evaluations require us to sympathize with people in spite of their distance from us. When these circumstances hold, we have appropriate, or reliable, moral sentiments which are intersubjectively shared. In the rest of this section, I outline the basic features of these requirements, which will lay the groundwork for debates in subsequent chapters. The first criterion is the focus of Chapters Three and Four, which examine the ontology of character traits and the epistemic process by which we locate them. The second and third criteria are discussed at length in Chapter Five. I do not engage

⁹¹ Brown (1994), p.33n7. Cohon agrees that the text is indeterminate on this point (Cohon, "Hume's Indirect Passions" (2008a), p.179).

⁹² In setting out these five criteria, I take my cue from Kate Abramson ("Cultural Conflicts," 1999), who suggests that these points, at least, are all agreed upon among readers of Hume (p.335).

extensively with the fourth and fifth criteria in what follows; however, the third criterion is often thought to inform the fourth (as will be elaborated below), so my argument in Chapter Five has implications for the criterion of the general point of view as well.⁹³ Though the rest of the dissertation does not attend directly to these last two criteria, I will note for the reader the basic interpretive options in this section. Accepting my reading of Hume's account of character traits and the evaluations we give to them does not entail that one accept a particular reading of the function of the general point of view or the operation of sympathy, but certainly a full account of Hume's moral theory would, and so it is worth rounding out the picture here, at least in a preliminary way.

The first criterion asserts that moral sentiments have a specific object. Whereas earlier, when discussing love or pride more generally, we associated an object (a new dress) or a feature (physical beauty) with ourselves or another person—as belonging or being related to us or to them—and felt pride or love, the attribution of vice or virtue requires that the object of our approval be associated not simply with the person but specifically with her character. Hume says we only evaluate actions on the assumption that they reflect character:

If any *action* be either virtuous or vicious, 'tis only as a sign of some quality or character. It must depend upon durable principles of the mind, which extend over the whole conduct, and enter into the personal character. Actions themselves, not proceeding from any constant principle, have no influence on love or hatred, pride or humility; and consequently are never consider'd in morality. (T 3.3.1.4 / SBN 575)

Only those objects of pleasure associated specifically with a person's character give rise to the approbation that picks out virtue or the disapprobation that picks out vice: "virtue and vice must

⁹³ A parallel claim might be made according to the argument in Chapter Four that would motivate a reading of the role of sympathy in Hume's theory. I argue that we need a narrative in order to attribute traits to people, which is prior to the arousal of moral sentiments, but a narrative also helps us sympathize with people. I discuss this feature of narrative briefly, and in so doing presuppose a Sayre-McCord-like view, but the import of the argument in Chapter Four is not dependent on accepting this view of sympathy.

be part of our character in order to excite pride or humility” (T2.1.7.5).⁹⁴ (Hume takes this last point as *proof* of the double relation of impressions and ideas.) From the account of the relation between specific passions and particular objects given earlier, it follows that we do not have a sentiment of *moral* approval except when the object of our approval is a person’s *character*.⁹⁵

Having established the circumstances under which moral sentiments arise, we can turn to the general claims Hume makes about which traits give rise to approval, and which to disapproval. Hume says that the character traits that draw our approval are those useful or agreeable to the person possessing them or to other people. The traits we disapprove of are those harmful or disagreeable. The basic psychological claim that Hume makes here is that we are pleased by the pleasure of other people (assuming we’ve abstracted from our own jealousies and biased perspectives), and discomforted by the pain of other people.⁹⁶ This an empirical claim that he takes to be true of human nature, so it could in principle be proven false, but allowing Hume this basic point, we can see the double relation of ideas and impressions that holds for the moral sentiments. In the case of moral approval, the associated ideas are that of a

⁹⁴ See also T3.1.2.3-4, 11; T3.3.1.4. Baillie (2000) uses this criterion to distinguish the moral sentiments from other indirect passions: “Whereas the cause of an indirect passion is some quality relating to a person, the object of the passion is the particular person herself.... By contrast, the object of a *moral* sentiment is always the aspect of character *per se*—the universal rather than the particular—such as *being a liar*” (p.140). Though he is not alone in distinguishing the two sets of passions in this way, the reason he cites for doing so is questionable. Baillie relies on the quote at T 3.1.2.4 / SBN 472 where Hume writes, “Tis only when a character is considered in general, without reference to our particular interest” that we feel the moral sentiments. I read Hume’s use of the term “general” here to refer to the general point of view, not character traits in general, independently of the person who possesses them. Elsewhere, Hume argues that the cause of love and hatred is not virtue “in the abstract” but must be virtue “related to a person” (T2.2.1.7). My argument in Chapter Five regarding the variability of virtue makes the kind of evaluation Baillie describes here impossible.

⁹⁵ As will be discussed in Chapter Five, Hume allows a number of traits not typically seen as “virtuous” into his catalog of virtues, such as, for example, wit and cleanliness. The point of emphasizing character here is not to distinguish character traits from, for example, a technical skill or a witty personality (which might be seen as virtues insofar as they are useful or agreeable qualities of mind) but to distinguish lasting characteristics from passing whims.

⁹⁶ Hume holds this as a brute empirical fact: “It is needless to push our researches so far as to ask, why we have humanity or a fellow-feeling with others. It is sufficient, that this is experienced to be a principle of human nature.... No man is absolutely indifferent to the happiness and misery of others. The first has a natural tendency to give pleasure; the second, pain.... It is not probable, that these principles can be resolved into principles more simple and universal.” (EPM 5.17n1; SBN 219-20n1).

person's character, as the cause of the action, and the person as the object of the passion; the associated impressions are the pleasure we get from observing those traits (as useful or agreeable) and the pleasure of approval. Only when these relations hold will we get a sentiment of moral approval, so only when we have taken a general point of view, and have the person's *character*, specifically, in our purview as the cause of the action, will these sentiments arise.⁹⁷

Annette Baier highlights another unique feature of moral sentiments, namely that they are passions *about* passions. A moral sentiment, she argues, is “an impersonal passion, felt from a general point of view, directed on passions because of their general effects on persons” (*PS* 135). I note this feature of her account because it is pertinent to the discussion of the next chapter, which focuses on exactly what this requisite object—a character trait—is. The passions play a crucial role in grounding character traits, as already noted, because of the relationship between character and motivation. However, Baier's statement may oversimplify exactly what can give rise to moral sentiments. It is true that some character traits can be manifested as reliable passions in persons; for example, we might note that a generous person is reliably motivated by compassion. However, for reasons I will elaborate in the next chapter, simply equating these objects (character traits) with passions is ontologically problematic. For this reason, though moral sentiments are directed toward traits, and traits are often cashed out in terms of passions, I hesitate to take the claim that moral sentiments are directed at passions as true by definition, although it often is in fact true.

Not only does Hume categorize virtues and vices according to their general effects, but he specifies that their effects on certain people are the morally relevant effects. Hume writes that

⁹⁷ The specific causal connection here leads Donald Livingston to argue for a certain *objectivity* of moral ascriptions “because there is a causal relation between certain features of the object and the sentiment of the perceiver and because the physical and cultural factors that determine the special viewpoint are objective” (Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life* (1984), p.128). While moral ascriptions are still *subjective* in the sense that they depend on felt sentiments, the circumstances that give rise to these sentiments are identifiable and objective.

we judge a person's traits according to the general effects of their traits on those persons within "that narrow circle, in which any person moves, in order to form a judgment of his moral character" (T3.3.3.2 / SBN 602). Part of the motivation for this criterion relates to the need for a standard viewpoint that anyone can adopt: "Now in judging of characters, the only interest or pleasure, which appears the same to every spectator, is that of the person himself, whose character is examin'd; or that of persons, who have a connexion with him" (T3.3.1.30 / SBN 591). That is, looking at his narrow circle is a way of abstracting from our own relations to the person (or lack thereof) and considering all the people who stand in relation to that person. There is a further, more pragmatic motivation that I argue for in Chapter Five, namely that Hume adopts this standard as a way of delimiting the persons to whom we can reasonably be held responsible. However, various factors, I will argue, inform who these persons are, and so some people have larger circles of influence than others. Because the narrow circle is part of the delimitation of the perspective from which we judge, I will turn to a discussion of the general point of view before returning to the role that the narrow circle plays, below.

Moral sentiments require a particular perspective in order to arise. Importantly, the spectator has to regard a person's character from a general point of view, meaning that her approval or disapproval does not depend on her own relations to the person in question. A *moral* sentiment will not arise when I am considering my neighbor from the perspective of my current discomfort as I sit in my living room. I have to remove my biased feelings before I can have a moral sentiment. My own irritation does not entail a moral failure on his part, and I cannot discern the latter while being wrapped up in the former: "'Tis only when a character is consider'd in general, without reference to our particular interest, that it causes such a feeling or sentiment, as denominates it morally good or evil" (T 3.1.2.4 / SBN 471-2). The generality of the required perspective is similar to the proper perspective for aesthetic judgments, as Hume describes in his essay "On the Standard of Taste." Moral sentiments arise when we are

contemplating the goodness or badness of persons' character traits, regardless of our personal advantage. Without this perspective, the passions of approval or disapproval that we have are too biased to be shared by others, and so do not provide stable moral evaluations. Whether these biased sentiments can be properly called moral sentiments at all, or whether only those from the right point of view are properly so called, is a question that will arise in the subsequent discussion of sympathy.

Exactly what function the "general point of view" has in Hume's work, and how it is that we are able to formulate evaluations from this point of view, are widely debated. There is disagreement over whether this entails an ideal observer view, relying on the sentiments an ideal observer *would* have, rather than sentiments we actually do have. Glossop, Harman, and Rawls have read Hume as holding an ideal observer view.⁹⁸ Radcliffe and Sayre-McCord both offer substantive reviews of this debate.⁹⁹ My reading is in line with Sayre-McCord's, for similar motivating reasons; as he puts it, "Hume's is a standard both more human in scope and more accessible in practice than any set by an Ideal Observer. And its very accessibility... is crucial to its playing the distinctive role in practical life that gives point to its introduction and adoption."¹⁰⁰ For reasons Sayre-McCord goes on to elaborate, Hume's use of the general point of view as a standard of judgment is meant to be accessible to the average person, and while it offers us evaluations distinct from our biased, immediately occurring sentiments, it does not require either an idealized complete knowledge or absolutely equal sympathy (which is hard to find defense for in Hume's text) in order to be adopted and used.¹⁰¹ Richard Dees makes a similar

⁹⁸ Glossop, "The Nature of Hume's Ethics" (1967); Harman, "Moral Agent and Impartial Spectator" (1986); Rawls *A Theory of Justice* (1971) pp. 185-88

⁹⁹ Radcliffe "Hume on Motivating Sentiments" (1994), Sayre-McCord "General Point of View" (1994).

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.* p.203

¹⁰¹ See also Sayre-McCord, "Bauhaus Theory" (1995), pp.291-2.

point about the necessary accessibility of the general point of view in terms I will take up in Chapter Four, saying that “Historians, not God, are the model for the spectator.”¹⁰²

A further question that arises within debates about Hume’s general point of view concerns the role of sympathy in helping us to adopt this point of view. Sympathy plays an important role in Hume’s account of how we come to have moral passions. We may not need sympathy to judge the virtue and vice of people near us, but to judge, for example, the virtue or vice of Brutus, which is based on the usefulness and agreeableness of his traits, we need to be able to sympathize, by means of imagination, with those who stood to be benefited or harmed by his traits. Our feelings of approval and disapproval vary based on whether we are near a person, and Hume argues that we must correct for distance to have proper moral sentiments (T3.3.1.16 / SBN 582). We have to take ourselves out of our individual, biased perspectives and adopt a general perspective, but in doing so we must still sympathize with the people who are affected. In order to avoid conflicting moral sentiments from different people, we have to find a perspective from which we can all sympathize, and so share the same moral sentiments.

There are several issues that are debated about Hume’s account of sympathy as it relates to the general point of view. First, there is the question of whether we must actually feel sympathetic sentiments in order to be able to evaluate at all. Hume argues in some places that we correct our natural sentiments based on knowledge of our bias (e.g. T3.3.1.15 / SBN 581-2), which is ambiguous between the claim that we bring ourselves to *feel* something different, and the claim that we make a judgment about what we *would* feel, in a different situation.¹⁰³ If the

¹⁰² Dees (1997), p.49.

¹⁰³ I take the latter reading to be a correlate to ideal observer views, though the two are not mutually entailing. Radcliffe (1994) argues that we typically only evaluate based on what we *would* feel in appropriate circumstances, though she rejects the ideal observer view. A distinct but related question is raised by William Davie, who argues that the process of taking up the general point of view is a matter of custom and habit, rather than a conscious, perhaps cognitive, effort. He attributes the latter view to Baier (1991) and Mackie (1980), and claims this his view is supported by Radcliffe, John P. Wright, “Butler and Hume” (1995) and Marcia Baron, “Morality as a Back-Up System” (1988).

latter is what Hume means, he runs into problems with his claim that morality is more properly felt than judged (T3.1.2.1)—in such cases, we are judging based on hypothetical sentiments and so nothing that is, in fact, felt. The most promising line, on my view, is Rachel Cohon’s argument that these are sentiments that we actually feel, though they are weaker than our more biased sentiments.¹⁰⁴

Second, there is the question of whether sentiments of approbation and disapprobation that we feel from a perspective other than the general point of view, or when we are not properly sympathizing, are moral sentiments that misrepresent their object, or whether proper sympathy is required in order to have moral sentiments at all. Again, I think Cohon plausibly argues that all of these feelings are moral sentiments, but only those felt by sympathy are the appropriate sentiments (the ones that do not cause cognitive or interpersonal conflicts of judgment).¹⁰⁵

There is, finally, a question about the range of those with whom we are expected to be sympathizing, and here we see the further role of the narrow circle. Hume says that we evaluate a person by sympathizing “with the sentiments of those, who have a more particular connexion with him” (T3.3.3.2). This prompts the question, which I take up in Chapter Five: with whom, exactly, are we meant to be sympathizing?

Louis Loeb’s proposal in response to this question is that the sympathetic perspective we must adopt is that of the agent herself, as the only cross-situational stable standpoint from which to judge.¹⁰⁶ He argues that the general point of view is supposed to tell us something about the point of view *from which* we sympathize, rather than the persons *with whom* we sympathize. We must sympathize *from within* a narrow circle, Loeb argues, in order to have an accurate sympathetic viewpoint, and because sympathizing from within as one member of a circle gives

¹⁰⁴ Cohon *Hume’s Morality* (2008b), pp.134-143. Cohon refers to this problem regarding the limits of our natural sympathy as the “variability objection,” but this should not be confused with the variability of virtues I discuss in Chapter Five.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ See Loeb, “Hume’s Moral Sentiments” (2004), “Stability and Justification” 2010.

us a different evaluation than sympathizing as another member of the same circle, Loeb contends that the agent's viewpoint is the only stable perspective from which we can sympathize with the entire narrow circle.¹⁰⁷ This is in contrast to Charlotte Brown, for example, who argues that we assume a generalized, standard narrow circle with whom we sympathize.¹⁰⁸ On this point, I agree with the phrase used by both Christine Korsgaard and Charlotte Brown, that we see someone "through the eyes of" her narrow circle.¹⁰⁹ This implies that there is more than one set of eyes through which we see the effects of a person's character, and so this view must accept potentially conflicting results.

To be clear, my argument in the following chapters is focused on character traits, outlining what they are and the causes and circumstances in which moral sentiments arise in response to them. I am not concerned with the phenomenology of moral sentiments in this dissertation, and so I do not have a lengthy discussion of how we take up the general point of view, epistemically, or how sympathy functions as a means of doing so.

Though my argument in Chapter Five does not take a stand on the issue of how the mechanism of sympathy works, the argument I offer there for the scope and purpose of the narrow circle lends itself naturally, I think, to the view that we sympathize with a variety of perspectives in the process of coming to a stable moral assessment. Nevertheless, my argument focuses on who falls within the scope of the sympathetic perspective (whose benefit and harm

¹⁰⁷ Loeb, "Stability and Justification" (2010), p.229

¹⁰⁸ "From Spectator to Agent" (1994), p.24.

¹⁰⁹ Korsgaard (1999), p.32; Brown, "Hume on Moral Rationalism" (2008), p.236. Korsgaard makes a further argument that character only exists by these means, which I disagree with in Chapter Three. Brown ("From Spectator to Agent") also makes the point that since we are generalizing about a person's typical point of view and so making idealized judgments, we may be seeing through eyes that do not exist. I can see some motivation for this conclusion, since we are often not able to fully account for a person's circle, but the argument I offer in Chapter Five gives us more responsibility, I think, for establishing the circle on a case-by-case basis. While we are still not fully capable of surveying every actual person within an agent's circle, I think Brown is too quick to generalize to a "typical" circle. Her solution is helpful for the special case of virtue in rags, however (see Chapter Five).

are relevant), and the boundaries of the circle as I lay them out are compatible, as I see it, with differing accounts of the mechanism of sympathy.

In Chapter Four, I will argue that there is more to Hume's account of the perspective that gives rise to moral sentiments than simply looking from a general point of view; I claim that, in addition, the spectator must view a person's action and motivation within the context of a narrative. It is only by this means that the object that causes a moral sentiment, a person's character, can be distinguished. The narrative account of moral judgments I give in Chapter Four is not an argument for the general point of view—it is not meant to give a full account of how we abstract from our own biased sentiments, but rather only an argument for how we establish the existence of a character trait. However, insofar as historical narrative helps us refine our moral sentiments by proper sympathy, the argument motivates the non-ideal observer reading of the general point of view; it gives us means of being better able to properly sympathize with the persons in question, and so to have sentiments as we do when, for example, we read an historical account of an event. Given my preference for reading Hume as saying that moral judgments come from an actual ability to sympathize with other persons, constructing a narrative to establish a person's traits also has the effects on sympathy that any "eloquent recital," factual or fictional, has to convert "our cool approbation... into the warmest sentiments of friendship and regard" (EPM 5.43 / SBN 230).¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, arguing for this conclusion is not the goal of Chapter Four; it is only a suggestion for the further import of the argument given there.

Though I agree with Sayre-McCord's response to the ideal observer reading, my argument in Chapter Five notes that without a fuller account of those with whom we are expected to sympathize, and thereby the scope of our judgments, it does not provide all that is required to make moral evaluations. In short, I agree with his account of the function of the

¹¹⁰ See also T2.3.6.7 / SBN 426-7.

general point of view, but note that this by itself does not tell us how to define it (in regard to what distance is appropriately general, for example). One might have a different view of the function of the general point of view and still recognize the significance of its scope as incorporating the interests of those within the narrow circle as I delineate it in Chapter Five.

4. Conclusion

Having retraced Hume's account of the passions generally, and in particular his account of the indirect passions, we are now positioned to see the unique problems that we face in discussing *character* in Hume's moral theory. It is clear, given the above account, that there is something called *character* that we pick out as the object of our moral sentiments. Character is the unique object that gives rise to our moral sentiments. However, to talk about a feature of *persons* as something lasting is a difficult task when we consider Hume's reductionist account of the self as an impermanent, shifting bundle of impressions (T 1.4.6 / SBN 251-63). The challenge for the next chapter, then, is to distinguish the referent of the terms "character" and "character trait." Furthermore, insofar as we are motivated by passions, they are the causes of our actions, and since the notion of lasting character suggests something about reliably produced actions, there must be a connection between character and passions that accounts for their stability as causes of predictable actions.

Once I have argued for what the object of our moral sentiments is, I will examine how we are able to distinguish it. The evidence we have by which to discern character traits are people's actions. However, not every action a person performs tells us something about her character, and often we might misinterpret actions as false indicators of traits that a person does not actually possess, though it may appear that she does. If I falsely attribute a trait to a person, then I may have a moral sentiment of approbation or blame toward her that she does not in fact deserve. The challenge of moral assessment is to distinguish which actions actually do stem from

character traits in a person, in order to be able to assess those traits. Explaining this process of assessment is the task of Chapter Four.

Chapter 3

The Metaphysical Ground of Character Traits

Hume's ethics relies on the notion of a character trait. These traits are lasting features of an individual that function as causes of that person's behavior, and because they are lasting features they are the appropriate object of our moral approval and disapproval. But given Hume's unusual account of the self, and given contemporary arguments¹¹¹ against the idea that the term "character" is meaningful at all, it is important that we understand what Hume meant by "character trait."¹¹² It is not, at first glance, obvious how Hume can assert the existence of these "mental qualities" given his reductionist account of the mind. The aim of this paper is to explain how Hume can account for traits as mental qualities actually possessed by persons in a way that does not violate his account of the mind as merely a constantly changing bundle of impressions and ideas.

Surprisingly, very little has been said to directly address this issue in philosophical literature. John Bricke noted this neglect in 1974¹¹³, but in spite of this recognition, the relative inattention to Hume's view of character has persisted, with few notable exceptions.¹¹⁴ Jane McIntyre's article, "A Humean Account of Character" (1990) and Donald Ainslie's response in his article, "Character Traits and the Humean Approach to Ethics" (2007) give us two insightful and enlightening options for understanding Hume's account.¹¹⁵ These represent, as far as I can

¹¹¹ Harman, "The Nonexistence of Character Traits" (2000), Doris, *Lack of Character* (2002).

¹¹² In some contexts, it is important to note that the term "character" may refer more generally to the whole of a person's "character traits." In this chapter, the focus is on what a character trait is, and I am not concerned with the question of what it is to have a "character" more generally. I use the term "character" therefore, in this context, only to refer to "character traits."

¹¹³ Bricke, "Hume's Conception of Character" (1974)

¹¹⁴ Ainslie himself notes that this aspect of Hume's philosophy is "remarkably underexamined" (80n6).

¹¹⁵ Ainslie also notes Baier (*Progress of Sentiments* (1991 ch.8)) and Dees ("Hume on the Characters of Virtue" (1997)) as exceptions to the general neglect, but both focus on the issue of trait evaluation, which, for reasons to be explained, is preempted by the more primary issue of the possibility of possessing traits at all.

tell, the only two direct attempts to resolve Hume’s ontology of self with his focus on character.¹¹⁶

In this chapter, I will address both of these interpretations, noting their relative merits, with the aim of offering an alternative explanation of the Humean metaphysical basis for “character traits,” one that will capture the merits of these previous accounts and make sense of additional claims Hume makes. While both views highlight important features of Hume’s account of character, each fails to accommodate certain elements of Hume’s view.

A further problem evident in Hume literature—and natural, given Hume’s indirect approach to the issue of character—is that the metaphysical question of what it is to *have* a trait gets combined with the epistemic question of how it is we *identify* that a person has a character trait. As evidenced in both McIntyre’s and Ainslie’s articles, these questions run together quite easily. Here I intend to separate them. In this chapter, I will only be concerned with answering the metaphysical question. On Hume’s view, moral responsibility tracks character traits precisely because, he argues, these are more lasting in a person. For the purposes of a practical moral theory, the epistemic question is more pertinent—what seems most important is that we understand how and when to make trait ascriptions, since these are essential for moral judgment. But in order to accept Hume’s claims that our moral judgments have character traits

¹¹⁶ Susan Purviance has also addressed the issue, but does so with the aim of eschewing any ontological account of traits. She has the explicit goal of separating the metaphysics of the self from Hume’s practical morality (and so arguing that the former is non-essential for the latter, in a Kantian sense of metaphysical claims being utterly beyond our comprehension and so independent of our practical concerns). Instead, she offers a “Fact of Agency View,” which gives real status to self-assertions without accounting for an ontologically distinct referent (Purviance, 1997). I do not discuss her view directly because it is based on a couple of false assumptions about this debate, and so to articulate her argument would take us far afield of the current discussion. In short, she misreads McIntyre’s view and by proxy any ontological account as requiring a “self-identical ‘I’” across time (p.205), which my view does not entail (nor, I think, does McIntyre’s, though it comes closer). My second primary concern with Purviance’s argument is that she assumes character judgments are made about a *whole* character, and so a bundle account cannot support a character judgment (p.208). There is a lot of evidence against this assumption in Hume’s texts, and examples will be discussed in Chapters Four and Five. Hume clearly allows for trait-by-trait judgments of virtue, so this is not a criterion an account of the self needs to accommodate. Since she fails to see room for an ontological account that does not assume a re-identified single, unified self over time, and since she offers a false criterion for an ontological account of self to support character ascription, her argument does not offer reasons to reject the view I offer here. For reasons I will offer, I think we do need some metaphysical account, so Purviance’s explicit initial assumption is untenable.

as their objects, it is essential that we be able to explain what these objects are; without such an explanation, given Hume's reductionist account of the self, we might wonder whether traits are more than an inter-personal quality that supervenes on disparate acts and does not in fact *belong* to the person to whom it is ascribed. Ainslie, for example, argues that the ascription of traits is a process depending in part on the observer (e.g. being called "witty" requires being perceived in a certain way).¹¹⁷ How we answer the epistemological question does not, in my view, depend on how we answer the metaphysical question; this means that the answer I propose to the metaphysical question does not entail a particular answer to the epistemological question. Still, it is primary in the sense that without a satisfactory answer to the metaphysical question, we should wonder about the value of answering the epistemological question if our goal is to interpret Hume's theory as coherent.

I begin this chapter with a review of Hume's disparate and often imprecise claims regarding what character traits are, including the significance of understanding them as causes of action. I will then relate the arguments of McIntyre and Ainslie, noting their respective merits and drawbacks. Specifically, I argue that McIntyre's view makes claims about the metaphysical basis of traits that are incompatible with Hume's view of the self (or mind). Ainslie's view, in response to McIntyre's, defines traits according to how they are recognized, leaving the question of their metaphysical ground unhelpfully, and unnecessarily, ambiguous. In response to these concerns, I offer a different account of the metaphysical ground of traits which, I argue, captures the merits of both views and overcomes their weaknesses.

¹¹⁷ This problem is discussed in section three, below.

1. Hume's Claims About Character Traits

Hume most frequently refers to character traits as “durable principles of the mind” or “mental qualities,” or as qualities of persons more generally.¹¹⁸ These mental qualities can be qualities of “imagination, judgment, memory or disposition” (T2.1.2.5 / SBN 279). These qualities cause us to act in certain ways (T2.3.2.6 / SBN 411), and since there is a causal connection between *motives* and actions (T2.3.1.14-15 / SBN 404-5), there must be a connection between these qualities and a person’s motives. Furthermore, since only passions motivate (T2.3.3 / SBN 413-8), we can surmise that these qualities have some connection to passions; precisely what this connection entails is part of the discussion that follows. These qualities can be possessed by a person even if they are never manifested in action—a person may be generous but never have the opportunity to act generously: “Virtue in rags is still virtue; and the love, which it procures, attends a man into a dungeon or desert [sic], where the virtue can no longer be exerted in action, and is lost to all the world” (T3.3.1.19 / SBN 584). Hence, these qualities are something attributable to and enduring in a person even if they are not exhibited in action. These qualities are also often explained as powers or abilities; virtues, in particular, are classified as such: “these two particulars are to be consider’d as equivalent, with regard to our mental qualities, *virtue* and the power of producing love or pride, *vice* and the power of producing humility or hatred” (T3.3.1.3 / SBN 575). Since there cannot be irreducible causal powers on Hume’s view, this power must be explained in terms of impressions. Hume also says that in certain cases “the ability of such a person to give enjoyment” is itself esteemed, even by those with no hope of receiving that enjoyment; so traits might be understood as certain abilities. Finally, it is worth noting that these qualities are so durable that it appears that Hume believes them to be relatively difficult to change:

¹¹⁸For example, “mental qualities”: T3.3.1.4-5 / SBN 575, T3.3.4.1 / SBN 606-7, T3.3.5.1 / SBN 614; “qualities”: T2.1.7.3 / SBN 295, T2.2.1.4 / SBN 330, T2.2.3.4 / SBN 348/9, T3.3.3.9 / SBN 606

many of those qualities, which all moralists...comprehend under the title of moral virtues, are equally involuntary and necessary, with the qualities of the judgment and imagination.... I might say the same, in some degree, of the others; it being almost impossible for the mind to change its character in any considerable article, or cure itself of a passionate or splenetic temper, when they are natural to it. (T3.3.4.3 / SBN 608)

Hume views many, if not all, traits as relatively stable in a person's nature, and not within his or her control to determine (though there is some reason to think we can make *some* amendment, at least in the arena of *moral* virtue¹¹⁹).

By way of illustration, in order to show the diversity of "qualities" that can be deemed character traits, I will mention several that Hume refers to specifically. He lists many "qualities" that help a person in her personal endeavors, including "*industry, perseverance, patience... vigilance*" (T3.3.4.7 / SBN 610). He also lists qualities that are more familiar to us as virtues, including "*generosity, humanity, compassion, gratitude, friendship, fidelity*" (T3.3.3.3 / SBN 603). He is comfortable referring to both "*natural abilities*" and "*moral virtues*" as "mental qualities" (3.3.4.1 / SBN 606-7). Natural abilities can include wit and eloquence (3.3.4.8 / SBN 611). Even cleanliness, which we might call merely a habit, is invited onto the list (3.3.4.10 / SBN 611). We can conclude, then, that Hume means something fairly general by "quality of mind" and "character trait."

Finally, I want to emphasize the causal role that character is said to play in a person's action. Hume argues that character is the focal point of our moral evaluations because it indicates something lasting in a person. If actions stem from something fleeting, he argues, they do not give us reason to praise or blame the person. As discussed in the Introduction, this

¹¹⁹ E.g. in his essay "The Sceptic" Hume writes:

Let a man propose to himself the model of a character, which he approves: Let him be well acquainted with those particulars, in which his own character deviates from this model: Let him keep a constant watch over himself, and bend his mind, by a continual effort, from the vices, towards the virtues; and I doubt not but, in time, he will find, in his temper, an alteration for the better. (E 1.18.30)

See also T2.2.3.4 / SBN 348-9, T2.3.2.7 / SBN 411-2.

follows from the role that causal assumptions play in Hume's epistemology. Hume argues that motives are the causes of actions (T2.3.1.10-18 / SBN 402-7), and we interpret people's actions as "signs" of their motives (T1.3.13.14 / SBN 151). But since the same action might be produced by different motives, our best means of knowing which motive a certain person is acting on is by knowing that person's character. In our interactions with individuals, we recognize character traits by the repeated conjunction of motives and actions (a person acts in ways that indicate the same motive in several instances). This constant conjunction leads us to believe that this motive is a steady cause of the person's actions and enables us to predict her future actions in ways that are necessary for us to interact with her. If actions "proceed not from some cause in the characters and disposition of the person, who perform'd them, they infix not themselves upon him, and can neither redound to his honour, if good, nor infamy, if evil" (T2.3.2.6 / SBN 411). On Hume's view, moral evaluations are made about *persons*, not actions, which is why he discusses character, as a stable feature of persons, as the focus of our evaluations, insofar as it is seen to be the cause of her actions. Just to further highlight Hume's emphasis on this point, "actions render a person criminal, merely as they are proofs of criminal passions or principles in the mind" (T2.3.2.7 / SBN 411). Their actions can *prove* something about this person's "principles of mind," which tells us that they indicate a fact about the person's mind.

I emphasize this point because understanding character as the *cause* of a person's actions should be distinguished from understanding it as the *object* of our passions. It is the second, on Hume's view, because it is also the first (based on the double relation of impressions and ideas). While many readers of Hume emphasize character as the object of our passions, and so discuss how it is that character is picked out, epistemologically, by our passions, we should not ignore that it is also said to be the cause of a person's morally evaluable actions, just

as gravity is the cause of objects falling.¹²⁰ And how it is that we locate character as the *object* of our passions is distinct from an account of what that object *is*. Recognizing that character is a real feature of a person that functions as the cause of her actions requires that we have some account of what it means to say a person has that feature. Character as the object of passions might follow from a social relation, as in the example of wittiness, but character in this sense need not be something *real* independent of its social appearance. It might be that a person has a character trait only if she is perceived to have it, as Ainslie argues (see below). In order for it to be a *cause* of actions, however, it must be real independent of its being perceived. References to these mental qualities as real features of persons abound in Hume's texts.¹²¹

2. McIntyre's Reading of "Character"

Jane McIntyre¹²² interprets Hume as suggesting that a character trait amounts to a *passion*, the possession of which gives the agent certain *powers*. She likens the explanation to Locke's account of secondary qualities. By this she means that a person has a trait when they have a certain passion (e.g. gratitude), and possessing this passion gives them the power to

120 One might worry that Hume's skepticism about causal relations creates a problem here. Insofar as Hume gives us some definition of what it means to say that a rolling billiard ball "causes" the ball it strikes to move (by which we mean the two are conjoined, and the mind associates the first with the second), we are, he argues, equally able to say that a character *causes* a person's actions. The difficulty in the second case is that we never have a direct impression of a person's character, whereas we do of the rolling billiard ball, and so while there is a constant conjunction of two impressions in the case of the billiard balls, there is only the constant conjunction between an action and an *inferred* motive in the case of human action. However, this seems to be more a problem of other minds than a problem about causation. And insofar as Hume takes it as a fact that we must rely on causal assumptions in spite of their lack of rational justification, we should no more avoid talking about actions having determinate causes than we avoid saying motion of inanimate bodies has determinate causes. Elsewhere (in Chapter Four) I argue that that we can develop a means of recognizing a person's character traits and so identifying them as causes.

¹²¹ My insistence on the reality of traits in persons is not new in Hume scholarship. For example, Terence Penelhum, while not giving an account of character, has noted at different times the point I make here, that character traits are *real* features of individuals independently of their being perceived: "At present, however, it is important to add to the condition that moral judgments, to claim truth, must be based on disinterested appraisal that this appraisal must involve the discernment of real qualities and tendencies in the character appraised" (*Hume* (1975), 149; see also "Hume's Moral Psychology" (2009), 265).

¹²² McIntyre, Jane. "Character: A Humean Account" (1990)

behave in certain ways. This interpretation importantly captures Hume's claim that a person can have a trait that is never manifested. McIntyre recognizes that an account of powers by itself does not metaphysically ground these powers in the agent because of Hume's argument that there are no irreducible causal powers, and so she attributes these powers to the possession of certain passions. The idea of traits as powers makes sense of some of Hume's more unusual claims about traits, such as classifying "wit" as a trait (on this account, a power to produce amusement in others), as well as his claim about virtue in rags (someone could possess a power without ever using it, just as a miser possesses the power to buy things but never does). But McIntyre's response to this further issue, that an account of traits as powers must have a metaphysical basis, is where her account becomes problematic.

McIntyre recognizes the important problem that must be reconciled, namely how it is that a person can have an enduring trait if the self is only a bundle of impressions, as Hume claims. McIntyre's answer is that passions are a type of impression, and in fact a rather enduring type; she argues that character traits are rooted in the enduring passions of an individual, which are in turn constituent parts of that self. She writes, "The passions are mental qualities that cause actions and are more durable than other perceptions. They are, therefore, real components of the Humean self that provide a foundation for the attribution of character to persons that is free from the ontological commitment to a substantial self."¹²³ From this and other things Hume says about the passions, McIntyre argues that passions can endure even when not operating as motivators, that some passions do endure and function as directives for behavior, and furthermore that the *relationships between* various passions which make up an individual's self are themselves formative for the person's character. As I understand this point, it is to say that a person can have various passions, say a passion for nurturing his children and a passion for his creative work; it is the *relationship between* these passions, how they interact, that forms

¹²³ p.200

character. A person may be a self-sacrificing father, or he may be a creative genius who is neglectful of his children, depending not simply on whether he has these passions but on how they interact. McIntyre offers the proposal that “on a Humean view, character is the structured set of relatively stable passions that give rise to a person’s actions.”¹²⁴ So, a person’s mind (or self) is constituted by his impressions, a subset of which are his passions. The structure of his most stable passions (those most lasting, and most influential in his behavior) forms his character.

On McIntyre’s view, each of us has, as part of the bundle that constitutes our minds or selves, several passions that we might call identifying passions—passions that are durable, not quick to change, and likely to direct action. If she is right that Hume’s account is best read in this way, we can make sense of his general skepticism involving changes of character—these passions are more enduring than other impressions—while still allowing for the rarer possibility that people can actually change—these passions are, after all, impressions in the bundle, and nothing about the bundle entails that these passions must persist.

Much of what McIntyre says is extremely helpful in understanding Hume’s view of traits. Her arguments that traits are importantly understood as involving the passions are valuable in pursuing Hume’s meaning, but we must be clear exactly how the traits are connected to passions. Here, her account leaves some space for confusion about what this connection looks like. She mentions the “*identification* of character traits with passions” (my emphasis), but elsewhere suggests that it is a “structured set” of passions that constitutes character.¹²⁵ Her conclusion claims that character traits “are, *for the most part*, passions.”¹²⁶ Importantly, McIntyre also argues that in *describing* a person’s character traits, we must often view passions *in relation to each other*.¹²⁷ For example, it is not the possession of either self-interested or benevolent

¹²⁴ p.201

¹²⁵ *ibid.*

¹²⁶ my emphasis, p.205

¹²⁷ p.201

passions that makes one selfish or benevolent; rather, on McIntyre's reading, the attribution of one trait or the other has to do with the relative balance between these two passions (both of which, it might be argued, we all possess in some degree or another).¹²⁸ This last point is significant for present purposes because it suggests that simply having or not having a passion is not sufficient to determine a person's character. Taken together, these claims leave the reader confused about whether traits are passions or relations between passions (or more ambiguously, "for the most part" passions).

Against McIntyre's initial proposal, there are problems with simply identifying character traits with passions. It is a fact of human psychology that we have multiple and often conflicting passions, some of which we indulge and some we don't. The mere having of a passion does not constitute a character trait. McIntyre's account would tell us that it is only those passions which are enduring in us that are properly called traits, but even here I would argue that this is not sufficient. A person who has been a victim of serious abuse might have great hatred within her, but that fact alone is not grounds to call her a hateful or vindictive person. A person's hatred, when taken in conjunction with other passions, might ground a disposition to actively assist other victims of violence, and so manifest in compassion. The old cliché about "what you do with your anger" applies here. McIntyre's latter proposal, that traits are better explained in terms of the relations of certain passions, has more going for it.

A problem with simply identifying traits as passions also crops up with some of Hume's other claims about virtue and vice. For example, pride is a virtue, on Hume's view, but excessive pride is a vice (T3.3.2.8 / SBN 596-7). Since it does not make sense to say that a passion can be excessive (it could be *strong*, but that is a different claim), the relative viciousness of excessive pride would have to be accounted for by the relation between the passion of pride and the other passions that a person possesses. So one can have the trait of being proud, but whether one is

¹²⁸ p.202

virtuously prideful or viciously so depends on whether one also has another passion, perhaps a passion that grounds public modesty. A person can also be very proud—have a strong passion—without this entailing any excessive pride. This is further reason to see traits as passion complexes, rather than individual passions.

It is important to remember here Hume's claim that a person's character is the *cause* of his or her actions. If a character trait were identical to a passion, this claim would be fully accounted for, since Hume argues that only passions motivate, and so are causes of actions. However, if character traits are better understood as the relationship between passions, do we want to say that this relationship has causal power? Certainly the passions do, but we have reason not to reduce character traits to passions. Maybe if causation is just constant conjunction, then the possession of a set of passions bearing certain relations to each other can be constantly conjoined with certain actions; still, it seems problematic to say that a set of passions *causes* a person to act on one member of that set. In the earlier case of the person who is a nurturing father even at the cost of his creative aspirations, in trying to maintain that the passion to nurture one's children is the causal factor we might say merely its efficacy is determined by its relation to other passions; but then we can no longer say that the trait causes the person's actions, if the trait is understood as the relation (or structured set).

For reasons even McIntyre recognizes, the mere possession of a passion does not entail a trait. Just because I possess the passion of concern for others does not mean I will always act in ways that show concern for others; it also seems required that I not have the passion of selfishness, or at least that I only have it to a lesser degree of strength. To make matters more complicated, we might also think that I had better have a passion of ambition, or at least have it to a greater degree than laziness. Otherwise I may have the trait of being concerned for others only in a trivial way—I feel the concern, but I am never motivated to act on it. So even if the possession of passions is necessary for traits, it is not sufficient. And once we recognize that

virtues and vices require the relations of passions to other passions (the structured set), we run into problems accounting for traits as causes of actions. The passion is, strictly speaking, the cause of the action (as a motivation), but whether or not passion x in a particular circumstance turns out to be the passion by which one is motivated to act depends on whether one possesses passions v and w or passions y and z , and this is not so obviously a causal relation.

Whether we take McIntyre's account as claiming that traits are grounded in sets of passions or individual passions, however, there is a larger problem that still gives concern. By arguing that it is lasting passions, either individually or as sets, which constitute the mind and ground these traits, McIntyre's view stipulates something about Hume's theory of mind that is not obviously compatible with his view. It requires that, though he says the self is just a bundle of impressions which can come and go (though gradually), the particular passions that ground our traits are much less likely to come and go, and so are of a special class of impressions. This seems to give them a certain privileged status in our account of the self that is not obviously warranted. A brief look at Hume's account of the self will make it more clear why this feature of McIntyre's account is a problem.

Hume's description of the mind or self in Book One of the *Treatise* as a bundle of impressions is meant to show that there is nothing permanent that grounds conscious self-identity. Rather, Hume says, we have varying impressions and ideas which resemble each other and come and go on each others' heels: "I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement" (T1.4.6.4 / SBN 252). It is the easy transition between these ideas, as well as the resemblance of some to others, and the resemblance of the whole to a prior whole, that gives us a *sense* of identity. The activity of the human mind, it seems, is the interplay of impressions and ideas, fleeting as they are, in terms of their relations of resemblance and causation:

the true idea of the human mind, is to consider it as a system of different perceptions or different existences, which are link'd together by the relation of cause and effect, and mutually produce, destroy, influence, and modify each other. Our impressions give rise to their correspondent ideas; and these ideas in their turn produce other impressions. One thought chaces [sic] another, and draws after it a third, by which it is expell'd in its turn. (T1.4.6.19 / SBN 261)

These statements do not imply that there are any impressions or ideas more lasting than others. There is no distinction made in these passages between impressions that persist and those that are perpetually being modified, influenced or destroyed.

There are places where it seems Hume might allow for certain passions to remain as lasting impressions in a person. For example, he writes: “A coward, whose fears are easily awakn'd, readily assents to every account of danger he meets with; as a person of a sorrowful and melancholy disposition is very credulous of everything, that nourishes his prevailing passion” (T1.3.10.4 / SBN 120). Norton and Norton note that according to a “widely held theory of Hume’s time, each human... is most under the influence of a single, predominating passion, or character trait” (*Treatise* p.459, editors’ note to above passage). Talk of a “prevailing passion” that is nourished or awakened could be read as talking about a passion that remains, over time, in the person and is roused on certain occasions. McIntyre cites Hume’s discussion of calm and weak passions, where he says some passions may be “instincts originally implanted in our natures, such as benevolence and resentment” (T2.3.3.8 / SBN 417). There are several places where Hume discusses passions as lingering and interacting, which suggests some temporal persistence, and McIntyre notes these also as support for her claim.¹²⁹ Elsewhere, as McIntyre notes, Hume talks about passions as “principles of action” and “inclinations of the soul”:

when a passion has once become a settled principle of action, and is the predominant inclination of the soul, it commonly produces no longer any sensible agitation. As repeated custom and its own force make everything yield to it, it directs the action and conduct without that opposition and emotion,

¹²⁹ e.g. T2.2.2.25-6 / SBN 345-6, T2.2.6.5 / SBN 368, T2.3.4.2 / SBN 420-1

which so naturally attend every momentary guest of passion (T2.3.4.1 / SBN 420)

McIntyre takes Hume's statement here as support of her claim that the passions can persist as constituents of the bundle because it sounds like these passions are stable, persisting causes. While this is one way to read what Hume is saying here, it is not the only way, and reading the text in this way makes it difficult to take seriously his claim that the impressions that constitute the mind are "in a perpetual flux and movement" (T1.4.6.4 / SBN 252), chasing each other and being expelled.

I favor reading these passages in another way. In a passage McIntyre cites as support for her reading, Hume says the relation of the mind to the passions is not like that "of a wind-instrument of music, which in running over all the notes immediately loses the sound after the breath ceases," but instead is more aptly compared to "a string-instrument, where after each stroke the vibrations still retain some sound, which gradually and insensibly decays" (T2.3.9.12 / SBN 440-1). Here Hume contrasts the passions with the imagination, but the analogy certainly doesn't entail that passions last indefinitely in the mind. They just decay more slowly. So while passions are not *immediately* fleeting, we need not read Hume as saying anything more than that passions may last for several moments, or several hours—perhaps even several days—while not implying that they last indefinitely.

I take these passages from Hume to indicate (a) the temporary lastingness of affective agitation (anger doesn't disappear in a moment), and (b) that people have tendencies to act on certain passions repeatedly and reliably. The passages about settled principles of action need not entail any particular metaphysical claims about the self, but rather simply establish a potential consistency of motivation. When we talk about passions being aroused or "awakened," this could be understood to mean merely that we're prone to certain passions, and does not entail that they are lying present in us in a metaphysical sense, waiting to be aroused. As I will show in

section four, this kind of tendency can be explained in another way, where what is “in” us, metaphysically, are the causes that give rise to certain passions, but not the passions themselves. An account that says a person has trait *A* when passion *x* recurs regularly in her as a motivation is a promising means of grounding traits, but what is true about the mind that makes it the case that passion *x* reliably recurs in this person’s mind is a separate question that must be answered. McIntyre’s answer is just that passion *x* sticks around indefinitely in the mind, but I have argued that this cannot be true. My view in section four argues for a different ontological account that explains the recurrence of passions without requiring they (or anything else) inhere in the mind over time. The goal is to explain a disposition to certain passions in a way that doesn’t violate Hume’s metaphysical account of the self. I will give an account of what it means to be prone to, or disposed to, certain passions in a way that is more consistent with Hume’s account of the mind.

McIntyre’s conclusion that some impressions, namely the passions, are more lasting within the bundle of impressions and ideas that constitute the self, is tenuous at best. Since the few passages that she uses as support require inference to be so used, and since in his metaphysical account of the mind or self Hume leaves no room for such enduring impressions, McIntyre’s view does not straightforwardly follow from the text. Judging from Hume’s account of the self above, I think McIntyre’s claims that “passions are mental qualities that cause actions and are more durable than other perceptions,” and hence “real components of the Humean self”¹³⁰ lack significant support. On my proposed reading (outlined in section four), we can accept the role that passions play in character without making this unjustified metaphysical claim.

¹³⁰ p.200

3. Ainslie's Response

In response to McIntyre's argument, Donald Ainslie has offered several criticisms along the way to giving his own account of character traits. Ainslie's primary interest is in the epistemological question of how we ascribe traits to someone, but he makes gestures to the metaphysical question at least insofar as he critiques McIntyre's view. For present purposes, we will focus on the concerns he has about the metaphysical account, and leave aside the epistemological questions. The latter can be answered in ways that are, I believe, amenable to his view, once the metaphysical account has been established.¹³¹

Ainslie's primary concern with McIntyre's metaphysical account is that, in looking at Hume's account of traits, "Not all character traits are passion-complexes."¹³² Hume lists traits such as wit, or patience, that are not obviously passions, and traits such as prudence and credulity, Ainslie notes, entail certain *beliefs* as well as passions. Recognizing that, he argues, we might also claim that generosity and vanity entail beliefs as well as passions. This is an important concern, in addition to the concerns already noted about McIntyre's view, and Ainslie's proposed account goes some way toward answering it, but it fails to give a satisfactory metaphysical ground for traits.

Ainslie's positive account of character appears to reduce the metaphysical to the epistemological. That is, what character traits identifiably *are* reduces to how they are *perceived*. On his view, character traits are the product of interpersonal engagement: "Humean character traits are... the offspring of our affective responses (the indirect passions) to one another as regularized by 'general rules.'"¹³³ A person has a trait if she exhibits behavior toward which people around her have a certain affective response, and if this response is prevalent or strong

¹³¹ Ainslie's epistemological account is in many ways compatible with the narrative account I offer in Chapter 4.

¹³² Ainslie, "Character Traits," p.88

¹³³ *ibid.* p.97

enough that it seems to indicate something deep about her: “someone *is* cheerful or generous if, in her society, the customary passional response to her indicates that these qualities make a difference to who she is.”¹³⁴ This account importantly leaves traits not up to the person to confirm or deny in herself. She may not experience or understand her own actions as indicating a particular trait, but this fact is irrelevant to the question of whether she has the trait: “If, according to the general rules prevalent in a society, a certain pattern of behavior indicates a trait, then someone who manifests the behavior has the trait, and has it in a way that makes him who he is, whether he likes it or not.”¹³⁵ According to Ainslie, traits are socially defined and socially accounted for, based not simply on a person’s actions, but on how her interactions are perceived by those around her. Ainslie says traits are “precipitates from the indirect-passional responses that are common in a society.”¹³⁶ They are, importantly, a *product* of an agent’s action *and* the social reception of that action.¹³⁷ This, he argues, solves the problems about traits such as wit, patience, and credulity because, though any of these have mental sources, what makes them traits is how a person’s behavior is received, whatever the mental source of that behavior.

While this account has promise as a Humean interpretation of how we ascribe traits, it leaves us wanting in regard to a metaphysical account of traits. Ainslie argues that as long as actions have mental sources of some sort, they can be understood to indicate character, even if we do not know what the mental source is:

so long as we take the various actions that are supposed to be manifestations of the trait to have mental sources (they are not mere bodily happenings like the epileptic’s seizures), it does not matter that we cannot pin down exactly which

¹³⁴ *ibid.* p.99

¹³⁵ *ibid.* p.97

¹³⁶ *ibid.* 100

¹³⁷ Ainslie’s view could be supported by Hume’s claim at T3.2.8.8 / SBN 547 that “there is just so much vice or virtue in any character, as every one places in it,” but this passage really only needs to be read as support for his sentimentalism, rather than a claim about any particular person’s possession of a virtue. Hume is saying here that sentiment determines vice and virtue; he need not be read as saying any individual case of the possession of a trait is entirely accounted for by how that particular person is viewed.

passions and beliefs are responsible for them. After all, Hume uses the generic term ‘mental quality’ as a synonym for character trait.¹³⁸

On this view, *something* about a person’s mind grounds her general dispositions, but we needn’t know what it is in order to attribute certain dispositions to her. This account is tempting, particularly given the difficulty that Hume notes in inferring particular mental causes from actions. If this account were satisfactory, it would save us a lot of interpretive work in investigating what in a person’s mind led her to act as she did. But, even if on any particular occasion we need not know what passions or beliefs give rise to a trait, given the impermanence of mental components on Hume’s view, we still want some account of how passions and beliefs can, in principle, manifest in durable traits. And as Ainslie phrases this requirement, there is no suggestion that this mental source be in any way lasting in the person.

This last point might be distinguished in another way. Ainslie’s account of how we attribute traits based on social affective responses gives us an account of character as the *object* of passions (the object to which our approval and disapproval draw attention), but the account of character as the *cause* of actions is only very weakly stated as some mental quality. As an account of character as the object of passions, the notion that character is the product of social affection has support in Hume’s text, in passages such as the following: “The knowledge of these characters is founded on the observation of an uniformity in the actions, that flow from them” (T2.3.1.10 / SBN 403). But this is just a point about our observation of traits, not of what it means to possess a trait. Without a concrete account of how mental qualities can manifest as character traits, the only positive statements we can make about the existence of traits is in regard to traits as the objects of passions. This problem with Ainslie’s view is best highlighted the problem of “virtue in rags.” To simply say that traits have their source in mental qualities, without explaining how this works, and then to delimit our reference to them in terms of how

¹³⁸ *ibid.* 100

they are perceived, is to leave us without a means of explaining virtue in rags. While it may often be the case that traits are socially manifested, and while social affective response is a significant determinant of a person's trait, Hume allows that we can in principle never see a person's traits, and yet she nevertheless deserves praise for them.

As noted earlier, in T3.3.1.19 / SBN 584, Hume claims that "virtue in rags is still virtue," meaning that a person could in fact possess a character trait even if she never has an opportunity to exhibit this trait. A version of this problem can be found in the "Prelude" to George Eliot's *Middlemarch*¹⁸⁹ in her discussion of St. Theresa's virtue:

Many Thesas have been born who found for themselves no epic life wherein there was a constant unfolding of far-resonant action; perhaps only a life of mistakes, the offspring of a certain spiritual grandeur ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity; perhaps a tragic failure which found no sacred poet and sank unwept into oblivion. With dim lights and tangled circumstance they tried to shape their thought and deed in noble agreement; but after all, to common eyes their struggles seemed mere inconsistency and formlessness.... Here and there is born a Saint Theresa, foundress of nothing, whose loving heart-beats and sobs after an unattained goodness tremble off and are dispersed among hindrances, instead of centring in some long-recognizable deed.

Behind Eliot's mourning of these lost Thesas, and Hume's reference to virtue in rags, is the notion that people's unrealized potential, if unrealized merely due to circumstances and not personal failures, is not an insignificant feature of our whole judgment of the person. (Or, we might say that our judgment could be wrong in ways we might never discover.)

If we take Ainslie's account of traits as the product of affective responses to action, then the best account we have of Hume's virtue in rags is a counterfactual account. This person has mental qualities such that if she had certain opportunities, she would act in certain ways that would be perceived as indicating trait x. In usual terms, we might say that she has a trait that would be useful or agreeable in better circumstances. But since traits are the "offspring" of affective responses, according to Ainslie, it could at best counterfactually be said that a person

¹⁸⁹ Eliot (2008), pp.3-4. Thanks to Dick Arneson for reminding me of this wonderful example.

would have trait *x* if she were able to exercise it (but since she is not so able, she does not have that trait). But this is not a particularly satisfying account of what it means for her to possess the trait. Hume says that there is something that is in fact true about this person, in spite of the fact that her actions do not exhibit it, and so independent of social affective responses to her actions. As Terence Penelhum has recently stated this distinction: “Their virtuousness or viciousness consists in their capacity to arouse these sentiments in observers; but these sentiments have not, of course, caused these character traits to be present in the observed agents in the first place.”¹⁴⁰ Reading Hume as saying that character traits are real qualities that cause actions, they must be more than merely the offspring of social sentimental responses.

As it stands, Ainslie’s account leaves us unable to make Hume’s virtue in rags statement; at least, he makes it meaningless in an important practical sense. Eliot’s lost Therasas are mourned because these young women’s “loving heart-beats and sobs after an unattained goodness”—reflecting qualities they in fact have—are never seen. On Ainslie’s view, the social attribution of “inconsistency and formlessness” to these Therasas is in some sense accurate, since this is how they are perceived; and if we wanted say that these attributions were incorrect, it is not clear what grounds we have to say this, given the tools Ainslie offers for trait ascription. If traits are merely the “offspring” of affective responses, then our account of a person’s character is fully circumscribed by how people respond to her. At the very least, if we accept Ainslie’s affection-neutral ontological claim that traits are rooted in some mental qualities, though we don’t know which ones, then we are left without anything to say about virtue in rags—such virtue is *by definition* unknowable about the person. What sense then does it make for Hume to point out the possibility of virtue in rags, if such cases are in principle unidentifiable?

The virtue in rags problem is an extreme case, but there are less extreme cases in which the same problematic consequence results. Compare, for example, Ebenezer Scrooge, who

¹⁴⁰ “Hume’s Moral Psychology” (2009), 257.

saves all his money as a mere miser, with no greater purpose in mind for it, against a man who also saves all his money, refusing to give any away, but does so because he wants to leave an inheritance for his children. Perhaps he never talks about it (he wants it to be a surprise), and at some point late in life, all his money is stolen. He never mentions what he had intended to do with the money because he wants to spare his children the disappointment of what they, too, lost. From the perspective of social affection, there do not seem to be any factors by which we would respond to these two characters any differently, since they manifest the same behavior. Still, they clearly have different traits.

Another problematic consequence of Ainslie's view, which he does not take to be problematic, is that it entails that a person cannot change his character. According to Ainslie, the attribution of a trait (e.g. selfishness) comes from the affective response to his behavior. Since this affective response builds on custom, Ainslie argues, it does not simply go away. The associations we make between a person and his traits are, by definition it seems, understood to hold over the person's whole life: "The associative mechanism involved in character trait ascription always leads to our thinking of the person as having had the trait throughout his lifetime."¹⁴¹ So if a person begins to exhibit behavior that draws a different affective response than his past behavior, all we can say is that we were previously wrong in our attribution of selfishness. Though Hume does suggest that traits are often ingrained and people rarely change, he is not committed to the claim that there is absolutely no change, on principle. In regard to this point about how we as observers view a person, based on his traits or qualities we have inferred from his actions, Hume says, "We can never think of him without reflecting on these qualities; *unless* repentance and a chance of life have produc'd an alteration in that respect" (my emphasis, T2.2.3.4 / SBN 349). Even if we are slow to respond to changes in a person's character, based on the strength of our past associations, this epistemological point about trait

¹⁴¹ Ainslie, p.106

evaluation should not entail a metaphysical point about trait possession. Yet on Ainslie's view, since character is constructed by social response to behavior, the truth of a person's character is limited to how it is socially assessed. On both this point and the virtue in rags point, it seems we cannot say that public assessment is *wrong* about a person's traits, because the traits are constituted by public assessment. While Hume gives a lot of power to perceivers for establishing an agent's virtue, this seems to give away too much.

I see two sources for concern with Ainslie's view. First, it is too vague about what "mental sources" explain the possession of traits. Without *some* indication of how this works generally, we are not able to accept the objective reality of traits as qualities actually possessed by persons. Given Hume's unstable bundle account, we have to have *some* explanation for how a shifting bundle of ideas can produce lasting mental qualities. Second, by defining traits in terms of how we answer the epistemological question (as "offspring" of affective responses), his view cannot account for either Hume's claims about virtue in rags, or his acceptance of the possibility that people can change their character. There are factual claims we might want to make about a person's character that are not captured if we are limited to a definition of character that relies on social assessment for its existence.

4. The Relations of Ideas View

At the risk of sounding overly accommodating, I will argue that both McIntyre and Ainslie are correct in significant ways. With one important change, McIntyre's view will be able to satisfy Ainslie's objections to the metaphysical account. In addition, though this is not the topic of discussion here, I think the view I offer, which I will call the Relations of Ideas View (RI), is quite amenable to Ainslie's more sophisticated answer to the epistemological question of how we recognize traits, and our understanding of character as the object of our passions. It enables us to explain character traits as mental qualities in a proper sense, and so establish their

metaphysical status, while still maintaining his suggestion that on any given occasion, we need not know *which* mental elements are the source of the exhibition of character traits. That is, we can still separate the epistemic question from the metaphysical question, without leaving the latter unanswered.

The main concern I have with McIntyre's account is that it seems to privilege passions as particularly lasting impressions, ones that seem to stick more tightly to the self "bundle" than other impressions. She argues that since passions motivate, and passions are impressions, it seems reasonable to think these motivating impressions are more lasting parts of the composite bundle. But this is not necessary. Rather than claim that these passions are always a part of the person, I will argue that passions arise on certain occasions (in the ways we often speak of them doing), and the reasons that some passions arise more reliably and more strongly, or are more forceful in motivating, *is explained by* the impressions that constitute the self at any given time, though it need not be explained by any particular lasting set of impressions.

In the following discussion, it is important to remember Hume's statements about the mind or self discussed in section two. In particular, I focus on his claim that the self or mind is "a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement" (T1.4.6.4 / SBN 252). I also make important use of his claim that the mind is "a system of different perceptions or different existences, which are link'd together by the relation of cause and effect, and mutually produce, destroy, influence, and modify each other. Our impressions give rise to their correspondent ideas; and these ideas in their turn produce other impressions" (T1.4.6.19 / SBN 261). The processes Hume notes here of how impressions (perceptions) and ideas interact is crucial for understanding how the elements of this bundle give rise to consistent ("characteristic") behaviors.

Earlier I mentioned that McIntyre's arguments about the role of the passions in understanding character traits was important. Here, I return to this issue, explaining the crucial role that they do play in a way that does not entail their persisting existence as impressions that constitute the self. The claim that a person has a predominant passion that is easily awakened, or that a passion can be a settled principle or predominant inclination, can be accommodated by giving an account in which the same passion is produced in a person on different occasions, understanding "same" as referring to the type, not the token. To motivate this reading, I will briefly review how passions arise, generally speaking, on Hume's view. This, coupled with his account of the self, can explain how it is that an individual can be said to possess "mental qualities" that reliably *cause* certain actions.

Passions are affective responses to perceived goods or bads. Hume argues that the will is not determined merely by the greatest immediate good or bad, but rather can be determined in different ways according to calm or violent passions. One way in which passions are aroused is by the presence of objects in our immediate experience. Objects that we encounter evoke affective responses (passions) in us; the strength or vivacity of these passions can be conditioned in part by our individual tendencies: "When any affecting object is presented, it gives the alarm, and excites immediately a degree of its proper passion; especially in persons who are naturally inclin'd to that passion" (T1.3.10.4 / SBN 120). In other words, the object evokes a certain passion, and does so especially strongly or immediately in those prone to such a passion. The first claim is straightforward, but the second needs some explanation. What does it mean for a person to be naturally inclined toward a passion?

Hume contends that people can be prone to acting on either present uneasiness or more long-term concerns. He expands Locke's account of action as based on present uneasiness by noting the various factors that play into how we weigh present uneasiness with future concerns:

Men often counter-act a violent passion in prosecution of their interests and designs: 'Tis 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. (T2.3.3.10 / SBN 418)

At any given time, several passions may be at play in determining our actions, and features of one's current state of mind or one's general character can have varying pull in the final outcome. Not only, then, might a person be inclined toward certain passions, but she might also be inclined toward acting on immediate versus long-term uneasiness (or vice versa). So what might determine a person's propensities to certain passions, or certain sorts of passions?

Objects present to the senses evoke immediate affective responses, but objects not immediately present can also evoke the passions. This works according to a person's beliefs, which are "almost absolutely requisite to the exciting our passions" (T1.3.10.4 / SBN 120).

Beliefs are formed by custom, according to Hume, either by the repeated experience of a causal relation, or by the mere repeated recurrence of an idea:

But let us next suppose, that a mere idea alone, without any of this curious and almost artificial preparation, shou'd frequently make its appearance in the mind, this idea must by degrees acquire a facility and force; and both by its firm hold and easy introduction distinguish itself from any new and unusual idea. (T1.3.9.16 / SBN 116)

This is how education and indoctrination work, according to Hume. By bringing ideas to occur in the mind repeatedly, these ideas come more readily to mind, and more vividly, than other (new or unusual) ideas: "Custom also, or acquaintance facilitates the entrance, and strengthens the conception of any object" (T2.2.4.5 / SBN 353). When a person has these beliefs—ideas that are felt more vividly and strongly than others—they can play a role in her passionate responses:

The effect, then, of belief is to raise up a simple idea to an equality with our impressions, and bestow on it a like influence on the passions. This effect it can only have by making an idea approach an impression in force and vivacity.... Wherever we can make an idea approach the impressions in force and vivacity, it will likewise imitate them in its influence on the mind. (T1.3.10.3 / SBN 119)

If a belief is strong enough, it can influence the passions in the same way that an object actually present to the senses can influence them. This is how Hume accounts for our not being entirely subject to our present passions, and maintaining some reflective control over our passions. In this way, present objects and deep beliefs may compete for our affective responses.

So when Hume says that someone is prone to certain passions, we might account for this in terms of her beliefs. And, her beliefs are accounted for in terms of the impressions she has had in the past and the ideas she retains of those impressions, as well as the relations of these impressions to other ideas, as influenced by her education, habituation, culture, etc. In regard to a person being prone to calm rather than violent passions, a strong belief in the value of reflective decision making might counteract the violence of present passions. Hume's arguments about how passions arise incorporate the force of belief, which in turn is based on these factors. It is also worth noting that for Hume, belief is nothing but the more vivid feeling we have upon reflection on an idea. Now we can return to the discussion of the Humean self, to see how this understanding of the passions helps us locate traits and tendencies in the individual.

In his account of the self, Hume notes the role of memory in constituting the supposed identity of a person across time. On Hume's view, a person's memory is her means to "raise up the images of past perceptions," and since images resemble their objects, the memory of these perceptions resembles the earlier perceptions themselves (T1.4.6.18 / SBN 260). At any given moment, the person retains a memory of a "considerable part" of her past perceptions; that is, she retains images (or ideas) of these past perceptions. The resemblance between this current set of images and a past set (say, from yesterday, or even a few years ago) is what causes her to attribute a relation of identity, and also what disposes us to call her the "same" person. If I could see into another person's mind and "observe that succession of perceptions, which constitutes her mind or thinking principle, and suppose that she always preserves the memory of a considerable part of past perceptions" (ibid.), I would have reason to call this the same person

over time. In other words, the bundle of impressions that currently constitutes *her* is so *like* previous bundles—they share such resemblance—that we overlook the differences and attribute identity.

What this argument tells us is that the impressions and ideas that make up a person are in large part memories—that is, ideas, or copies, of past experiences and impressions. These are not just memories of experiences, but memories of different associations between ideas, developed by custom and education as well. These remembered ideas and impressions can be called to mind by current impressions and ideas because of the associations between them. A present impression calls to mind other ideas related to it, and makes those ideas more vivid: “*when any impression becomes present to us, it not only transports the mind to such ideas as are related to it, but likewise communicates to them a share of its force and vivacity*” (T1.3.8.1 / SBN 98). The relations of ideas, we have already noted, are formed by past experiences, education and habit. Which ideas or beliefs are brought to mind depends on the relations of ideas that constitute the person—which associations she habitually draws between the ideas she has.

In explaining how present impressions can reinforce belief, Hume argues that the present impression must be the cause of the conclusions I draw upon perceiving it. He argues that the present impression *by itself* cannot lead us to any conclusions, for the same reasons that the first experience of a causal sequence does not give us the impression of a cause. The belief that attends the impression, Hume argues, “is produc’d by a number of past impressions and conjunctions” (T1.3.8.10 / SBN 102). Our customary associations between objects resembling the present impression and other ideas inform our belief. Contiguity and resemblance between ideas can convey the thought from one to another as readily as ideas of cause and effect, according to Hume:

when of two objects connected together by any of these relations, one is immediately present to the memory or sense, not only the mind is convey'd to its correlative by means of the associating principle; but likewise conceives it with an additional force and vigour, by the united operation of that principle, and of the present impression. (T1.3.9.2 / SBN 107)

An idea always associated with another idea or impression, or taken to resemble that idea or impression, is brought to mind “with additional force and vigour” when the other idea or impression is called up. One of Hume’s descriptions of belief is simply, “A LIVELY IDEA RELATED TO OR ASSOCIATED WITH A PRESENT IMPRESSION” (T1.3.7.5 / SBN 96), which highlights the significant connection Hume draws between present impressions and associated ideas. The associations we make, which ideas come most vividly to mind, depend on the factors of habit, past experience, and education, as noted earlier.

A particular experience (a present impression) calls to mind ideas that we associate with the object of our present impression, and the habitual association of these ideas plus the present impression make the associated ideas come to mind with more force and vigor. For example, imagine I hear a mother in the supermarket threatening to hit her child. This impression calls up for me the beliefs I have about the wrongness of physical violence, particularly when directed at children, taught to me in my upbringing, and the knowledge that if that parent follows through on her threat, certain people who might be in the store are mandated by law to report the incident. It might also remind me of accounts I have read of children who have been hit by their parents and the suffering they underwent. All of these factors play into my current impression, and I have a strong disapproval. Someone else might witness this event and be reminded of her own experience being hit as a child; she might hardly notice because in her experience this behavior is not out of the ordinary. The significance of the event is different for her than for me, based on the ideas each of us relates to the current impression, and so our passions in response to the situation might be quite different. (Also, it is important to note that most of this probably occurs on a subconscious level—these responses can be quite visceral. Hume is not requiring

that we consciously draw these relations for ourselves.) My first inclination in such a situation might be to indicate my disapproval, or at least to keep an eye out for the child's safety while he is still in my vicinity (though this inclination could be tempered by the socialized trait of keeping my nose out of other people's business). The inclination of the other person I described might not be to act at all, or it might be to simply turn away so as not to be reminded of her own experiences. Our beliefs and associated ideas produce passions in us that direct our actions.

On this account, a trait can be explained as a disposition to act according to certain passions or motivations, and this disposition is explained by the ideas and impressions that constitute my current self, and the relations between them. Having the trait of generosity entails that a person strongly relates features of dire situations with his own ability and duty to give help. A person more exposed to need in his life might be more disposed to act generously in part because he is better at recognizing situations in which generosity would be beneficial, and because the gravity of the need is more familiar and so more strongly felt. The impressions he has on encountering such a situation bear strong relations, in his mind, to many other ideas he has. In calling up these other ideas, he then feels a passion, in the same way that a person, upon seeing a beautiful object and recognizing it belongs to her, is infused with pride (T2.1.2.6 / SBN 279). Insofar as he tends to act on this passion when it is aroused, he can be said to be generous.

The RI view amounts to the following. When a person encounters a particular object or situation, how she acts in that situation depends on which passions motivate her; which passions motivate her depend on which ideas and beliefs are called to mind for her in this situation; and which ideas and beliefs are called to mind depends on the relations of ideas she has, as built upon her past experience, her habits, her education, etc. Hence, the impressions and ideas that constitute the self, and the relations between them, determine a person's actions by way of giving rise to certain passions.

This reading gives a more precise account of the “mental causes” that ground traits than does Ainslie’s view. It also accounts for the source of traits within the bundle of impressions and ideas that constitute the self *without* having to privilege a set of them as more lasting than others, as McIntyre’s view does. This reading makes sense of Hume’s claims that a person can change his character, and that it is quite difficult to do so; on this reading, changing one’s character would require changing one’s ideas and beliefs. In the paragraph noted earlier at T1.4.6.19 / SBN 261, where Hume says that the human mind is a system of perceptions linked together by cause and effect, he goes on to note that a person’s character can change as can his impressions and ideas: “And as the same individual republic may not only change its members, but also its laws and constitutions; in like manner the same person may vary his character and disposition, as well as his impressions and ideas, without losing his identity.” To the extent that our ideas and impressions over time resemble each other, our character is likely to remain largely the same; to the extent that we are able to change our ideas, we may be able to change our character. This leaves open a possibility of moral learning and development, and reformation of character. The further advantages of this reading will be explored in the next section.

5. Advantages of the RI View

The main advantage of this account is that while it defines dispositions in terms of the relations of ideas and impressions that constitute the self, it does not require that any set of these ideas or impressions be ever-present in the self. On one occasion or another, I might recall different memories of my mother teaching me that it was wrong for parents to hit their children, and I need not always recall the same set in order to have this disposition. Once I have had many of these experiences, I might so strongly associate the general ideas that even if I forget many or most of the particular experiences that helped cement this relation in me, I nevertheless have this relation strongly and so can still be said to possess the trait. It can be

described as a mental habit, that when I see this behavior certain ideas come to my mind. The only thing required on this account is what Hume acknowledges, that much of the time a person's bundle of ideas is recognizably similar to the bundle of memories possessed by that person at earlier times. Since a consequence of the association of these ideas is the arousal of certain passions, this view maintains the advantage of McIntyre's account insofar as passions motivate, and can be said to cause actions. It also explains how traits, as mental qualities consisting of beliefs and associations of ideas, *cause* actions, by causing passions. Beliefs and sets of beliefs, combined with current impressions, can be said to cause passions; this is an advantage over the problem noted with McIntyre's view, that sets of passions cannot clearly be said to cause us to act on one member of the set, or cause its motivational efficacy.

This understanding of traits also accounts for Ainslie's worries about certain traits that Hume describes as entailing something about a person's beliefs, such as credulity or generosity. Ainslie argues that these examples cannot be accounted for if traits are identified with passions or relations of passions. But once we understand passions as arising from complex relations of ideas and impressions, which produce beliefs, and how these beliefs in turn give rise to passions, we can account for traits that seem to require the presence of certain beliefs.¹⁴²

This view helps make sense of what Hume calls "strength of mind" as well. Hume discusses strength of mind as a sort of overarching trait—it is the general "prevalence of the calm passions over the violent" (T2.3.3.10 / SBN 418)—and this discussion leads directly to his discussion, noted earlier by McIntyre, of settled principles of action (T2.3.4.1 / SBN 418-9). The attribution implies a certain steadiness of character in the face of excitement. Acting only

¹⁴² Hume talks about credulity in his discussion of belief. He explains this characteristic of certain people as a response to the fact that whereas some effects only indirectly "point out" their causes, human testimony "does it directly, and is to be consider'd as an image as well as an effect" (T1.3.9.12 / SBN 113). We presume people's ideas resemble the facts (much more closely than they often do, Hume notes). Hence we tend to be more rash in our judgments because the impression given upon hearing the testimony is strong, and so can outweigh other beliefs.

on calm passions does not have a direct correlation to virtue—one can imagine virtues such as heroism that might require acting on violent passions. But often times, such a trait is seen as adding stability and regularity to a person’s behavior. McIntyre notes Hume’s discussion of strength of mind: “In the *EPM...*, however, Hume goes further, and says that strength of mind, the ability to resist a present pleasure for a future one, is the result of our calm passions, which act to rank order the objects of our desires (E 239). Here, strength of mind appears as a kind of second order desire” (McIntyre, 201). The reading I have offered can explain strength of mind because of its reliance on custom and habit for grounding traits. When discussing the effects of custom, Hume notes that while becoming accustomed to a certain idea or action increases the facility with which the idea comes to mind, or with which we perform the action, it also has the effect of decreasing the affective response one has to the customary idea or action. For example, if a person becomes more accustomed to danger, his fear is lessened and yet his tendency to act courageously is increased.¹⁴³ The stronger our associations between ideas, the more readily these ideas come to mind. The more readily they come to mind, the less our affective response but the greater our tendency to act on them. Hence, we exhibit a certain steadiness in behavior amidst violent passions.

This view can also accommodate the more unusual behavioral tendencies that Hume classifies as traits, such as cleanliness. A person’s mental associations with clutter, or with keeping a clean house, can produce motivating passions. These associations of ideas are not different in kind than those that ground more traditional traits such as loyalty or generosity. Wit might still be seen as a problematic case, although I think it is plausible to characterize wit as a certain ability to associate disparate ideas with facility in ways that draw out absurdities or ironies.

¹⁴³ This example comes from Butler’s “Analogy of Religion,” in his discussion of active and passive habits (p.194). Hume’s discussion of the effects of custom on the passions cites Butler’s and is a close approximation to the latter’s view. For more on this connection, see John P. Wright, “Butler and Hume on habit and moral character” in *Hume and Hume’s Connexions* (1994).

Even eloquence seems plausibly explainable in terms of a person's wealth of associated ideas and facility in connecting them.

This view maintains the virtue noted earlier of Ainslie's view that a person can be said to have a trait even if she does not recognize the trait in herself. People can have almost instinctual reactions to impressions and ideas that they might not recognize in themselves—Ainslie uses racism as an example—but which can nevertheless be truly said to hold of the person, and be exhibited in her actions.

Finally, this view can accommodate Hume's view about virtue in rags. On this reading, a person may have a set of beliefs and associated ideas that, were a situation to present itself, these associations would produce in her the passion to act in a particular way. The fact that such a situation never arises does not change that she possesses these beliefs and associations of ideas, and so she can still be said to possess the trait, "in rags."

In conclusion, let me emphasize the degree to which the view proposed here is intended to accord with the views expressed by McIntyre and Ainslie. Since the RI view gives an account of the production of passions, all of McIntyre's claims about the causal powers of passions and their relations to traits can still be maintained, without having to posit their metaphysical stability. We are also exempted from concerns about traits as causes since it is clear in Hume that ideas and beliefs can cause passions, and passions cause actions. Ainslie's view, which is directed at the epistemological question of how traits are recognized socially, can, without damage to its conclusions, recognize this RI view as an account of how mental qualities ground these socially recognized traits, and then need not be as skeptical about the metaphysical ground of traits as it appears to be. With this more precise view, we can account for the possibility of virtue in rags, and we can allow for the possibility—and difficulty—of changing one's character (it is as difficult as changing one's beliefs can be!). The RI view is perfectly consistent with Hume's view of the mind or self, and relies solely on his accounts of the association of

impressions and ideas, and of the relationship between belief and passion, to establish relations that can properly be called mental qualities, and can be seen to cause action.

Beyond the plausibility of this account as a reading of Hume, I think it offers independent benefits for our understanding of character traits. Even if we do not agree with Hume's ontology of the self, understanding how beliefs can play a role in causing action, even on a sentimentalist account that requires passion for motivation, allows us to explain our traits in reference to what we have learned from our past experiences, our schooling, and our environment, in combination with any natural tendencies we may have. The way in which belief can influence our actions by giving rise to certain passions based on how we interpret a situation is, I think, an important way of understanding character traits on any account.

Chapter 4

Narrative and History in Hume's Moral Epistemology

In his *History of England*, Hume offers a character judgment of Archbishop Laud of Canterbury, who aimed to temper the Puritan uprising in seventeenth century England by rekindling “high church” tradition, and who enforced compliance by, for example, having his libelists physically branded. Laud was eventually beheaded, in part for accusations that his rituals posed a threat to the true interests of the Protestant church. Reflecting on Laud, Hume writes: “The primate, it is true, conducted this scheme, not with the enlarged sentiments and cool reflection of a legislator, but with the intemperate zeal of a secretary; and by overlooking the circumstances of the times, served rather to inflame that religious fury which he meant to repress” (*History* 5:460). Given this assessment of Laud’s behavior and character, we have every reason to blame him for being intemperate and overzealous and perpetuating dangerous religious fervor. The familiar features of authoritative moral judgments, on Hume’s view—consideration of Laud’s character as it is useful or agreeable to those around him, and calm sentiment from the detached, general point of view—support this inclination. But this is not Hume’s judgment. Hume goes on to explain that we should not hold this as a vice in Laud’s character because “this blemish is more to be regarded as a general imputation on the whole age, than any particular failing of Laud’s; and it is sufficient for his vindication to observe, that his errors were the most excusable of all those which prevailed during that zealous period” (*ibid.*). Hume *vindicates* the archbishop, instead of blaming him. What entitles Hume to this final judgment, if not the sentimental response to Laud’s character, felt from common point of view?

Hume’s epistemology of moral evaluation shares key claims with other sentimentalists, namely that our moral evaluations are based on moral sentiment, as opposed to reason, and that

the decisive sentiments in moral judgments are those sympathies felt from a common, or general, point of view. In his essay “On the Standard of Taste,” Hume describes the characteristics of a person who fully adopts the common point of view, and has achieved the status of a “true judge”: “Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this valuable character; and the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty” (*Essays*, 23). Traditionally, interpreters of Hume have treated the common point of view as the authoritative perspective from which to make moral judgments. While this is obviously a significant element in Hume’s moral epistemology, in this paper I argue that it is not a sufficient condition for moral judgment that we occupy the common point of view. In the case of Archbishop Laud, if we simply take the common point of view—if we are practiced and free of prejudice, etc.—we should perfectly well expect to blame him for his zeal. This and copious other examples in Hume’s *History* indicate that something else is involved in the evaluative process.

While the common point of view is necessary, in order to avoid bias, it is not sufficient to pronounce moral judgment. In this paper, I argue that Hume’s moral epistemology, centered on an account of individuals’ characters, requires what in contemporary terms we can call a narrative structure. That is, our evaluations can only be pronounced when we have considered an action as part of a narrative. Without this additional feature, the standard view of Hume’s moral epistemology is notably incomplete.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ While the present paper is focused on arguing for the narrative structure of moral evaluations, I note for the reader a couple of consequences of this view not taken up here. If my argument holds, then Hume’s moral theory distinguishes him among his fellow sentimentalists. Whereas Hutcheson, Hume’s most often-cited sentimentalist predecessor, argues that the morality of an action can be assessed according to a mathematical equation (taking into account the agent’s motivation and abilities (Hutcheson, *Inquiry* II.iii.xi)), Hume argues that the morality of actions cannot be evaluated if we view an action in isolation. He is, rather, committed to the claim that a proper moral evaluation of any particular action essentially places it in relation to other actions and features of the agent, and the moral significance of the action is derived from the narrative constructed around these relations.

My argument will proceed as follows. I begin by clarifying what I mean by narrative, and then proceed to show how three features of Hume's view indicate that such narrative form is essential to moral evaluation. First, Hume's emphasis on understanding actions in context, coupled with his account of how we interpret actions, indicates that an action can be understood only in relation to other facts and events. Second, his emphatic contention that only *lasting* traits are the objects of moral praise and blame suggests that in identifying the objects of our moral evaluations, we are engaging in a process that connects facts and events over time. Finally, understanding Hume as requiring a narrative for moral evaluation gives us a new perspective from which to interpret his appraisal of the value of history for moral philosophy. Having argued that these features all lead to the conclusion that for Hume, moral evaluation is a narrative process, I end with a discussion of some examples taken from Hume's *History of England* to highlight Hume's use of this narrative evaluative process.

1. What is a Narrative?

Before I argue that Humean moral evaluation requires "narrative," let me explain what I mean by the term. The concept of narrative is often used by contemporary philosophers in theories of personal identity. While the argument here does not presuppose a narrative account of personal identity, it is compatible with and arguably quite amenable to such an account. I will

Another promising upshot of this argument is that it gets Hume out of trouble with some concerns about his "common point of view," such as the concern that it requires an un-sentimentalist rational override of our actual sympathies from an understanding of a counterfactual claim about what we *would* feel from a certain perspective (Cohon, *Hume's Morality* (2008b), 138-43), and the concern that the sympathy Hume requires is psychologically untenable (Taylor, "Virtue and the Evaluation of Character" (2006), 285-7; Cohon (2008b), 131-3). If moral evaluations require a narrative structure, then as we will see they take on a form that results in the proper sympathies in the judge, sympathies that arise from an unbiased perspective and that produce judgments based on sentiment. A narrative structure avoids the concern that our judgments are based on the counterfactual claim of what we *would* feel because they produce the requisite sympathy in us.

remain neutral on the issue of narrative in personal identity, but I will make use of such an account as a way of explaining what I mean by “narrative” in this context.¹⁴⁵

Anthony Rudd gives a clear definition of “narrative” in his case for narrative personal identity, which we can use as a starting point.¹⁴⁶ A narrative connects a succession of events and presents them as in some way related, but not just any recounting of events is a narrative. According to Rudd, not only must events related in a narrative be linked temporally, but they must be linked in an *explanatory* way. He argues that a narrative relates events “in such a way as to make sense of them.”¹⁴⁷ In particular, he says, it makes events “intelligible”, and this intelligibility “also distinguishes a narrative from a description of a merely causal sequence.”¹⁴⁸ Rudd goes on to explain what he means by this intelligibility criterion. According to the narrative theorist, “We can only makes sense of an action as an action if we place it in a context, describing the agent’s intentions, the social and cultural settings which made those intentions intelligible, the past situation to which the intended action was a response, and so forth.”¹⁴⁹ Rudd argues that these contextual elements are what distinguish the actions of a person from mere cause/effect sequences: “You understand my actions when you can see why I did them; what I was doing them for. So a narrative is teleological; it provides reasons, not just (efficient) causes.”¹⁵⁰ By Rudd’s account, then, a narrative is an intelligible relation of events in time which references not only a cause (for Hume, in motivation) but also the social and personal context in which this cause operates.

¹⁴⁵ From a wider scope, I think that Hume’s account of personal identity is intimately bound up with his assumptions about character traits, and that in fact we understand the latter in relation to the former, but for the present argument it is not essential to presuppose this connection. From the wider viewpoint, however, I think a narrative account of personal identity, which would expand on the groundwork given in Chapter Two, is an endpoint arguably well suited to Hume’s theory of self-identity.

¹⁴⁶ Rudd presents his view as an interpretation of Alasdair MacIntyre’s view, and also suggests that it is a generally shared account by those who argue for narrative identity.

¹⁴⁷ Rudd, p.61

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ Rudd, p.62

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*

Rudd goes on to argue that events in a narrative are *only* intelligible in relation to each other. Such events are not, as he puts it, “like pearls on a bit of string”¹⁵¹ which exist distinctly in isolation and are merely put together as a story. Rudd argues that in this theory of narrative, the “point is rather, a kind of holism; events do not exist in their own right, prior to and independently of their narration; and what counts as a distinct event in one narrative may not in another.... We start with narratives and an event can only be understood as a segment cut out of a narrative.”¹⁵² In character evaluation, this translates to the claim that an action, or a single motive behind an action, cannot be understood as meaningful and morally significant without reference to other actions and motives.

The rest of this paper will argue that this kind of narrative is necessary for character evaluation on Hume’s view. The essential features of a narrative that I employ are (1) it is an account of multiple events or actions that ties them together in an explanatory way; (2) individual events or actions do not carry their meaning viewed in isolation from the narrative; and (3) a narrative account of character will refer to social circumstances, personal beliefs and intentions of the agent, and/or other pieces of relevant contextual information that allow us to make the action intelligible. A consequence of this view is that our understanding of events is importantly relational; that is, that the meaning of an event depends on events that precede and follow it. David Velleman has made this point in his accounts of narrative structure, arguing that the meaning of an earlier event depends on the events that follow (64). In arguing that narrative is required for character evaluation, I contend that the moral significance of our actions must be understood relationally.

¹⁵¹ Rudd, p.62

¹⁵² *ibid.*

2. Evidence that Hume's Moral Epistemology Requires Narrative

For Hume, our moral evaluations are character assessments. Our observations of character are indirect, so we rely on inferences from people's behavior. As in many other circumstances, on Hume's view, in character assessments we must infer the cause from the effects; however, this presents a special case in which the usual "constant conjunction" is not sufficient to establish the cause. This is because the same action might be performed from very different motivations. So in the case of inferring the causes of actions, when we could infer one of several causes, we have the task of making an inference to the best explanation. As I will show in what follows, this inference requires reference to a person's circumstances (including her intentions, her social context, etc.) and her past behavior as supporting evidence. More precisely, this inference requires reference to this evidence in a narrative form. The inference to a character trait requires that the action be understood not simply as the effect of a trait in a certain context, but more robustly that it be made meaningful and intelligible in relation to these factors.¹³³

Several features of Hume's view can be seen as evidence for the claim that character assessment requires a narrative form: (1) Understanding the social and personal context in

¹³³ I am not here arguing a metaphysical claim which is more akin to Rudd's and MacIntyre's projects: I do not argue that character is narratively formed, or that traits do not exist outside of a narrative. I only argue that a narrative process is required for our evaluation of traits. Since I make only the latter argument, some standard arguments against a MacIntyrean view do not hold weight against the present argument. For example, the objection that a person does not *have* a character unless he has a narrative of his character, which has been leveled against narrative accounts of identity, is not implied by my view. Williams has objected to the view of narrative identity on the grounds that since the coherence of a narrative requires a picture of the narrative as a whole, conscious narrative plays no role in the shaping of my identity because narrative is only possible afterward (Williams, "Life as Narrative" (2009), pp.311-12). The parallel objection would be that one could not live one's life according to a narrative of having or striving for certain traits because this narrative could only be retrospectively created. Though this objection doesn't hold against my view, it does point to questions about how narratives might change over time, and how an action interpreted according to one narrative now might be re-interpreted according to another later. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss, my view does imply a fair degree of fallibility in our character attributions, and leaves it open that our judgments may change with new information.

which an action is performed is crucial for identifying and evaluating the causes of those actions (the motivations behind them), according to Hume. (2) The object of evaluation is a *lasting* trait, as contrasted with a passing whim; the requirement that we pick out this object which exists across time implies that our evaluation requires an account of events across time. (3) Hume's emphasis on the value of history in relation to moral evaluation, and the way in which he engages history in his writing, indicate the essential role of narrative in moral evaluation. I argue for these three claims as independent indications that some kind of narrative is required, and together they stand as strong evidence for this conclusion. I take up (1) and (2) here, and (3) in Section 3.

2.1 *Identifying motives and interpreting signs*

One feature of Hume's view which suggests that narrative is essential for making moral evaluations is his discussion of what counts as evidence for moral judgments, and how it is obtained. Understanding the type of evidence we have to accumulate makes it clear why narrative is necessary for putting this evidence together to make evaluations.

Hume says that all judgments, including moral judgments, are based on our past experience of conjoined events, and the probability of their future conjunction. In the case of moral judgments, the conjoined events are a motive and an action taken: certain motives lead people to do certain things. Because other peoples' motives are not directly available, we rely on their effects (actions) as evidence of the cause. Hume calls these "signs" (T 1.3.13.14 / SBN 151¹⁵⁴). Hume recognizes that though sometimes motives are clearly indicated by their effects, often they are not, and there are many obfuscating factors in determining a person's motives. For example, Hume says, the difference between "*open* and *conceal'd* violations of the laws of honor" is that for the first, "the sign, from which we infer the blameable action, is single, and

¹⁵⁴ See also T 3.2.1.2 / SBN 477

suffices alone to be the foundation of our reasoning and judgment,” but for the second “the signs are numerous, and decide little or nothing when alone and unaccompany’d with many minute circumstances, which are almost imperceptible” (T 1.3.13.17 / SBN 152). If Betty catches her husband in an overt act of infidelity, the sign is clear. But if her evidence is that Don is often home late, or stays overnight in the city after work, or has fancy dinner receipts in his pockets, or won’t meet her eye in conversation, etc., any one of these by itself is not an obvious sign, but together they point to an affair.

The problem in these kinds of situations is that the force of the ideas is weaker because the association between any one of these actions and the causing motivation is not as immediate in the spectator, and so the judgment is not as strong. If Betty just considers Don’s tardiness, for example, that evidence does not strongly suggest an affair (after all, he has a demanding job, he depends on the train schedule for his commute, etc.). By themselves, these signs don’t individually carry enough force to create a strong idea of their causes in us, since numerous causes could bring about this effect. But considering several behaviors together, in relation to each other, leads to a stronger conclusion about the common cause of Don’s actions.

Our stronger judgments are those made with more, and better, evidence. When we are sure of the cause of something, this is because the effect produces an idea of the cause, and the “force and vivacity” of the idea are strong; this force and vivacity increase by degree, being strongest when “the conjunction is found by experience to be perfectly constant” (T 1.3.13.19 / SBN 153). It follows that the weaker the idea, the weaker our judgment:

But when we have not observ’d a sufficient number of instances, to produce a strong habit; or when these instances are contrary to each other; or when the resemblance is not exact; or the present impression is faint and obscure; or the experience in some measure obliterated from the memory or the connexion dependent on a long chain of objects; or the inference deriv’d from general rules, and yet not conformable to them: In all these cases the evidence diminishes by the diminution of the force and intenseness of the idea. This therefore is the nature of the judgment and probability. (T 1.3.13.19 / SBN 154)

A narrative account of actions takes seemingly disparate, or even contradictory evidence, fills in missing evidence with reasonable conjecture, and provides a unified account. Though a single effect viewed on its own may not create a strong idea, once this evidence is seen in relation to other factors, the resulting ideas are stronger. Once Betty sees that not only is Don staying out late, but that he is often inexplicably absent when she calls his office, he has appeared tired after nights away, she notes his flirtation with his client's wife, etc., the pieces inform each other and constitute a narrative whole in which the individual parts have new meaning.

While Hume is making a point about all judgments in the above passage, it is important to note that he is equally referring to judgments of people's motivating sentiments, and judgments about vices such as violations of honor. He notes later in this discussion of probability and causes that in nature, there are often numerous subtle intervening causes, and that it is the job of the experimenter to reduce variables in order to establish with greater certainty exactly which causal relationships hold. Hume then notes that it is so much harder in moral philosophy, "where there is a much greater complication of circumstances, and where those views and sentiments, which are essential to any action of the mind, are so implicit and obscure, that they often escape our strictest attention, and are not only unaccountable in their causes, but even unknown in their existence" (T1.3.15.11 / SBN 175). (Consider the possibility of Betty's ignorance of Don's upbringing, the lack of intimacy in his childhood home that might play a role in his infidelity—this sentiment might be obscured even from Don's own conscious motivation.) So while making moral judgments involves recognizing the causes of people's behavior, Hume is not idealistic about the difficulty of this endeavor, or the obscurity of the objects we seek. Often motives are multiple and obscure, and we must do some narrative work to uncover them.

Already, we can see that a moral evaluation of any action requires a fair amount of information because determining the motive that lies behind an action is difficult. What is

significant for the present argument is understanding how we gather this information, and what kinds of information are relevant to help us distinguish the causes of people's actions. One type of evidence that Hume clearly relies on comes from understanding the social circumstances in which an action is performed. In order to assess a motive, we must look at an action in relation to facts about a person's society, peer group, etc. and how these facts inform the person's intentions. Motives carry different meanings according to these contextual factors, so making them intelligible requires a narrative that presents them to us in relation to these situational elements.

Appended to *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* is "A Dialogue," which illustrates clearly that Hume believes moral judgments require contextual information. In this dialogue between an unnamed narrator and his friend, Palamedes, the latter relates a fictitious story about a society in which many behaviors that are vicious by modern English standards are virtuous within the society that engages in them. The conclusion that Palamedes and the narrator draw together is directly relevant to the question of the value of narrative, insisting that we must look at an action in relation to other beliefs and actions, in order to have a perspective from which we can make evaluations.

In the "Dialogue" we see Hume arguing that a person's social context imports meaning to a person's actions, and the actions can only be intelligible when considered in relation to this context. Hume's narrator emphasizes that the sensibleness of particular behaviors is necessarily context-dependent: "There are no manners so innocent or reasonable, but may be rendered odious or ridiculous, if measured by a standard unknown to the persons" (EPM "A Dialogue" 19 / SBN 330). This implies that even modern English standards of "reasonable behavior" could be considered abhorrent to someone from another society. What we see here is that whether an action is "reasonable" or "ridiculous" depends on the context in which we view that action. One example Palamedes uses to illustrate his point is the story of Brutus and Caesar,

imagined from within their society. Palamedes tells the narrator a fictional tale about his encounter with Brutus, whom Palamedes disguises with the name Alcheic. Palamedes says that when he asked Alcheic why he assassinated his good friend, “he replied coolly, that he was not then so much at ease in his circumstances as he is at present, and that he had acted, in that particular, by the advice of all his friends” (326). Out of context, this sounds like the reasoning of an insensitive, impulsive pushover, but Palamedes presents the action as reasonable within the circumstances. Making sense of a person’s motives and reasons for acting requires us to account for how that person would perceive his action in his own situation. Only then is the meaning of the motives and reasons, and the action itself, understood.

Our assessment of traits as virtuous or vicious is also dependent on a narrative structure. On Hume’s view, the virtuousness or viciousness of a certain trait depends in many ways on the context in which it is exhibited. The conclusion that Palamedes and the narrator draw is that in order to understand why a certain behavior is accepted in another society, we have to understand it in the context of that society. Regarding Brutus, who by modern standards is a traitor but was beloved in his own day, Palamedes says, “we should make no scruple, according to our sentiments of morals, to denominate Brutus, and Cassius, ungrateful traitors and assassins: though you know, that they are, perhaps, the highest characters of all antiquity” (EPM “A Dialogue” 15 / SBN 328-9). Palamedes and the narrator also discuss ancient Athens, and generalize to note how different this culture is from their own: “an Athenian man of merit might be such a one as with us would pass for incestuous, a parricide, an assassin, an ungrateful perjured traitor, and something else too abominable to be named, not to mention his rusticity and ill-manners” (EPM “A Dialogue” 17 / SBN 329). In response to Palamedes’ descriptions, the narrator corrects the implied judgment of his statement: “Your representation of things is fallacious. You have no indulgence for the manners and customs of different ages. Would you try a Greek or Roman by the common law of England? Hear him defend himself by his own

maxims, and then pronounce” (330). In other words, we need to know the rules and laws of conduct that this person lives by, in his own society, before we can judge his action. And, to reiterate an earlier point, it’s worth noting that the person here should be allowed to “defend himself”, which implies not just that the laws must be known, but that the individual’s understanding of his own behavior within those laws is significant.

Hume reminds his readers that in making these contrasts, he is not judging that some societies fail to see what is truly moral. Rather, he is arguing what kind of behavior is right or wrong cannot be universally judged. Palamedes agrees with his interlocutor, reiterating Hume’s point: “I had no intention of exalting the moderns at the expense of the ancients. I only meant to represent the uncertainty of all these judgments concerning characters; and to convince you, that fashion, vogue, custom, and law, were the chief foundation of all moral determinations” (EPM “A Dialogue” 25 / SBN 333). The primary conclusion of this fictitious conversation is to show that judgments of an action made outside of the context in which it is engaged are inaccurate and uninformative. We can only judge the goodness or badness of a person’s actions from within the social and personal context in which they are performed. To judge an action abstracted from these conditions is misleading and unjust.

In looking at the “Dialogue,” it is also important to keep in mind that Hume is not arguing for the variability of moral values, but just the variability of how these values are understood and expressed in different societies. He makes it clear that even though a certain behavior might be abhorrent by our standards, its acceptance by another society means that it is understood in that society to express a value that we would all share: “the principles upon which men reason in morals are always the same; though the conclusions which they draw are often very different” (EPM “A Dialogue” 36 / SBN 335-6). Hume’s narrator says that as the Rhone and the Rhine flow from the same source, but go in different directions, so traditions in different society can share the same root value, though it may be manifested very differently.

Although in these passages Hume often refers to “manners,” “fashion,” and “customs,” which we might take to be much more variable than moral or immoral actions, it is clear that he means to make a stronger claim. He makes the same points about traits and actions that are clearly virtues and vices:

Sometimes men differ in their judgment about the usefulness of any habit or action: Sometimes also the peculiar circumstances of things render one moral quality more useful than others, and give it a peculiar preference.... Sometimes, too, magnanimity, greatness of mind, disdain of slavery, inflexible rigour and integrity, may better suit the circumstances of one age than those of another, and have a more kindly influence, both on public affairs, and on a man’s own safety and advancement. Our idea of merit, therefore, will also vary a little with these variations. (EPM “A Dialogue” 38-9 / SBN 336-7)

In this passage, one reason for this variability is suggested, namely that a trait might be more beneficial, “both on public and private affairs” in one social circumstance than in another. While our approval is always directed to those traits that are beneficial, which traits meet that criterion depends on societal circumstances. So again, the virtuousness of a trait can only be judged against the background of contextual details. Furthermore, that it might be judged differently in a different context does not attest to any universal judgment about its virtuousness—there is no implication that one context takes priority in this kind of evaluation. Mortal vengeance might be a sign of the virtue of loyalty and honor in one society, or of foolish rage in another; the latter society would recognize the value of loyalty, but not this act as an expression of that value, so our judgments in these cases require a narrative that accounts for how moral values are reflected in the practices of a particular social and cultural environment in order for us to know whether a person is virtuous or vicious. Though judgments of virtue and vice adhere to a single standard—virtues are those traits useful or agreeable to self or others, vices those harmful or disagreeable—which traits manifest this utility or agreeableness depends on social and cultural factors.

I explain in section three why we are entitled to look to Hume’s *History of England* for

examples of moral judgments, but allowing this assumption for the moment gives us numerous examples which bear out the foregoing point, that we cannot abstract a person from his or her circumstances if we seek an accurate picture of his or her character. The example of Archbishop Laud given earlier is one. Another comes in Hume's judgment of John Hambden, a threat to the throne of Charles I, where Hume suggests in a footnote that the confusion of the time does much to temper our judgment of his character (H 5:407n¹⁵⁵). He does the same in discussing Cromwell's refusal of the crown, after successfully defeating Charles: "Most historians are inclined to blame his choice; but he must be allowed the best judge of his own situation. And in such complicated subjects, the alteration of a very minute circumstance, unknown to the spectator, will often be sufficient to cast the balance, and render a determination, which, in itself, may be uneligible, very prudent, or even absolutely necessary to the actor" (H 6:97). Hume readily allows that contingent, contextual factors can, if known, ameliorate our judgment, and may give us pause even if unknown. Our judgments must come from within the context of the motive being judged, a context which includes social expectations, cultural trends, circumstances, and personal intentions.

From the above, we see that Hume clearly holds that evaluations require contextual information. Considering an action, and its cause, in context, we are locating this action within a particular place and time, in relation to particular circumstances of the situation. That is, we are understanding the action or motive *as part of a narrative*. As Hume notes in the first appendix to the EPM, we cannot form judgments without the kind of information that I argue a narrative uniquely provides: "Before we can pretend to form any decision of this kind [regarding moral determinations], every thing must be known and ascertained on the side of the object or action" (EPM App. 1.12 / SBN 291). Circumstance and custom, and the agent's understanding of these factors, are essential considerations in our moral evaluations. Describing an action in reference

¹⁵⁵ text of note DD appears on p.574

to social context—“They killed their child because they lived in a society that only allowed them one child, and their financial security depended on their having a male child,” or, “They killed their child because it was certain that if the child lived, it would be subject to a degrading and tortured life in a Nazi death camp”—presents the action as part of a larger story, which gives new understanding to the single action. The action (for example, killing one’s child) is only meaningful and intelligible—as an act of self-preservation, or an act of mercy—with reference to the circumstances and customs of the time, as well as the intention of the agent. The meaning of the action, which is only found when it is seen as part of a narrative, bears on how harshly we judge the person.

Contextual information is crucial for moral evaluation, but it is also vital that we be able to consider the *relevant* contextual information while weeding out what is irrelevant. “Contextual information” can refer to many things, including what a person had for lunch or what color socks she is wearing, and obviously we don’t need *all* contextual information to make sense of an action. However, in some cases seemingly insignificant pieces of contextual information may be causally influential. If I ask you why Stephanie was so irritable just now, and you tell me it’s because she ate cheese for lunch, I’m going to wonder what kind of causal universe you live in. But if you explain that Stephanie is lactose intolerant, and when she has cheese she gets terrible stomach cramps, then it makes more sense to me why her response was so gruff. The way we are able to know what contextual information is relevant is by constructing a narrative that makes it make sense in relation to other facts about the situation. So simply gathering evidence is not enough—the process of putting this information together, in ways that make sense and are explanatory, requires a narrative.

2.2 Durable traits

Another type of evidence, which Hume relies on even more heavily, if less explicitly, is evidence we gather about the person in question: evidence of her past behavior, her beliefs, and her intentions. Hume is clear that single actions could not, and *should not*, be evaluated independently of facts about the character of the person:

Actions are, by their very Nature, temporary and perishing; and where they proceed not from some *Cause* in the Characters and Disposition of the Person, who perform'd them, they can neither redound to his Honour, if good, nor Infamy, if evil.... as they proceeded from nothing in him, that is durable and constant, and leave nothing of that Nature behind them, 'tis impossible he can, upon their Account, become the Object of Punishment or Vengeance. (EHU 8.29 / SBN 98)

An essential feature of Hume's moral theory is that the object which we judge in our moral evaluations is a person, and only those traits that are lasting in a person are properly praiseworthy or blameworthy. I contend that our only means of recognizing a *lasting* motive or trait in a person is by understanding the indicative action in some kind of context, as part of a narrative.¹⁵⁶

Witnessing a single act of cruelty does not tell us with any certainty why the person performed the action. It could be for any number of reasons—spite, hurt, vengeance, ignorance, etc.—or any combination of these motives. It could also be from a more unusual motive, if the person understands the situation differently. We may hear a story of parents being cruel to their children, but whether this is out of hatred, a lack of compassion, or a misguided understanding of what is good for children, we cannot know immediately. And even if we do know the motive behind such an action, we do not yet know whether the person should be praised or blamed for it, according to Hume, because it may be that this motive arose out of extenuating, unusual circumstances, and the person is not normally so motivated (e.g. the earlier example of parents

¹⁵⁶ See also T 2.2.4.6 / SBN 354, T 3.3.1.4-5 / SBN 575

killing their child to prevent its inevitable torture). For Hume, we are only concerned with lasting motives, for reasons already discussed.

In addition to attributions of praise and blame, this last point reminds us of what we might argue is Hume's more pressing concern in our moral evaluations: our ability to reasonably predict how people will behave in our future exchanges with them. Our expectations of moral behavior, which we rely on in social interaction, depend largely on our knowledge of the people with whom we interact, and this knowledge is put together in narrative form. We can easily see how background knowledge of the person in question—knowledge of his or her past behavior, beliefs, etc.—plays a role in our everyday interactions. We have important knowledge about our friends, gained through our experience with them, and so have clear expectations for how they will behave. We know enough about those close to us to be confident in our expectations of them: "Were a man, whom I know to be honest and opulent, and with whom I live in intimate friendship, to come into my house, where I am surrounded with my servants, I rest assured, that he is not to stab me before he leaves it, in order to rob me of my silver standish" (EHU 8.20 / SBN 91). Hume's assurance here is strong because of his background knowledge of and previous relationship with the individual in question. Of course, we do not have this assurance about a stranger. The difference between inviting a friend or a stranger into your home is not that the former is less capable of a bad act than the latter, but simply that we have no basis for knowing of what the latter is capable. Ask me if I think the person who comes to repair the dishwasher is going to rob me, and I'll say that he probably won't, but I still take precautions when inviting a stranger into the house. Believing that most people do not have sinister motives, I have an expectation that this person is probably trustworthy, but this is a very different, much weaker judgment, than the judgment I make that if I invite friends over, they will surely not rob me. I am confident in the latter judgment. The reason for this, on Hume's view, has to be that the impression is much stronger in the latter

case, since the “force and intensesness of the idea” I have of my friend’s motivation provides stronger evidence for my judgment (T 1.3.13.19 / SBN 154). The intensity of the idea is drawn from its connections to other ideas, which are brought to light in a narrative account of my friend’s character. Having known him to behave honestly on several past occasions, I have a stronger impression of his honest motives.

Recall an important feature of Rudd’s account of narrative, that we can only make sense of an action with reference to the situation, to a person’s intentions, etc. Rudd says that we must understand the reasons for an action, rather than just the causes.¹⁵⁷ This implies that a causally efficacious “motivation” at a given point is a complex and context-informed element of an action. By definition, on the narrative account, an action as the object of evaluation cannot be understood in isolation. Hume says as much when he defines moral evidence as “nothing but a conclusion concerning the actions of men, deriv’d from the consideration of their motives, temper and situation” (T 2.3.1.15 / SBN 404). He says here explicitly that when we make moral evaluations, we only properly understand actions with reference to context. The mere fact that on a particular occasion a person acts out of self-interest cannot, by itself, be understood to indicate that person’s possession of the vice of selfishness. Rather, we have to consider other situations in which this person has appeared to act on this motivation, and we must also consider this person’s perception of the situation (which may be informed by social forces), etc. On Hume’s account of moral evaluation, we must not only be able to identify the motive (the cause) behind an action, but we must also be able to identify it as a lasting motive, something relatively stable in the person in question. Even if we know clearly what the motive of any particular action is, we are not yet in a position to evaluate a person’s virtue. Since evaluation requires more knowledge of the person, this implies that a single action viewed in isolation does not convey

¹⁵⁷ Rudd, p.62

any morally significant meaning; we must be able to view this action in an intelligible relation to other actions, events, or desires over time in order to understand its moral significance.

Again, we also have to recognize that not all of a person's past actions are relevant to understanding a present situation, and a narrative process is a way in which we establish that particular past actions are relevant. As in the example above—that I know my friend will not steal my silver because I have been around him enough to be sure of his honesty—knowledge of or experience with a person's past honesty is important. In addition, narrative can help us understand retrospectively. So accounting for a present action in terms of past actions may also either reinforce the earlier conclusions we drew, or it may push us to reinterpret past actions in light of present ones. The meaning that a person's actions give to each other is crucial for the evaluative process, since by themselves, as we've seen, actions can be so difficult to interpret. If I am trying to understand why a friend lied to her sister, I look for past instances of deceit in her behavior, and I recall times when she could have gotten away with something but told the truth anyway, and at her past interactions with her sister, and I give a narrative account of how these actions inform each other. Without the narrative, I just have a collection of events, not obviously related, and possibly appearing contradictory. In constructing a narrative, however, I may find new significance in her past behavior that I would not have seen for what it was without the present case in view. The explanation of the relation between events, which is what narrative gives us, is what is essential for understanding the current situation.

In Sections 2.1 and 2.2, I have argued that Hume's account of the strength of our judgments in terms of the evidence we have for them applies to trait attribution as well; and evidence of traits requires not only knowledge of human nature and social customs, but also some knowledge of the person in question (specifically, knowledge of how this person has behaved in the past). A narrative account of a particular action is uniquely suited to provide both of these elements. In order to know why people do what they do, generally, and why a particular

person did what she did, specifically, we need some type of narrative, by which I mean an account of her behavior on the present occasion *as it relates to* her past behavior. I cannot understand what she did as an intelligible action without knowing why she did it, and making sense of why she did it requires an account relating her intentions, her social context, etc. Without the evidence that a narrative provides, we cannot make the strong, sure judgments required in evaluating character.

My claim that the strength of our moral judgments depends on our constructing a narrative of the person being evaluated follows from Hume's view that the object of moral evaluation is a lasting trait, in conjunction with his account of moral evidence. In our moral judgments, we rely on the probability that action y is caused by motivation (sentiment) x , but we also consider the probability that person A will act on motivation x . If we have evidence to believe that the latter probability is low, then the fact that she has, or appears to have, acted on x does not suggest a lasting trait. Hume's well-known illustration of this point is that an otherwise obliging person might on occasion give a "peevish answer" which can be explained by his not having yet eaten (EHU 8.15 / SBN 88). Hume's point is that "The most irregular and unexpected resolutions of men may frequently be accounted for by those, who know every particular circumstance of their character and situation" (ibid.). Of course, our mercy in judging these uncharacteristic actions depends on our having knowledge of this person as generally obliging; were we to have only had one correspondence with him, we would likely make a false judgment about his "peevish" character. If we do not know "every particular circumstance" pertaining to this person, we are not likely to dismiss his present peevishness. And the implication is generally, I think, that we should dismiss it, if it comes from such a fleeting motive. It is, after all, a person's more regular resolutions with which our judgments are concerned. For the cases when signs are "open" and we can with moderate certainty distinguish a person's motive for acting, we still do not know whether this motive is something lasting in the

person. Hume is clear that we judge an act to be virtuous or vicious only as it is a sign of traits that are “durable” and “extend over the whole conduct” of a person (T 3.3.1.4). Even in these “open” cases, our judgments are weak without knowledge of the individual. So constructing a narrative that takes the present motive as meaningful in relation to the whole picture, including past motives and patterns of behavior, is essential for making good moral judgments.

3. History in Hume, and Hume’s *History of England*

Understanding character evaluations in terms of narrative structures sheds new light on why Hume saw the study of history as so important for morality. Hume’s six-volume *History of England*, which he wrote after his major philosophical works, does not, despite appearances, represent a major shift in his primary interests. Hume talks about history frequently in his philosophy, and he uses historical examples liberally to illustrate points. He viewed his history as a continued study of the same ideas in moral philosophy that he’d discussed in his theoretical work, now importantly under scrutiny in human history. (This connection between the two threads of Hume’s written work was not always acknowledged, but it is becoming increasingly accepted.¹⁵⁸) In the philosophical literature, scholars are still exploring the value of the *History* in relation to Hume’s philosophy, and how it may give us further insight into the latter. The purpose of this section is to show, by an examination of Hume’s *History* and his philosophical view of history, that the value Hume places in history, due to its ability to give a unifying and explanatory account of a collection of events, is best understood in terms of narrative, as described above. Hume advocates studying history as a means of exercising our moral

¹⁵⁸ Donald Livingston has a good account of philosophers who thought the two were unrelated, including R.G. Collingwood and John Laird (Livingston *Hume’s Philosophy of Common Life* (1984), Chapter 8). In more recent scholarship, much more has been made of the connection between the two strands of thought. See Costelloe, “To Have Lived From the Beginning” (2007); Millgram, *Ethics Done Right* (2005); Siebert, *The Moral Animus of David Hume* (1990); Wertz, *Between Hume’s Philosophy and History* (2000); Wootton, *David Hume: ‘The Historian’* (2009). At this point, I do not take it to be controversial to claim that the two are connected in Hume’s thought.

judgment. I contend that this value comes from the specifically narrative structure of history, which parallels the narrative structure of evaluations that I have argued Hume's view requires. I explain what is entailed by Hume's account of history as inherently narrative, and then I argue that the reasons Hume gives for his claim that history is a tool for moral evaluation are products of its narrative structure. History, because it has this narrative structure, is a useful tool for developing our capacities for moral evaluation. In looking at his *History*, and his claims about studying history, we can see further evidence that our everyday practices of moral evaluation require a narrative structure.¹⁵⁹

3.1 *The narrative structure of history*

History is, first, a collection of facts, but it is not merely that. Hume views history as an inherently narrative endeavor. In the extended version of the third section of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (included in the text until Hume extracted it for the fourth edition¹⁶⁰), he discusses the various forms of narrative compositions. This section of text focuses on the association of ideas, and Hume offers three ways in which we associate ideas: resemblance, contiguity, and causal relations. This central feature of Hume's epistemology holds that these are the only means by which ideas are related to each other, and so our ability to understand new ideas in relation to past ideas is via these means. The function of each of these means of relating ideas is to unify our experience, an essential aspect of Hume's account of human understanding.¹⁶¹ Hume compares historians and epic poets, showing that both make use of these connections in order to maintain unity in their works. The epic poet relies on

¹⁵⁹ Hume discusses history throughout his writing, his primary philosophical texts, his letters and his essay "On the Study of History".

¹⁶⁰ The extraction in the fourth edition seems to have been motivated by fear of digression, rather than a change in Hume's view; see Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life* (1984), pp.135-6. Citations for this piece of text are from *The Philosophical Works of David Hume*, volume 4.

¹⁶¹ Consider his account of why we rely on the ideas of cause and effect, in spite of our lack of a rational justification for them. See also Wertz, *Between Hume's Philosophy and History* (2000) for this value as expressed in Hume's *History*.

resemblance, by which Hume means that all the elements of the narrative must relate to a single topic (e.g. the siege of Athens). The historian, by contrast, relies on contiguity (by selecting a particular location and era), and most importantly causality, by tracing the connection between events over time.

The primary aim of the historian, on Hume's view, is to trace a causal chain of events. Though there are always gaps in the historian's causal story, the fewer gaps there are, the better is the account: "Each link in this chain [the historian] endeavors to touch in his narration; Sometimes unavoidable ignorance renders all his attempts fruitless; Sometimes he supplies by conjecture what is wanting in knowledge; And always, he is sensible that the more unbroken the chain is, which he presents to his readers, the more perfect is his production" (*Works*, 4:27n). Again, the reason for this emphasis is that it creates unity in our understanding—it makes past events *make sense* to us in the larger picture. History is meant to instruct us in the causes of certain events, to help us recognize and potentially avoid them in the future. The historian "sees, that the knowledge of causes is not only the most satisfactory, this relation or connexion being the strongest of all others, but also the most instructive; since it is by this knowledge alone we are enabled to control events and govern futurity" (*ibid.*). So for Hume, a historical narrative is a relation of events that *connects* those events in terms of causal relations. In a review Hume wrote of fellow historian Robert Henry's *History of Great Britain* (1773), he commends the work particularly on the unity of its narration: "By this delicate and well fancied method, the thread of the narration is preserved unbroken, and some degree of unity and order introduced into a portion of the history of Great Britain, which has perplexed the acuteness of our most philosophical and accomplished historians."¹⁶² In other words, Henry has made events make

¹⁶² This review is published in Ernest Campbell Mossner's "Hume as Literary Patron: A Suppressed Review of Robert Henry's *History of Great Britain*, 1773". See Wertz pp. 45-52 for a more detailed discussion of causal relations and the value of unity in Hume's *History*. Also in Wertz's discussion is some commentary about the historian's attempts to fill historical gaps with conjecture. For an interesting

sense, creating unity and order, by his narrative. Tracing the causal relations between events connects those events in a unified story.

More generally, then, a narrative for Hume is an account of different events, facts, behaviors, etc. that *connects* those events through one or another of the three ways we have of connecting ideas. As discussed earlier, a narrative connects its elements in an intelligible way. For Hume, we have the three means of connecting ideas just discussed (resemblance, contiguity and causality). Most of the time, a character narrative will rely on the causal relation, similarly to historical narratives. But though both rely on tracing cause and effect relations, we should note that in order to understand either historical causes of events or behavioral/psychological causes of actions, we need a narrative to pick out for us the relevant historical events or individual actions from the full picture of occurrences, and show us how they inform each other. The historian cannot simply say that the French Revolution was caused by class differences in French society. She has to describe how these differences affected public feeling, what circumstances came together to allow the lower class to successfully fight back, etc. Her task is not simply to relate a series of events in temporal order. She also must describe intervening sentiments and circumstances to *explain* how one event led to another.

3.2 Hume's valuation of history

Hume sees the study of history as a useful tool for refining our moral sensibilities. History, as we will see, provides essential material for making use of the theories we develop in philosophy. In a letter to the Abbé Le Blanc in 1754, shortly after beginning to publish his *History*, Hume writes, "The philosophical Spirit, which I have so much indulg'd in all my Writings, finds here ample Materials to work upon" (HL 12 Sept. 1754). He sees a deep connection between this new endeavor and his past writings, and he portrays this connection as,

account of Hume's techniques in the regard, see Siebert's discussion of Hume's account of the death of Mary, Queen of Scots (Siebert, pp.45-52).

in a way, one between theory and practice. Elsewhere, Hume explicitly notes two primary advantages of studying history: (1) it evokes our unbiased sympathies, and (2) it provides us evidence of human nature.¹⁶³ On these two points, my reading is uncontroversial. Importantly, however, we now see that history can do these things *because* it has a narrative structure. In addition to these two advantages, then, I contend that reading and writing history actually gives us practice in the process of moral evaluations because the narrative structure of history mimics the narrative structure of our everyday moral evaluations.

Hume says that history is good for our moral sensibility because it gives us a unique perspective as evaluators. In our daily lives, we usually occupy an interested perspective on the situations in which we evaluate others' traits as virtuous and vicious: "When a man of business enters into life and action, he is more apt to consider the characters of men, as they have relation to his interest, than as they stand in themselves; and has his judgment warped on every occasion by the violence of his passion" (E 6.7¹⁶⁴). Reading history, by contrast, creates a certain distance in us that allows for a more objective evaluation. Obviously the actions of Caesar or Charles I do not affect me directly, so my sentiments about their behavior are not biased toward my own interest.

Hume is careful to note that this is not a fully disinterested view, either, which he also views as an impediment to clearly discerning virtue and vice. The academic pursuits of the philosopher, Hume argues, are *too* detached; when the philosopher "contemplates characters and manners in his closet, the general abstract view of the objects leaves the mind so cold and unmoved, that the sentiments of nature have no room to play, and he scarce feels the difference between vice and virtue" (E 6.7). History provides the appropriate sentimental stimulus for evaluation: "The writers of history, as well as the readers, are sufficiently interested in the

¹⁶³ This formulation of Hume's view is most clearly expressed in his essay "On the Study of History."

¹⁶⁴ Hume's essay "On the Study of History" was withdrawn from later editions of his essays. It appears as essay six under the withdrawn and unpublished essays in the Liberty Fund edition of the text.

characters and events, to have a lively sentiment of blame or praise: and, at the same time, have no particular interest or concern to pervert their judgment” (ibid.). This point is reiterated in the second *Enquiry*, where Hume says that history is interesting precisely because it excites our sentiments (EPM 5.32 / SBN 223). History evokes sentiments, but not the pernicious, personally biased sentiments of our own experience. And since it is the proper cultivation of our sentiments that Hume says is vital for becoming good evaluators, history is a means uniquely suited to this end.¹⁶⁵

Reading history excites our sentiments, and in so doing helps us refine our sense of vice and virtue. There is an element of Hume’s theory of moral evaluation which suggests practice makes perfect, or nearly so: “the more we habituate ourselves to an accurate scrutiny of morals, the more delicate feeling do we acquire of the most minute distinctions between vice and virtue” (EPM 5.14 / SBN 217). This point about the unique value of history is not widely disputed in current literature, as a couple of examples will show. Donald Siebert reiterates it in the language of scientific experiment: “Hume’s *History* provides a kind of laboratory in which those passions can be isolated and strengthened.”¹⁶⁶ Timothy Costelloe agrees, and proceeds to argue that the value of history in this regard is, at least in part, that developing our moral sense, like reading history, is a *reflective process*.¹⁶⁷ He cites as evidence Hume’s statement that “By our continual

¹⁶⁵ In this regard, we cannot reach a goal of being good moral thinkers merely by philosophical theorizing. This is not just to say that our moral evaluations always apply to real-life situations (hypothetical or actual), but that we cannot even properly learn to make more evaluations without dedicated study outside the confines of moral theory.

“There is no man so young and unexperienced, as not to have formed, from observation, many general and just maxims concerning human affairs and the conduct of life; but it must be confessed, that, when a man comes to put these in practice, he will be extremely liable to error, till time and farther experience both enlarge these maxims, and teach him their proper use and application. In every situation or incident, there are many particular and seemingly minute circumstances, which the man of greatest talents is, at first, apt to overlook, though on them the justness of his conclusions, and consequently the prudence of his conduct, entirely depend.” (EHU 5.5*n* / SBN 45*n*)

¹⁶⁶ Siebert (1990), p.44

¹⁶⁷ Costelloe (2007)

and earnest pursuit of a character, a name, a reputation in the world, we bring our deportment and conduct frequently in review.... This constant habit of surveying ourselves, as it were, in reflection, keeps alive all the sentiments of right and wrong, and begets, in noble natures, a certain reverence for themselves as well as others, which is the surest guardian of every virtue” (EPM 9.10 / SBN 276). History provides us with material for a parallel reflective process, with which we can cultivate our abilities to survey relevant information before making evaluations.

It is clear that Hume sees value in studying history because of its ability to evoke in us the right kind of sympathies for making moral judgments. Sympathy plays an important role in Hume’s moral epistemology, but how it does so is controversial. It seems that sympathy is both requisite for moral evaluation¹⁶⁸ and yet often we must make evaluations in the absence of actual felt sympathy.¹⁶⁹ Historical narrative creates the appropriate sentimental distance, but it also draws us in as philosophical reflection does not. It is able to do this because it is a narrative. Like other narrative compositions such as biography or poetry, history draws on our sympathies by presenting a whole story. But unlike poetry, history and biography rely on fact, rather than imagination, and so the sympathies that they evoke are appropriate to the actual situation and not “enflamed” as they are in poetry (*Works* 4:28*n*). If the narrative structure of history allows it to produce the appropriate sympathies in us, and these sympathies are tempered because they rely on fact rather than imagination, then a narrative structure in moral evaluations might have a similar effect. A consequence of seeing moral evaluations as requiring narratives, then, is that it gets us out of the problem of having to evaluate while completely lacking in sympathy.

In his essay “Of the Study of History,” Hume also argues that history gives us evidence of human nature in volumes we could not collect in our own lives. This supports his main philosophical aim, which is to advance the science of human nature. Without the stories of

¹⁶⁸ See, for example, T 3.2.2.24

¹⁶⁹ See, for example, T 3.3.1.15-18

history, he says, “we should be for ever children in our understanding” (E 6.6). This is because our own experience is limited by the duration of our lives, whereas history “extends our experience to all past ages, and to the most distant nations; making them contribute as much to our improvement in wisdom, as if they had actually lain under our observation” (ibid.). History provides us with a great wealth of information through the experiences of other people, giving us insight into many more situations than we could ever have in a single lifetime. Studying history allows us to build on the experience of the past; “A man acquainted with history may, in some respect, be said to have lived from the beginning of the world, and to have been making continual additions to his stock of knowledge in every century” (ibid.). Hume also makes this point in the first *Enquiry*, arguing that human motivation is relatively constant over time and so studying history is not like studying a different people, but rather it provides us with many more examples of human behavior that can be used in our present lives as evidence of how people act. History gives more evidence for the constant principles of human nature that Hume argues apply across all ages and nations, and the annals of history are like experiments and test cases, from which we can learn:

These records of wars, intrigues, factions, and revolutions, are so many collections of experiments, by which the politician or moral philosopher fixes the principles of his science, in the same manner as the physician or natural philosopher becomes acquainted with the nature of plants, minerals, and other external objects, by the experiments which he forms concerning them. (EHU 8.7 / SBN 83-4)

History gives us a larger quantity of evidence for how people behave, for what motivates us, and what consequences follow. This general evidence of causal relations between motives and actions enables us to make better predictions of people’s behavior.

The evidence history gives us is of the causal connections between motivations and actions, as well as the remote consequences of actions. But, as in moral evaluations, we can only deduce these causes when we have a narrative account of their context and surrounding

circumstances. As we have seen, this kind of evidence is not just lying out in the open. When we are seeking out the causes of actions, we have to consider many surrounding factors. For example, there is not just one cause of the usurpation of the monarchy, nor is there a single chain of causes; rather, there are numerous interrelated causes that together lead to such an event. Perhaps one person brought about the final blow, but many various situational factors had to be in place for Cromwell to achieve what he did. As Hume notes in his excised portion of the first Enquiry, the historian “traces the series of actions according to their natural order, remounts to their secret springs and principles, and delineates their most remote consequences” (W 4:27*n*). In constructing an historical narrative, the historian is doing the work of uncovering the causes of certain actions, their “secret springs and principles.” This point is reminiscent of Hume’s claim about our everyday task of locating the causes of actions, when the causes we seek are “so implicit and obscure, that they often escape our strictest attention” (T1.3.15.11 / SBN 175). So, the point he makes in his essay “On the Study of History”, that history provides us with a wealth of evidence of human nature, is a product of the historian’s narrative, since it is only via narrative that we can understand the inner workings of human nature.

The task of the historian is not simply to catalogue events, but to explain events. For Hume, this is primarily because we can then learn the causal connections between historical circumstances and events. From these historical narratives, we discern patterns in how character traits and circumstances interact to lead to certain actions, and so can learn to infer the former from the latter. We see how ambitious people gain and lose power; we see how wealth and poverty influence behavior, etc. Because her task is explanatory, the historian draws connections between all the events that she relates. Hume says her task is similar to that of the biographer in this regard. The historian and the biographer both require in their stories what Hume calls “a unity of action,” by which he means that each piece of the story connects to the whole. A

consequence of this requirement is that in a good biographical or historical account of an event, every piece of the story carries meaning for the whole story:

even a biographer... would connect the events by showing their mutual dependance [sic] and relation... Nor only in any limited portion of life, a man's actions have a dependance on each other, but also during the whole period of his duration from the cradle to the grave; nor is it possible to strike off one link, however minute, in this regular chain, without affecting the whole series of events which follow. (W 4:27*n*)

To change or remove one part of the story is to change the whole story. This is true of any narrative account, including historical narratives. It is also true in moral evaluation, insofar as the task of moral evaluation is in part to explain *why* a certain action was taken, since it is only the answer to this question that provides us with the object of our evaluation.

The outcome of reading a historical narrative is that we have a new perspective on a whole story, and with the whole thing in front of us we have a new impression of it. Spencer Wertz looks at Hume's view of history from the angle of other theories in the philosophy of history. He aligns Hume's view with the later view of historian Herbert Butterfield, arguing that both hold that moral judgments in history are offered by description, rather than unnecessary pronouncement, and that "moral judgments emerge upon reflecting on the whole narrative."¹⁷⁰ He argues that the task of the historian, on Hume's and similar views, is "to describe all the circumstances and relations known about some event, so that the reader may from the contemplation of the whole, i.e., the event and its context, feel some *new* impression of a passion."¹⁷¹ This is clearly Hume's view: in the first appendix to the EPM, he writes, "Again; attend to Cicero, while he paints the crimes of a Verres or a Catiline; you must acknowledge that the moral turpitude results, in the same manner, from the contemplation of the whole, when presented to a being, whose organs have such a particular structure and formation" (EPM App.

¹⁷⁰ Note, however, that Wertz's argument is limited to moral judgments *within* histories, and he does not extend his argument to any discussion of Hume's view of moral judgments generally (Wertz, *Between Hume's Philosophy and History* (2000), p.68).

¹⁷¹ *ibid.* p.71

1.16 / SBN 292). By understanding an event as it relates to other events—in other words, by understanding that event within a narrative whole—we gain a new view on its meaning, and the passion that immediately results, on Hume’s view, is a better informed, more accurate evaluation.¹⁷² Narrative, as defined above, invokes social circumstances, personal perspectives, and other contextual features relevant to understanding particular actions. On Hume’s view, gathering this information is epistemologically significant for our ability to sympathize, and so to evoke the moral sentiments we use for evaluation.

In summary, history has two primary values for Hume in regard to his science of human nature. First, it engages our sympathies in a way that refines our moral sentiments. Second, it provides a wealth of evidence for human motivation and behavior. History becomes, as Siebert suggests, the “laboratory” for developing and refining our moral sensibility and moral judgments.

The claims that Hume views history as valuable because it provides evidence of human nature and because it creates a proper sympathetic perspective are not controversial. However, its value as a means of practicing and refining moral judgments can be understood in two ways. The usual understanding is more like Siebert’s analogy of a laboratory—it is an environment in which we can practice having the right kind of perspective, and gather evidence that we can apply in everyday life. While I agree that history has this value on Hume’s view, I argue that it gives us practice in another sense as well. Because these features of history are derived from its narrative structure, and because Hume’s view of moral evaluations implies a parallel narrative

¹⁷² We will look at specific examples in the next section, but a general piece of evidence for the importance Hume’s theory accords to information about a person’s past, is the very structure of his *History of England*. Not only does he go beyond what might be seen as the proper grounds of the historian by commenting on the character of the major players in England’s history, but he does so primarily *after* he has finished writing the account of their lives. Typically, throughout these volumes, we see a heading such as, “Death of the king” followed by “His character.” In these sections, Hume offers a final statement on the character of the king, queen, prince, or other public figure in question, based on the narrative he has provided. It is not an insignificant fact that this is a *final* statement. It is, in a way, what we can conclude from each person’s life about his or her character, when all the evidence is in.

structure, I contend that studying or writing history actually gives us practice in the *process* of making moral evaluations. That is, not only does it help us recognize evidence and proper sentiments, but it actually shows us what the process of evaluation looks like. To offer an analogy, it does not just teach us the vocabulary of moral evaluations, but it also teaches us the grammar. That is, in addition to providing evidence of human nature and broadening our sentiments, it also shows us how to put this evidence together in a manner that makes each piece intelligible, and that evokes these sentiments.

4. Character Narrative

The argument I have offered that on Hume's view moral evaluation requires narrative, gives us a new understanding of his moral epistemology; it also gives us a new perspective from which to read his *History of England*. If we look at his *History* as exemplifying the process of moral evaluation, then we can use it to better understand what the process of developing a narrative account of character looks like. In judging individual characters in his *History*, Hume frequently considers factors about a person's past behavior in establishing the attribution of particular traits, as well as considering his or her context in assessing the relative virtue or vice of traits. These repeated examples are clear indications that for Hume, the strongest judgment about an individual's character requires the kind of evidence we have been discussing, as well as a sympathetic perspective, both of which are provided by a narrative. In this section, I draw on examples from Hume's *History of England* to show what a character narrative looks like.

James I came to England from the throne of Scotland, the son of a notorious mother (Mary, Queen of Scots) and in the wake of Elizabeth I. Hume notes the difficult position of James I in establishing himself in this position. Within the first year of his reign, he made a proclamation limiting the right of election to Parliament; Hume notes that this action could be viewed as a new monarch seeking to assert control over the authority of the parliament. Such a

bold proclamation might be taken as an immediate vie for power, but Hume suggests that in this case it ought not be so viewed. On his view, such a move would suggest “Most alarming circumstances, had there not been reason to believe, that this measure, being entered into so early in the king’s reign proceed more from precipitation and mistake, than from any serious design of invading the privileges of parliament” (H 5:16). Taking the proclamation in itself, it might be a sign of an ambitious new monarch. But Hume cautions his reader with other information about James’ character in a footnote, noting that the man held the maxim that “no prince in his first year of his reign should begin any considerable undertaking” and that his “cautious, not to say timid character” was well suited to live up to this maxim. Furthermore, Hume notes, the fact that his character was known to be such, combined with the action taken, indicates a mistake rather than malice: “The facility, with which he departed from this pretension, is another proof, that his meaning was innocent” (ibid, footnote *d*). In short, given what was known about James, the fact that he made this bold move is best taken as foolish and naïve, and the fact that it was taken so easily only further speaks to its not being a grab for power. But such an interpretation cannot be read simply from the act taken, or what we know about the general motivation for such actions. It requires the insight we get from a narrative of James’ attitude toward government and other known features of his character.

After recounting his death, Hume gives James I’s character a mixed review. Though not on the whole negative, Hume’s analysis emphasizes that though James’ “intentions were just,” he was not particularly suited for his public role (H 5:21-2). Hume lists many virtues which James possessed and describes their tendency to exceed their proper strength. Of note in particular are Hume’s attributions that James’ “generosity bordered on profusion” and “his friendship on light fancy and boyish fondness” (H 5:121). Hume is able to make these attributions of traits because of the narrative he has provided regarding James’ life, as shown with the following example.

In relaying James' life as king, Hume spends significant time noting his rather arbitrary and blind affections for young men whom he sought to groom for greatness. Hume is clear in his descriptions of these scenarios that James was rather subject to his fancy and blind to reality, on many occasions. One such protégé, Robert Carre, was appointed Viscount of Rochester and later Earl of Somerset; Carre fell in love with the wife of the Earl of Essex, precipitated their divorce, and married her himself. James had consulted Sir Thomas Overbury, a confidante to the king and mentor to Carre, when he first heard of this plot, and Overbury strongly discouraged the maneuvers. Once married and appointed Earl, Carre and his new wife exacted revenge on Overbury for his disloyalty and arranged his murder in the Tower of London. Eventually the truth came to light, and Carre and his wife were held responsible for their acts. James pardoned them, however, and was frowned on for doing so, but Hume offers a moderated review:

Several historians, in relating these events, have insisted much on the dissimulation of James's behaviour, when he delivered Somerset into the hands of the chief justice; on the insolent menaces of that criminal; on his peremptory refusal to stand a trial; and on the extreme anxiety of the king during the whole progress of this affair. Allowing all these circumstances to be true, of which some are suspicious, if not palpably false, the great remains of tenderness, which James still felt for Somerset, may, perhaps, be sufficient to account for them.... At least, the unreserved confidence, in which the king had indulged his favourite for several years, might render Somerset master of so many secrets, that it is impossible, without farther light, to assign the particular reason of that superiority, which, it is said, he appeared so much to assume." (H 5:63)

In this situation, we see Hume putting himself, as best as possible, in the mindset of those involved, to mediate the harsh blame they received. He looks not only at social circumstances, but at how the actors may have been thinking about their own situations. Nevertheless, as noted above, Hume's final view of James recognizes that though this king was generous, especially in friendship, he lacked judgment and proper selectivity in bestowing his affections. The scenario with Carre is just one example that Hume uses in recounting James' life that eventually enables him to make the final judgment of his character. Without his narrative, Hume's attributions of

mitigated virtues to James would be unfounded in the mind of the reader; having read these stories, however, Hume's account is clear and justified. Knowing the details of James' life, of his blind but true affections in such cases, we are now inclined to agree with Hume's assessment and acknowledge both James' good intentions and his failures.

Another interesting and lengthy example in Hume's *History* that illustrates the value of narrative in making character judgments is his account of Oliver Cromwell. Cromwell first appears in the fifth volume of the history (Chapter LVII and following), in the civil war and events leading up to the death of Charles I. However, in the second chapter of the sixth volume (Chapter LXI) Hume takes pause to recount "Cromwel's birth and private life."¹⁷³ In preparation for his account of Cromwell's tenure as Protector of England, Hume takes time to tell his reader about the man's personal history, and does so clearly with an eye to this history being relevant to our assessment of his character. Hume tells us that Cromwell, as a young man, was a drinker and a gambler and led a "dissolute and disorderly" life until one day, "All of a sudden the spirit of reformation seized him," after which he married, "affected a grave and composed behaviour," settled his debts and became a member of the puritanical party (H 6:55-6). The story appears to account for a major change in Cromwell, but Hume describes these events as suggestive of something consistent in Cromwell's behavior, telling his reader that "[t]he same vehemence of temper, which had transported him into the extremes of pleasure, now distinguished his religious habits" (H 6:56). In this early narrative, Hume is establishing a pattern of behavior that suggests zeal and impulsiveness, traits that come back to bear on our final analysis of Cromwell. Hume notes also a country land development project in Cromwell's neighborhood, to which Cromwell was opposed. The commissioner who contracted the work met with Cromwell's opposition, and Hume tells us "this was the first public opportunity, which he had met with, of discovering the factious zeal and obstinacy of his character" (H 6:56). The event itself is

¹⁷³ Hume spells Cromwell's name with one "l" consistently.

irrelevant to Cromwell's political career, but it is clear that Hume is providing this narrative of Cromwell's pre-political life to give us evidence of certain character traits in the future Protector.

In his full account of Cromwell's tenure over the course of this chapter, Hume repeatedly notes the man's impulsiveness and zeal, with mixed review. At one point, Hume suggests that though Cromwell's decision to dissolve Parliament was unwise, that at least when he made his mind up he could make it happen: "no man's actions were ever, in such a variety of difficult incidents, more decisive and judicious" (H 6:72). Rather than make a caricature of Cromwell as an impulsive fool, Hume recognizes that in certain circumstances the trait worked in his favor. He makes a similar point in describing the seafaring missions Cromwell sent out into the Mediterranean, and the aggressiveness of his posturing in foreign affairs: "The conduct of the protector in foreign affairs, though imprudent and impolitic, was full of vigour and enterprise," and ultimately it was good for the pride and reputation of his country (H 6:85). Here, his brashness in foreign affairs served a certain purpose (though note that Hume still considered it "impolitic"). Hume's consistent evaluations of Cromwell's behavior suggest both disapproval of his conduct and recognition of its relative merits.

Hume's final assessment of Cromwell's character is as mixed as his particular notations of the man's actions. Having provided us this narrative not only of Cromwell's political career, including his judicious domestic policy which stood in contrast to his foreign policy (H 6:85), but also his early years, and his behavior with friends, colleagues, and family, Hume has provided his reader with ample evidence to accede to his conclusions. Within this narrative, Hume has also given the reader a sense of the fanatical religious climate in which Cromwell lived and worked. Hume recognizes the effect of the context in which Cromwell lived on our assessment of his actions:

Amidst the passions and prejudices of that period, that he should prefer the parliamentary to the royal cause, will not appear extraordinary.... The murder of the king, the most atrocious of all his actions, was to him covered under a

mighty cloud of republican and fanatical illusions; and it is not impossible, but he might believe it, as many others did, the most meritorious action, that he could perform. His subsequent usurpation was the effect of necessity... nor is it easy to see, how the various factions could at that time have been restrained, without a mixture of military and arbitrary authority. (H 6:109-10)

In spite of his clear disapproval of much of Cromwell's character, Hume is exceedingly sympathetic in his final account. He leaves his reader with a mixed review of the man, arguing that, in spite of the horrible accounts often given of his character, "If we survey the moral character of Cromwel with that indulgence, which is due to the blindness and infirmities of the human species, we shall not be inclined to load his memory with such violent reproaches" (H 6:109). He notes that Cromwell's character combined "such violent ambition and such enraged fanaticism" with "much regard to justice and humanity," and that in spite of his questionable public behavior, in his private life he "does not rather merit praise" (H 6:110). What Hume has done in his assessment of Cromwell is removed it from the biased perspective that many use to view him, and by providing a narrative of the man's life and conduct in seemingly insignificant detail, has given his reader a picture of Cromwell's character as a whole. From this, we can assess his virtues and vices in relation to his circumstances, and we can recognize their relative persistence in his character.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that Hume's *History of England*, and his view of the study of history, provide us with important evidence about the process of moral evaluation. Specifically, I have shown that the narrative structure which makes history so important in Hume's view has a parallel function in contemporary moral judgments. As examples from the *History* show, Hume constructs narratives for the people whose characters he wants to assess, and by doing so gives his readers evidence of traits and brings them to sympathize with both actors and bystanders. Since these are examples of historical figures, we are clearly in an ideal

position to assess their characters because we can construct a narrative of their lives as complete wholes. Certainly we cannot construct such complete narratives of our contemporaries, nor in many cases can we even come close. To forestall confusion, I am not suggesting that a character evaluation cannot properly be made without a *complete* narrative; rather, I argue that for Hume, the more complete a narrative we can construct, the more confidence we have in our judgments. Even in cases in which we can construct only the barest of narratives—if we can call on two previous encounters with a person—we are still in a much better position to evaluate her character than if we have no narrative at all, because we can draw connections between her current actions and her past actions and motivations. Without any narrative, we can merely guess based on our general knowledge of human nature, but we cannot conclusively make a judgment about the traits of the individual in question. Sometimes, too, as in the case of James I, “it is impossible, without farther light, to assign the particular reason”—sometimes we may have to withhold judgment. Taking this lesson from Hume’s *History*, we can better understand the complexity of his moral theory.

The claim that we often lack important information for making moral judgments about people’s actions is not unique to Hume. Kant, for example, admits the same in the *Groundwork*. For Kant, as for Hume, whether or not an action is virtuous depends on the motive from which the action arose, and Kant, like Hume, acknowledges the difficulty in discerning the motives of others, and even of ourselves (4:407). On any given occasion, there may be a multiplicity of subtle causes in play, and we are just unable to know, clearly, what motivated a person to act in a certain way. What is different about Hume’s account is the unique value placed on *narrative* in explaining how we can gather more information to help us make these judgments. Making moral evaluations is a difficult practice, often obfuscated by factors we do not immediately recognize, and it requires a process of reflection and comparison

to reach a conclusion that makes sense of the present in terms of the past and is a judgment we can confidently assert.

Recognizing this narrative element in Hume's accounts of character is important for our appreciation of his moral epistemology. We see now that the perspective from which we make moral evaluations, while it still must be practiced, "perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice," must also have in its purview an account of actions and motives as elements of a narrative whole. It is only from the point of view that a narrative gives us that we can understand the moral significance of actions.

Chapter 5

The Variability of Virtues

Hume's moral theory has the primary marker of a virtue theory: moral evaluations track a person's character traits, and are not determined by the obligatoriness or permissibility, or rightness or wrongness of actions. Actions are not judged in isolation but rather as signs of virtues or vices in a person, and people are praised or blamed for their actions to the extent that their actions indicate virtuous or vicious character traits. Hume's conception of character traits and his definition of virtue and vice in terms of the effects of traits on individuals and society, however, lead to an unusual account of what it is to be virtuous, and this places him at odds with most mainstream virtue ethics. Having established what it is to have a trait, on Hume's view, what the process is for identifying these traits, and the preliminaries of how we go about evaluating them, we can now consider his unorthodox answer to the question of what traits are virtuous.

In what follows, I will argue that Hume's theory entails a significant amount of variability of virtue, in regard to what one's society holds as virtuous, to an individual's position within that society, and even to particular facts about the individual in question. By the phrase "variability of virtue," I mean that on Hume's account, the traits seen as virtuous in one person may be judged otherwise in a different person, depending on different factors. A virtue in one person might even be a vice in someone else, so it is not the mere having of the particular trait that makes a person virtuous.¹⁷⁴ Furthermore, the same trait in the same person may be virtuous in some situations but not in others. Entailed by this interpretation is a rejection of the view that there is a single description of what it is to be virtuous that we all can hold as a common standard.

¹⁷⁴ To be clear, the phrase does not refer to the "variability objection" that Cohon discusses (Cohon, p.131), which is a problem about the variability of our sentiment of sympathy. (See Chapter Two, n102.

In place of a universal account of the virtues, I argue that on Hume's view there is a single account of how to determine what is virtuous, to which we subject all our assessments. There is a uniform standard for evaluation, but the results of evaluation differ based on the various factors noted above. As I argued in the previous chapter, judgment of individuals' virtues requires knowledge of his or her situation and circumstances. This chapter elaborates on a further dimension of why that knowledge is so significant for our moral evaluations. Advantages of this view include its allowance for our commonplace differences in expectations of different people (e.g. of the higher standard of personal merit for political figures), as well as its consideration of persons as inextricably acting within contexts of society and personal expectations, so that their characters are judged not in an abstract, impersonal and non-contextual way, but as human beings in specific situations.

There are several ways in which this variability of virtue comes out of Hume's theory, all of which will be discussed at greater length in the body of this chapter. For one, Hume offers a disjunctive account of virtuous traits, naming them as those traits that are useful or agreeable to oneself or others. A consequence of this disjunctive definition is that a trait might meet one criterion and violate another, and so Hume is faced with an account that allows the same trait to be both virtuous and vicious, for different reasons, in different contexts. Another piece of evidence in Hume's theory that the virtues are variable is the scope he suggests we use to determine virtue, in reference to the relations a person bears to others; since different people bear different relations to other people, a trait can be a virtue in one person, given her relations, and a vice in another according to a different set of relations. Finally, Hume suggests that traits can be virtuous or vicious depending on other traits a person has—that clusters of traits inform the determination of one as virtuous or vicious. This follows from his criteria of usefulness and agreeableness given above, since certain traits can interact in ways that make them more or less useful or agreeable than they are on their own. For all these reasons, which we will consider in

detail, Hume's account of virtue must allow for significant variance. These degrees of variance are further support for the argument in the previous chapter that knowledge of the individual and her circumstances are vital for the accuracy of our assessment of her traits.

The beginnings of this argument are well recognized in the Hume literature. The basic claim that on Hume's view, certain virtues can conflict, and that there is no single account of what it is to be a virtuous person in the form of a list of traits that such a person has, is not new. The conflict between "goodness" and "greatness" of character, in Hume, has been discussed at length in this regard.¹⁷⁵ Hume argues in the *Treatise* that both Caesar and Cato are virtuous, but each "in a different way" (T3.3.4.2); whereas one is *good* and has the virtues you'd want in a friend, the other is *great* and has the virtues you'd want in yourself. These are presented as two distinct and not fully compatible ways of having virtuous character. Another topic of widespread debate is the significance of Hume's reference to the "narrow circle" of a person's influence when evaluating virtue.¹⁷⁶ However, the upshot of these commitments for Hume's account of virtue still awaits a thorough treatment, and that is my aim in this chapter. I will show that the degrees of variability are more complex than has been acknowledged, and that Hume's reference to a sphere of influence is more significant than has yet been noted in our determinations of virtuous traits.

The chapter will proceed as follows. The first section situates Hume's view as an unorthodox virtue ethic, differing from common virtue ethics in ways that contribute to the variability conclusion. Section two addresses Hume's account of the "narrow circle" as the proper scope for judging merit, and how this informs our understanding of the variability of the virtues. Section three will address textual obstacles to reading this variability into Hume's

¹⁷⁵ See, for example, Baier, *Progress of Sentiments* (1991), pp.212-15; Dees, "Hume on the Characters of Virtue" (1997), p.51; Abramson, "Two Portraits" (2002).

¹⁷⁶ See, for example, Baier, "How Wide...?" (2006); Brown, "From Spectator to Agent" (1994); Kelly, "Stability and Partiality" (2004); Loeb, "Stability and Justification" (2004); Sayre-McCord, "Hume's 'General Point of View'" (1994).

account, addressing the fact that he does sometimes list virtues in ways that look fairly standard. Section four expands on these foundations for variability, highlighting a variety of ways in which Hume considers virtues as variable. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the consequences of accepting a variable account of virtue.

1. Classifying Hume's Theory as a Virtue Ethic

In focusing on character traits as the objects of our moral evaluation, and in offering an account of morally good actions that is derivative of an account of virtuous and vicious traits, Hume is, I contend, offering a moral theory most properly categorized as a virtue ethic.¹⁷⁷ Classifying Hume's theory in this way, however, requires differentiating it in important ways from more traditional virtue ethics. In this section I will highlight features of Hume's view that separate it from traditional virtue ethics, and some concerns that arise as a result. I do not intend to argue that all other virtue ethics are committed to the following points, but rather that some version of these claims is taken up by most virtue ethicists. I also do not intend to imply that only Hume has ever made any of these atypical claims about virtues, but again intend to distinguish his view from the most common virtue ethic accounts.

1.1 *Non-traditional features of Hume's view*

The most common type of virtue ethics is a perfectionist, eudaimonist ethic, in the Aristotelian tradition. Such accounts share the fundamental claim that the virtuous life is essential for an individual's *eudaimonia* (usually rendered as happiness or flourishing), and the

¹⁷⁷Reading Hume as offering a substantive virtue ethic has been a fairly recent trend. See, for example, Cohon *Hume's Morality* (2008); Homiak, "Does Hume have an Ethics of Virtue?" (1998), Merritt, "Virtue Ethics and Situationist Psychology" (2000); Slote, *From Morality to Virtue* (1995); and Swanton, "Can Hume be Read as a Virtue Ethicist?" (2007).

account of virtue is derived from an account of the perfection of human nature.¹⁷⁸ These views begin with a universal account of human nature, and what it means for a human being to flourish, and so they result in a universal set of virtues. These are sometimes referred to as agent-centered views because they focus on the moral deliberation of the agent, and because the virtuous agent, on such an account, is promoting her own excellence (perfecting her nature) as a human being.¹⁷⁹

Whereas traditional virtue ethics ground virtue in individual flourishing, Hume's account of virtue is grounded in an account of personal *and* social usefulness and agreeableness. He defines virtuous traits as those traits which are "useful to others, or to the person himself, or which [are] agreeable to others, or to the person himself" (T3.3.1.30 / SBN 591). The virtuous life is not describe in terms of individual flourishing, but in terms of human beings as active members of an interactive groups. But because there is no single universal form of society and social relations, Hume cannot claim to offer a universal account of what it is to be a useful and agreeable member of society. On Hume's view, we must first look at the position of the individual within her social group(s), and then consider what it means for *her* to be a useful and agreeable member of *that* (or *those*) group(s). In a similar manner, there might be features of the individual's situation that are relevant to determining which traits are useful and agreeable to her, personally.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ See the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on "Virtue Ethics" and section three of the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on "Virtue Ethics" for confirming evidence of this general focus.

¹⁷⁹ Julia Annas, Rosalind Hursthouse, and Philippa Foot all hold versions of this type of view. The terminology should, again, be distinguished from Loeb's reference to Hume's view as "Agent-Centered" (2003) which is still spectator-centered in the sense used here. On Loeb's view, the spectator adopts the perspective of the agent as the appropriate means of sympathizing with the agent's relations, but whether or not a trait is virtuous or vicious still depends on a spectator's evaluations of its effects. See Chapter Two, n24.

¹⁸⁰ Hume's account could be cast as perfectionist on one loose reading of the term, if we simply mean that the virtuous person is said to be excellent. On occasion, Hume refers to certain virtues as "excellences or perfections" (EPM 6.21 / SBN 242-3). When Hume says that the ultimate test for virtue is that there is no relation in which we would not wish to stand with a person (T3.3.3.9 / SBN 606), we might think this also connotes something like perfection. As a term to evaluate a person's overall success as being virtuous, I

As discussed in Chapter One, Hume's view is spectator-centered.¹⁸¹ This feature of his view distinguishes it from most virtue ethic accounts because typically, virtue is understood in terms of the motives, intentions, or reasoning of the agent, since these are the means by which she can perfect her nature. Particularly in Aristotle, emphasis is placed on the deliberation of the moral agent in determining virtue, but Hume clearly puts the measure of virtue—approval and disapproval—in the eyes of spectators. As discussed in Chapter One, this means that an agent's individual perspective, such as, for example her intention to be benevolent, does not by itself determine her virtue. This spectator-centeredness is a complement to Hume's non-eudaimonist definition of virtue. Because virtues are determined by social utility and agreeableness, rather than an account of *eudaimonia*, the point of view of the judicious spectator is a commonly-accessible viewpoint from which to evaluate virtue.

Also discussed in Chapter One was the tenet known as “the unity of the virtues,” which claims that having one virtue entails having them all. Many virtue ethics uphold this principle, but Hume does not. This principle says that the virtues are a consistent and related set, and lacking one virtue entails that one is lacking in regard to other virtues as well. Hume is influenced in his view of virtue by the writings of Mandeville on this point. Mandeville called into question the unity of the virtues by arguing that some virtues stand in conflict with each other, suggesting that not only does having one virtue not entail having all virtues, but that it might preclude having some other virtues. Mandeville argued that if one is pious, one cannot also be honorable, since the latter calls for murder as a proper act of vengeance but the former prohibits it. Acting in accordance with one of these virtues entails failing to act in accordance

have no objection to the term. If we take it as a precondition for determining what is virtuous, however—in the sense that those actions are virtuous which help us perfect ourselves, as human beings—Hume is certainly not a perfectionist. (Thanks to Dick Arneson for distinguishing this acceptable sense of perfection.)

¹⁸¹ I take the phrase from Abramson, “Spectator-Centered Theory” (2008). I suspect this phrase is developed from Brown's description of Hume's as a “spectator theory” (Brown, “From Spectator to Agent” (1994), pp.20-21).

with the other. In my elaboration of the variability of virtue, it will be clear that Hume holds similar views about the potential conflict and incompatibility of virtues. Hence he, too, rejects the unity of the virtues thesis.¹⁸²

A further distinction between Hume's virtue ethic and eudaimonist accounts comes in the relationship between virtue and happiness. On eudaimonist accounts, virtue is required for the happy or flourishing life; while it does not by itself guarantee happiness, it is essential for the possibility of having a happy life.¹⁸³ The virtues, defined as those traits that best serve human flourishing or perfection, are what they are because of their relationship to *eudaimonia*. But as Rachel Cohon notes, "Hume gives no explicit account of the good or flourishing human life, and whatever implicit account he may have... does not serve as a criterion for identifying the virtues."¹⁸⁴ The virtues are defined according to the approval of unbiased observers. We might think that since, as a matter of fact, our approval tracks usefulness and agreeableness, that virtues will also tend toward general happiness. But given Hume's disjunctive account of virtue, many of the virtues have no relation to the happiness of the agent who possesses them—they are virtuous insofar as they contribute to the happiness of others. Whether they tend toward our happiness as individual agents would be, as Cohon again notes, "a matter for empirical investigation," not a matter of analytic truth.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸² The recognition that Hume rejects the unity of the virtues is not entirely new. Jacqueline Taylor mentions it ("Hume on the Standard of Virtue" (2002), p.58), as do Michael Gill ("Humean Moral Pluralism" (2011)) and Donald Ainslie ("Character Traits" (2007), p.105). Dees concurs: "In Hume's scheme, the virtues are united only by a favorable response to them from the moral points of view; there is no greater unity to the Humean virtues" (Dees, p.64). This rejection is a consequence of Hume's view, and not an issue he takes up explicitly. For various reasons it is clear the he does not hold the unity thesis, not the least of which are the character evaluations he gives in his *History*, which exhibit his view that people are virtuous to varying degrees, and often only partially virtuous.

¹⁸³ The translation of *eudaimonia* is not always taken as "happiness," but it is taken to say something about a *good life*. Some eudaimonists, such as the Stoics, hold that virtue is also a sufficient condition for a good life, but Hume rejects even the necessity claim.

¹⁸⁴ Cohon, *Hume's Morality* (2008b), p.162.

¹⁸⁵ *ibid.* As a matter of empirical observation, it seems Hume does think these aims will align. For example, in the final section of his second *Enquiry*, he writes that all that is left is to "inquire whether every man, who has any regard to his own happiness and welfare, will not best find his account in the

Before moving on, I should note that the interpretation of Hume as a virtue-ethicist is a fairly recent reading, and not all readings view his ethic as so different from the more traditional virtue ethic accounts. Marcia Homiak, for example, argues that Hume has a quasi-Aristotelian virtue ethic, reading an account of practical reasoning into Hume's theory that correlates with Aristotle's. She argues that despite his sentimentalism, Hume's account allows a significant role for practical reasoning in being virtuous, and so, following the Aristotelian line, persons of good character, whose calm sentiments preside, are those to whom moral knowledge is available and are those who will be most capable of continuing to act virtuously.¹⁸⁶ Her presentation is exploratory, and while interesting, I don't think ultimately speaks to the anti-Aristotelian elements that I have highlighted in Hume's theory, since it focuses on moral knowledge and motivation, and despite the parallel it acknowledges Hume's sentimentalism (which distinguishes him importantly from Aristotle). The comparison Homiak makes is on a relatively minor point, given present concerns.

There is one further regard in which Hume's theory does seem to share a key element with Aristotelian virtue ethics. Aristotle defined virtue according to a doctrine of the mean, where virtuous behavior fell between two extremes of vice (e.g. cowardice and rashness). In the second *Enquiry*, at least, Hume does give an account of virtuous traits as mean-approximating, which might lead us to draw a parallel between his ultimate view of the virtues and that of Aristotle. For Hume, the appropriate mean of a trait is determined by factors of utility, or

practice of every moral duty" (EPM 9.14 / SBN 278). As he goes on to argue, we will find our best account of happiness and welfare in this practice. But depending on how we translate *eudaimonia*, as noted above, there is not obvious reason even to think that happiness and welfare constitute *eudaimonia*.

¹⁸⁶ Homiak, "Does Hume Have an Ethics of Virtue?" (1998). On the latter point, she claims that "the agent's character will influence his assessment of the kind of situation he faces, which is then reflected in the minor premise of the practical syllogism he applies to the situation." Given the definition of character traits I gave in Chapter Two in relation to the associations of ideas, there might be some promise in this reading of Hume. My present concerns, however, prohibit a lengthy discussion of the role of practical reason in making virtuous choices.

usefulness and agreeableness, and so is highly context-dependent. We see this clearly in the following passage:

No quality, it is allowed, is absolutely either blameable or praiseworthy. It is all according to its degree. A due medium, say the Peripatetics, is the characteristic of virtue. But this medium is chiefly determined by utility. A proper celerity, for instance, and dispatch in business, is commendable. (EPM 6.2 / SBN 233).

Aristotle also holds that the proper mean is situation specific (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1106a36-b16). Aristotle thus argues for the significance of practical wisdom for discerning the mean proper to the situation, and this might give some support to Homiak's argument. Still, Aristotle is operating with a discrete set of virtues, whereas Hume's definition of virtue leaves its boundaries wide open for various traits to be considered virtues. Though there are some similarities between Hume's view and a traditional eudaimonistic view, these do not overshadow the significant ways in which they differ.

In sum, Hume's account of virtue differs from an Aristotelian account in the following ways. First, the virtuous agent is not necessarily aiming at her own perfection, and the virtuous life is not determined by the agent's individual perfection; rather, the moral life is understood as essentially social. Second, the standard of virtue is not individual perfection or flourishing (and so is not found in an account of the agent's deliberation or intentions), but rather in the approval of a trait's effects, as observed by a judicious spectator. Third, virtue does not bear a direct relationship to the virtuous agent's happiness. Hume's view also denies the unity of the virtues, allowing that a person may possess some virtues and not others. These features have further consequences, as we will see, that distinguish Hume's view from the Aristotelian view. Hume allows that virtues can conflict, and having one virtue might preclude someone from having another. He recognizes certain traits such as cleanliness as virtues in the same way that more traditional traits such as generosity are virtues. And finally, Hume holds that a trait may be virtuous in one person or one context and not in others.

1.2 Consequences of a non-traditional view

That Hume does not give an Aristotelian or modified Aristotelian account of virtue has proven to be problematic for some interpreters. Rosalind Hursthouse, who herself argues for a perfectionist, eudaimonist virtue ethic¹⁸⁷, claims that though Hume doesn't profess to be, he at times implies and in fact has to hold a more traditional definition of virtue in order for his claims to be coherent.¹⁸⁸ The reason for this, she argues, is that Hume's disjunctive account of what makes a trait a virtue leads to unacceptable conflict and confusion. As I read Hume, this disjunctive account is precisely what leads us to conclude that virtues are variable, a consequence that is not inherently problematic. Because an understanding of this disjunctive account is crucial, and because Hursthouse poses important challenges to it, it is worth considering her argument in some detail.

Hursthouse focuses her critique of Hume's account on his disjunctive claim that virtues are those traits which are either useful or agreeable to either the self or others. From this claim, of course, he argues for the selfish virtues—traits that benefit only the agent—as well as for more traditional virtues. Hursthouse wants to argue that implicit in Hume's account is an assumption that the above conditions are actually *conjunctive*, because otherwise they would lead us into error and contradiction. She claims “it is disastrously obvious that the four causes of pleasure are bound to yield many inconsistent and inconclusive results.”¹⁸⁹ Among these results, she notes

¹⁸⁷ Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (1999a).

¹⁸⁸ Hursthouse, “Virtue Ethics and Human Nature” (1999b).

¹⁸⁹ *ibid.*, p.71. I am not the first to note that conflict amongst the virtues is an acknowledged fact, not an overlooked problem, for Hume. On the contrast between virtues of “goodness” and virtues of “greatness,” which will be discussed in more detail below, this conflict has been noted. Dees and Baier both recognize this feature of Hume's view. Dees categorizes virtues of greatness as generally those most useful and agreeable to oneself, and those of goodness generally as those most useful and agreeable to others, and takes it as straightforward, from Hume's text, that “greatness and goodness are often not found together, and they can even conflict” (Dees, p.51). (See Baier, *Progress of Sentiments* (1991) p. 214; also section 4.2 below.) But since this conflict is not a consequence that all are willing to accept, it is important to recognize arguments such as Hursthouse's to shed light on the consequences of this feature of Hume's view.

concern that the disjunctive account would accept injustice as a virtue, since it is beneficial to the agent. In other words, she worries that the sensible knave (the free rider, the person who regularly and successfully skirts the demands of justice for his own advantage (EPM 9.22-25 / SBN 282-4)) could also be virtuous: “Suppose we follow him [Hume] in insisting that the so-called selfish virtues are only useful to their possessor. All right, so that is why they receive approbation. But, by the same token, so should injustice....” (p.71). Because it meets the criterion of being useful to its possessor, it must be a virtue, she argues.

Though readings of Hume’s sensible knave passage are hotly debated, it does appear that he is *trying* to argue that in some way, this injustice is bad, even for the knave himself.¹⁹⁰ Hume imagines this person to be successful in avoiding all social consequences for his misdeeds, and to be lacking any personal compunction for his behavior. Without this sense of shame, such a case is problematic for Hume’s account of our motivation to virtue. Still, Hume imagines that such a person, “ever so secret and successful,” will still be worse off. This is because, according to Hume, he will have

sacrificed the invaluable enjoyment of a character, with themselves at least, for the acquisition of worthless toys and gewgaws.... And in view to *pleasure*, what comparison between the unbought satisfaction of conversation, society, study, even health and the common beauties of nature, but above all the peaceful reflection on one’s own conduct; what comparison, I say, between these and the feverish, empty amusements of luxury and expense? (EPM 9.25 / SBN 283-4).

One way of reading this passage is to see a qualitative distinction of pleasures implied here.

Another way to understand this passage, which seems to be more in line with other parts of Hume’s project, is to infer that the sensible knave is not viewing his actions according to the

¹⁹⁰ There is a related question that is central to Hume’s passage on the sensible knave, which I am not addressing here. This is the issue of the knave’s motivation to be just. This is a problematic, but separate question, and here I am only concerned with whether the trait is a vice in him.

appropriate standard of taste.¹⁹¹ However we read it, Hume seems to want to argue that injustice is not even agreeable to its possessor.

Hursthouse might point out here, though, that this just exacerbates the problem—if injustice is useful to its possessor, but not agreeable, it seems that it is both a virtue and a vice even on a single dimension of virtue. (Hume may be arguing that injustice is neither useful nor agreeable to its possessor, in which case Hursthouse offers a bad example of a potential conflict; but for the sake of argument, let’s assume that he has only proven that it is disagreeable. Even if he were arguing for both harmfulness and disagreeableness, Hursthouse might use it as evidence of his discomfort with the disjunct since it is non-obvious why it would not at least be useful to him.) Her concerns regard exactly these cases of conflict, when there is a reason to approve and a reason (or many reasons) to disapprove. The only way to reconcile these conflicts, on Hursthouse’s view, must be to reinstate the conjunctive statement, that a trait must be useful *and* agreeable to *all* concerned in order to be a virtue (or, at least, must meet one criterion and be neutral toward the others). But why not accept that these various values and disvalues can be weighed against each other? This, I argue, is Hume’s intent, and his account of pride as a virtue in *EPM* 8.10 gives us an example of how we weigh these distinct values and disvalues.¹⁹²

In both the *Treatise* and the second *Enquiry*, Hume famously (or infamously) argues against the “monkish” virtue of humility, arguing instead that pride is a virtue for the individual.

¹⁹¹ Dale Dorsey gives this reading of the sensible knave passage in “Hume’s Internalism Reconsidered” (2008).

¹⁹² One might respond to Hursthouse here that injustice would still be a vice because it doesn’t satisfy the primary definition of virtue for Hume, namely, our approval. This is to distinguish between the definition of virtue, as whatever has the power to produce moral sentiments, and the criteria of virtue (usefulness and agreeableness). So while there is an apparent disconnect in this case—here we have a trait that meets the criterion of being useful to the agent, but of which we do not approve—we could just fall back on the primary definition of virtue. However, I do not think Hume would accept such a disconnect as possible, because our disapproval only arises in certain conditions. Our disapproval of injustice would arise from a sense of the disutility or disagreeableness of the trait, as these outweigh any utility for the possessor. See Christine Swanton’s “Can Hume be Read as a Virtue Ethicist?” (2007) for a lengthy discussion of the relationship between the definition of virtue and the criteria of virtue. Thanks to Dick Arneson for the suggestion of this challenge.

He considers anyone who disagrees a “superficial thinker” for believing that “a man would be more esteemable for being ignorant of his own merits and accomplishments” (EPM 8.10 / SBN 264-5). A lack of proper self-esteem and self-value is a vice, on Hume’s view, though he also recognizes that a *public* display of one’s high self-esteem can be a vice. He argues that pride is a private virtue and a public vice, and so a person of good character both has pride and disguises it publicly: “a generous spirit and self-value, well founded, decently disguised, and courageously supported under distress and calumny, is a great excellency, and seems to derive its merit from... its immediate agreeableness to its possessor” (EPM 8.10 / SBN 265). This is a clear example of a virtue so denominated for its value to its possessor, which is also *not* described as useful or agreeable to others. It is, in fact, disagreeable if not properly disguised. Its opposite, in fact, is a public virtue: “In ordinary characters, we approve of a bias towards modesty, which is a quality immediately agreeable to others: the vicious excess of the former virtue [pride], namely insolence or haughtiness, is immediately disagreeable to others; the excess of the latter is so to the possessor” (ibid.). The proper degree of each, in the relevant context, makes for a virtuous character.

From this example, it appears that Hume has no concern about a trait being virtuous due to its agreeableness to its possessor, while fully acknowledging that it can be useless and disagreeable to others. By Hume’s account in the above passages, the merit of pride is in its agreeableness to its possessor, and the merit of modesty is in its agreeableness to others. The disjunctive account only becomes a problem when each trait is excessive. In section four I will discuss virtue clusters, but here we see a potential example of a trait, pride, which is virtuous, but only when coupled with another trait, which is a public bias toward modesty; either in excess, not balanced by the other, has the potential to be vicious. The potential of either to be vicious is

due to the fact that the merit of each is derived from its meeting only one of the disjunctive criteria.¹⁹³

It is also worth noting, in response to Hursthouse, another passage in which Hume discusses the selfish virtues, specifically. In listing some virtues such as temperance, sobriety, and patience, Hume writes; “As their merit consists in their tendency to serve the person, possessed of them, without any magnificent claim to public and social desert, we are the less jealous of their pretensions, and readily admit them into the catalogue of laudable qualities” (243). This passage suggests that if these qualities, which are useful to the individual, *did* make “magnificent claim” to social desert, that we might think differently; that is to say, if they produced a serious conflict with public utility, then in spite of their usefulness to their possessors they might not be admitted as virtues. But this is not to deny that there is a conflict, only to acknowledge that we would have to take a side in such conflicts. The same might apply to the sensible knave. What is useful to him might conflict with what is agreeable to him, as well as with what is useful or agreeable to society. Whether or not we maintain that a trait is virtuous, then, has to consider the weight of conflicting concerns.¹⁹⁴ Hume’s disjunctive account is a bit messy, on the point Hursthouse notes, but this does not have to be seen as either a mistake, as she suggests, or even a weakness of the view. As we will see in section four, we may sometimes have conflicting

¹⁹³ My present aim is to lay out the degree of conflict in Hume’s account of the virtues, and I am less concerned with the practical details of how these conflicts are resolved. It is important to note that these conflicts are features of virtue that Hume takes for granted, but understanding exactly how they are resolved is a separate project. Dees offers an interesting argument for how some of these conflicts, particularly that between pride and public modesty, are resolved, claiming that the artifices of etiquette and justice are constructed precisely as means of resolving these conflicts. See Dees, “Hume on the Characters of Virtue” (1997).

¹⁹⁴ I suspect that the conflict posed by the sensible knave has features unique to the fact that Hume sees justice as an artificial virtue, one constructed from social concerns. To that extent, we have to account for one’s motivation to justice in order to fully understand the case, which is a separate issue. The pride example is helpful in understanding the way in which natural virtues can be said to make conflicting claims of utility and agreeableness, and presents the problem without requiring a further account of the artificial virtues.

responsibilities, for which conflicting traits are suited, and this I take to be a factor of human life from which Hume does not shy away.

Kate Abramson offers a way of navigating this conflict which seems to have strong potential to assuage these concerns.¹⁹⁵ She argues that the traits useful or agreeable to oneself are virtues to the extent that the advantages the agent incurs are advantages “*in her relations with others.*”¹⁹⁶ To the extent that self-indulgence limits ones intimacies with others, she argues, it is not a virtue in spite of its being agreeable to its possessor. The sensible knave still poses a problem on this view, since Abramson’s brief response—drawn from Hume’s text, but not very satisfactory (sounding like a paternalistic attitude toward his pleasures)—is that the unjust knave lacks a satisfactory self-review.¹⁹⁷ To bolster her case, though, we might say that insofar as some traits that are useful to ourselves are so because they fit us in our relations, a trait of injustice would leave me wanting in relation to others, and so its opposite would be useful to me. Hers is a plausible argument that makes headway with the problem Hursthouse proposes, and it does not ignore the fact that Hume’s definition is intentionally disjunctive.¹⁹⁸

While much of Abramson’s argument for resolving this debate is, I think, helpful in resolving disputes of the sort Hursthouse notes, I do think it fails in one respect to recognize the significance of Hume’s disjunctive account. Some traits simply are useful to their possessors, full stop. I might (in a perfect world) be a particularly clean and organized person. If I lived alone, this trait would have no value to other people. But insofar as it would be useful and agreeable to

¹⁹⁵ Abramson, “Hume’s Spectator-Centered Theory” (2008), pp.249-253.

¹⁹⁶ *ibid.* p.251

¹⁹⁷ *ibid.* p.253; EPM 9.25 / SBN 283

¹⁹⁸ Elsewhere, Abramson leaves the question of weighing conflicting virtues open, at least when it is usefulness vs. agreeableness on the same level: “the societies Hume knows of face a trade-off between encouraging to a greater extent either the useful trait of ‘prudence’, or the agreeable trait of ‘gaiety’ in men. And he does *not* claim that extensive sympathy will or will not provide us reason to prefer one of these sets of customs over the other.” (Abramson, “Hume on Cultural Conflicts” (1999), p.179). On the level of what society is better off favoring, there may just be trade-offs, with neither alternative being clearly better. The role of social custom in determining virtue will be discussed in Section IV, below.

me, it would still be a virtue. The only way Abramson's account could manage this claim would be, I think, to make a general claim about how traits that are agreeable to me also make me more agreeable to be around¹⁹⁹, but I think that fails to capture the value that my cleanliness has for me. Now if my trait were injustice, rather than cleanliness, it would have effects on other people, and I would have to weigh its relative utility and disutility, as already noted. I think this solution regarding injustice follows from her account, and it is important. However, I think we should not neglect the independent value of some traits that are merely, or simply, useful to ourselves.

In short, I think Hursthouse's objection to Hume's disjunctive account is based on a consequence of his view he freely accepts. There are clear examples that he accepts traits as virtues or vices simply by their meeting or failing to meet one of the criteria. There might be more nuance to how virtue is assessed in some cases—if a trait scores highly on one criterion and somewhat negatively on others, we might say it is a virtue, but not an unqualified virtue.²⁰⁰ But on the whole, Hume embraces his disjunctive definition and recognizes that it may lead to conflicts of virtue. (As we will see in section four, he allows that sometimes virtue must be determined based on individual circumstances, which might also give us means for negotiating particular assessments in cases of conflict.)²⁰¹ Given this commitment, he cannot hold that the virtues constitute a unified set, let alone the stronger thesis that the virtuous person exhibits all elements of a discrete set of virtues. And if traits are virtuous or vicious according to a variety of factors, then picking out the relevant factors is important to determining whether a trait is a virtue. The argument for how this is done will be taken up in the remainder of this chapter.

¹⁹⁹ I infer this from her arguments on pp.251-2.

²⁰⁰ Thanks to Dick Arneson for this articulation.

²⁰¹ Dees has a similar reading of Hume's view of heroism: "Perhaps Hume's ambivalence towards heroism... is exactly the correct attitude. The trait has some things in its favor and others against it, and nothing more can be said" (Dees, p.58).

2. The Narrow Circle and the Scope of One's Influence

A further question of conflicting evaluations, beyond the question brought up by Hursthouse, might arise on a social level, if a trait is, for example, useful to one's countrymen but not the citizens of a neighboring country. Hume often talks about our moral evaluations as considering the "narrow circle" within which a person's influence is felt—we judge a person's traits according to their effects on all the members of this narrow circle. This circle includes the agent herself, as well as her family, friends, colleagues, etc., but how far this circle extends has been debated in the literature. Lack of a clear understanding of what Hume means by the "narrow circle" has led to a variety of concerns and confusions about who it includes. Erin Kelly has read the narrow circle as a boundary on our sympathy—that it is circumscribed according to those with whom we sympathize in evaluating virtue—and expresses concern that if our sympathies are limited in certain narrow but epistemically stable ways, we could fail in our moral judgments. With a reasonably stable account of a natural narrow sympathy, she argues, "Persons outside of our sphere of concern in effect lack moral status; we are under no moral pressure to take them into account and to consider our possible obligations toward them, if the mechanisms that tend to block our consideration of them are stable enough."²⁰² In response to Kelly, Louis Loeb rightly points out that one's sphere of influence is not determined by one's actual sympathies, but includes "everyone typically affected by a character trait."²⁰³ However, he goes on to delimit it rather arbitrarily, suggesting that it includes family and friends and excludes strangers, which again leaves it quite narrow indeed.²⁰⁴ In response to this debate, Annette Baier

²⁰² Kelly, "Stability and Partiality" (2004), p.335

²⁰³ Loeb, "Stability and Justification" (2004), p.345

²⁰⁴ *ibid.*, p.349. The dialogue between Kelly and Loeb is largely tangential to the discussion at hand, though these noted concerns are voiced. Their discussion is about sympathy and our epistemic responsibility to sympathize beyond the scope of our natural sympathies. It is an issue of debate that this account does not directly solve, but will certainly inform. My focus here is not to elaborate the epistemic responsibility of the moral agent, so I leave aside a lengthy discussion of their positions, but I do think that this account might inform Kelly's concerns in interesting and fruitful ways.

has argued that the narrow circle is only one way of measuring the relative virtue of a trait, and so although it is narrow, it should not be read as dangerously exclusive.²⁰⁵

There is more general consensus on the function of the narrow circle in Hume's theory, but even here the issue is not totally settled. As discussed in Chapter Two, the narrow circle is generally understood to have an evaluative function in delineating with whom we are to sympathize in formulating moral judgments. For example, Geoffrey Sayre-McCord argues that the narrow circle functions as a stable standpoint for a sufficiently general point of view, from which we can collectively make univocal moral judgments; this reading is helpful for understanding its function but is empty if we cannot first establish its scope.²⁰⁶ Richard Dees has suggested that there is a practical function for the narrow circle, as well, noting that it tells us whose interests we are expected to consider in our actions. He contends that if its scope is understood as including everyone affected by a person's actions, we are judging people for consequences far beyond the limits of what can be expected of them, and this reading "ignores Hume's reasons for confining our attention to the 'narrow circle': asking people to think about everyone they will affect is asking too much, even for a king or a president."²⁰⁷ What the literature shows is that there is not a consensus on either the function of the narrow circle in Hume's argument or its scope.

In this section, I offer reasons to consider Hume's narrow circle as variably "narrow." I will start with a general overview of the narrow circle as it is employed by Hume and interpreted in the literature, and then elaborate my own reading of its function. My view shares some key points with Baier's recent elaboration of the narrow circle, although I think she restricts its function unnecessarily. Rather than conceding that because it is so narrow, it is one of several

²⁰⁵ Baier, "How Wide...?" (2006)

²⁰⁶ Sayre-McCord, "Hume's 'General Point of View'" (1994), pp.218-19. This emptiness is also noted by Jason Kawall, "On the Moral Epistemology of Ideal Observer Theories" (2006), p.370.

²⁰⁷ Dees, p.50n21.

constraints on our moral judgments, I argue that we need not put such emphasis on the “narrowness” of the circle. My reading has a similar payout to Baier’s, and I agree with her that to some extent, one’s usefulness or agreeableness to posterity is relevant in assessing one’s virtue. On my reading, however, we have a better means of establishing exactly which effects of a person’s traits are pertinent to our assessment of those traits, and guidelines for how these boundaries shift from person to person depending on identifiable features of their situations. Furthermore, as suggested by Dees above, I see in Hume’s texts gestures toward a normative function for the narrow circle—that it puts conditions on what is expected of us—in addition to its evaluative function whereby it provides us with the proper scope of assessment.

2.1 Boundaries of influence and prioritized concerns

To understand the import of Hume’s “narrow circle,” it helps to first look at his reasons for positing it as a boundary by which we judge merit. One reason Hume has to restrict our moral evaluation to a small group of those affected is to provide us with a distinct, stable set of assessments that can be shared by impartial observers. If we are unsure whose perspectives matter in our judgment, we may differ in our beliefs about which perspectives are relevant and so disagree in our sympathetic assessments. Another reason Hume has to post the narrow circle appears to be practical: it helps us avoid an impossibly large set of moral obligations. Certainly there are things a person can do to affect others quite distant from herself, but Hume wants to restrict our moral evaluations to the more regular and localized effects. Both of these functions operate in Hume’s text:

Being acquainted with the nature of man, we expect not any impossibilities from him; but confine our view to that narrow circle, in which any person moves, in order to form a judgment of his moral character. When the natural tendency of his passions leads him to be serviceable and useful within his sphere, we approve of his character, and love his person, by a sympathy with the sentiments of those, who have a more particular connection with him.... The only point of view, in which our sentiments concur with those of others, is, when we consider the tendency of any passion to the advantage or harm of

those, who have any immediate connexion or intercourse with the person possess'd of it. (T3.3.3.2 / SBN 602-3)

We see in this passage that the narrow circle provides us with “the only point of view” from which we can all share moral sentiments. We also see a suggestion of the normative claim in the first sentence, that the narrow circle is posited because “we expect not any impossibilities” from people.

The argument that the narrow circle provides us with a stable point of view from which to make assessments is widely discussed, and given my current interests in establishing virtue and vice, rather than in explaining the process of sympathy and moral judgments, I will leave aside lengthy discussion of this evaluative function of the narrow circle. Evidence of this function of the narrow circle is included in the following discussion, but my focus is on elaborating this normative function because recognizing this feature of Hume’s view helps us understand the scope of the narrow circle.²⁰⁸ Getting clear on what the functions of the narrow circle are—both the widely recognized evaluative function and the practical function I will argue for—is important, but it leaves open the question of who stands within the boundaries of the narrow circle. The function of delimiting those whose perspectives we consider in evaluation, as well as the function of delimiting those whose interests we consider in our actions, both require that we know who falls inside the narrow circle, and who does not.

Who does fall within the bounds of the narrow circle? From the above quote, we can infer that Hume is prioritizing the effects that our character traits have on those in closer relation to us. Should we conclude from this circumscription that the effects of our traits on distant people is insignificant, bearing no weight on the evaluation of our characters? Such an interpretation could lead to serious consequences for what is morally expected of us. For

²⁰⁸ Sayre McCord offers a plausible reading of the function of the narrow circle as it helps us sympathize from a shared perspective. Rachel Cohon also gives a clear and concise reading (*Hume’s Morality* (2008), pp.143-50), and Louis Loeb offers the alternative reading discussed in Chapter Two (“Hume’s Agent-Centered Sentimentalism” (2003)).

example, insofar as present day ecological responsibility, such as recycling, will have its greatest effect on future generations, we might think it is not required of us if the effects of our traits on people with whom we do not have “any immediate connexion” is insignificant. One might wonder if this part of Hume’s argument is based on an error of fact, an estimation that the effects of our traits on distant strangers is negligible. But clearly my commitment to recycling now, and the motive from which it stems, *do* have tangible effects on people far distant from me (unless, I suppose, I am the only person recycling, but let’s assume recycling has the status of an artificial virtue, and my participating implies my confidence that others also participate). It can’t be that the effects of our traits on distant people is *actually* insignificant, so we need an argument for why their effects on closer people are more *morally* significant.

One route around these difficulties is to read Hume in this passage as focusing on keeping moral expectations reasonable. That is, he might not be making either of the strong claims (that we should not be concerned about our influence on those distant from us, or that we have no influence on those distant from us), but rather he is making a claim about what can be reasonably expected of a person. We might think of him as saying something like this: “My trait may have an influence on a nomad in rural Mongolia, but it cannot be reasonably expected that I consider such an influence before acting on this trait.” So while I might make efforts to monitor these influences, I should not reasonably be judged according to them. Still, we might worry that recycling is morally important, and that Hume would not be able to accommodate this claim. Keeping this worry alive, I wish to set it aside for a moment to consider other factors of Hume’s expression of his view.

There are several other passages where Hume talks about moral judgments based on one’s “circle” or “sphere” of influence, in which he is much more moderate and inclusive in his claims. When discussing what gives rise to moral sentiments, for example, Hume says that they “may arise either from the mere species or appearance of characters and passions, or from

reflections on their tendency to the happiness of mankind, and of particular persons. My opinion is, that both these causes are intermix'd in our judgments of morals.... Tho' I am also of opinion, that reflections on the tendencies of actions have by far the greatest influence” (T3.3.1.27 / SBN 589-90). Here he is making a point about the immediate appearance of traits versus their tendencies to produce certain effects, but it is important to note that their effects are considered in terms of “their tendency to the happiness of *mankind*, and of particular persons” (emphasis mine). This passage suggests that it is not merely the particular set of individuals who immediately surround an agent whose perspectives are considered in our moral assessments. In other passages also, Hume’s vagueness allows room for a wider interpretation: “Now in judging of characters, the only interest or pleasure, which appears the same to every spectator, is that of the person himself, whose character is examin'd; or that of persons, who have a connexion with him” (T3.3.1.30). The term “connexion” does not delineate a narrow subset, but leaves open the possibility of distant connections.

Baier has also noted the variety of phrases Hume uses to describe this circle, and that they do not all obviously mean the same thing. She writes:

Hume uses other phrases in *Treatise* 3.3 which are sometimes taken to refer to the same group of people as the "narrow circle," namely “those who have any immediate connexion or intercourse with the person,” which does seem to amount to the same, and “those who have any commerce with the person,” which is surely broader. It occurs earlier, in T 3.3.1.18 (SBN 583), when the topic was the sympathy needed for moral judgement [sic], whatever the virtue we are considering.... Just as "any intercourse" is not, for Hume, the same as "any intimate intercourse," so "any commerce" is not the same as "any *immediate* connexion or intercourse" (my emphasis), and it is sympathy with those with whom the judged person had "any commerce" or "any intercourse" that was said to be required for passing moral judgement [sic]. (Baier 2004, p.114)

We can reasonably wonder, given these various references, exactly who bears the appropriate relation to the agent so as to factor into our moral judgment. As Baier goes on to point out, would Hume’s readers, hundreds of years after he wrote, be counted insofar as our lives are influenced by him? The essential question is, how do we determine the boundary of the sphere

of influence whereby people within the boundary are considered in our assessment, and people outside of it are not?

I now direct the reader's attention back to the first quote about the narrow circle above, which might give us pause about the limitedness of our obligations. I suggested that one way to interpret this passage was from a point of view of the practicality of our decisions to act, claiming that it is not that we just ignore distant influences, but that we are more reasonably responsible for those close to us. Add to this reading the following passage, in which Hume notes those traits that make us most agreeable and useful to those around us:

Even when the vice of inhumanity rises not to this extreme degree, our sentiments concerning it are very much influenc'd by reflections on the harm that results from it. And we may observe in general, that if we can find any quality in a person, which renders him incommodious to those, who live and converse with him, we always allow it to be a fault or blemish, without any farther examination. On the other hand, when we enumerate the good qualities of any person, we always mention those parts of his character, which render him a safe companion, an easy friend, a gentle master, an agreeable husband, or an indulgent father. We consider him with all his relations in society; and love or hate him, according as he affects those, who have any immediate intercourse with him. And 'tis a most certain rule, that if there be no relation of life, in which I cou'd not wish to stand to a particular person, his character must so far be allow'd to be perfect. If he is as little wanting to himself as to others, his character is entirely perfect. This is the ultimate test of merit and virtue.
(T3.3.3.9 / SBN 606)

We might think that this passage just reinforces the reading that Hume's circle is too narrow if we focus on his designation of people who have "immediate intercourse" with the agent, and perhaps his list of relations (companion, master, father, etc.). However, consider also that he is discussing a person's "relations in society." Hume is emphasizing here the types of relationships that can be designated and identified between the agent and those affected by his character. I may not bear a distinguishable relation to a nomad in Mongolia, which could be a reason why it is hard to evaluate my moral responsibility to him.

It also cannot be ignored, in reading these passages, that the type and level of impact of a single eighteenth century Briton's actions on those in rural Mongolia was much different than it would be today. We might consider ourselves to bear relations to those in rural Mongolia or Africa—or at least people in Sendai, Japan—but in such a consideration we have to recognize the ability we have to influence those people, via technology, national wealth, cultural values, etc., that just did not exist in eighteenth century Britain. (It may be that the British had more influence on the members of their colonies than they would have liked to admit, but that is an error in judgment on their part and only reinforces the claim I make here.) I might say that as a twenty-first century American of middle-class income, that I do bear a distinguishable and important relationship to those starving in Africa. I have direct means to help those people through international charities, I see myself as a member of a global economic system, and I am present to their plight via television and internet news. (I can see them on TV, and by pressing a few buttons on my phone, I can provide others with life-preserving funds.)

The fact that we could currently have these relationships which did not exist for those in Hume's day, that what is virtuous in me, now, depends on these considerations that were not in play for Hume, is perfectly consistent with Hume's view of virtue and its relation to society. We also, arguably, have distinguishable relationships to future generations, insofar as they are our children and children of those we love, which can help explain why we should recycle. (Scientific advances have given us much more information about the effects of our actions on future generations, as well.) I contend that these sorts of distant obligations that we might like to claim we stand under can be accommodated according to shifts in our "narrow circle" which Hume would allow, even if he did not conceive of it stretching across distances that it now stretches across. One key feature in determining the scope of our narrow circle involves establishing to which people we bear distinguishable relations. In our day, given advancement in science and communication, it seems plausible that we might bear distinguishable relations to all

citizens of the world, at least in regard to the scope of some of our traits, such as generosity.

Another feature to note about Hume's confining our evaluations to a narrow circle is the issue of partiality and conflicts of benefit and harm. Having distinguishable relations to people is an important requirement for responsibility, but also important is the relative proximity of these people to whom we bear relations. Justification of partiality is a familiar dilemma in contemporary ethical debates, whether we are trying to explain partiality to one's children, one's friends, one's country, or some other group that seems to receive, and perhaps merit, our special attention. Hume also noticed this problem, and thought that his account could accommodate some of our tendencies to partiality. (Some might disagree with the idea that our partiality is justified, but that is a separate debate. Here I only note that for those who argue that it *is* justified, Hume has an explanation for why it is so.) In a footnote in the second *Enquiry*, Hume notes the value of such partiality in regard to one's nation:

When the interests of one country interfere with those of another, we estimate the merits of a statesman by the good or ill, which results to his own country from his measures and councils, without regard to the prejudice which he brings on its enemies and rivals. His fellow-citizens are the objects, which lie nearest the eye, while we determine his character. And as nature has implanted in every one a superior affection to his own country, we never expect any regard to distant nations, where a competition arises. (EPM 5.38 / SBN 225f)

This national partiality is not unqualified, but rather is justified only when a conflict arises between the interests of one's own nation and those of another. In cases of conflicting obligations, Hume suggests that our virtue is determined more heavily by our effects on our closer relations. His reasoning, I argue, is pragmatic.

We might still be unsure of whether this partiality is justified if, for example, the interests of Nazi Germany conflicted with the interests of other countries (if we could even construe the historical situation as in the Germans' interest). However, a careful look at the text makes it clear that Hume has a practical motivation for drawing these lines, and he thinks that doing so is the best means of securing the general interest of humanity. Hume offers the

following justification for this partiality: “while every man consults the good of his own community, we are sensible, that the general interest of mankind is better promoted, than by any loose indeterminate views to the good of a species, whence no beneficial action could ever result, for want of a duly limited object, on which they could exert themselves” (ibid.). Hume uses very similar wording in a subsequent footnote in which he discusses partiality to friends: “It is wisely ordained by nature, that the private connexions should commonly prevail over universal views and considerations; otherwise our affections and actions would be dissipated and lost, for want of a proper limited object” (EPM 5.42 / SBN 229f). Furthermore, while recognizing these partialities, he goes on to say that “we know here, as in all the senses, to correct these inequalities by reflection” (ibid.). From these passages we can conclude that Hume is not justifying partiality for the sake of partiality (for the reason that it tracks our natural sentiments), but because it is generally, as he sees it, a practice more efficient at achieving good ends than is complete impartiality. He is clear that our natural partiality is often to be corrected by reflection, and so is not unqualifiedly justified. It is not always and in principle justified to be partial to one’s friends, but to the extent that we face conflicts between our responsibilities to those nearer to us and to those far away, Hume suggests that we are justified in our partiality because we are more able to be useful and agreeable when we focus our attentions in this way. And when conflict arises, where one can benefit *either* one’s peers or distant strangers, but not both, Hume says that there is a good, practical reason to be partial. I take these passages to suggest a normative function for the narrow circle: by giving us boundaries for our action, we are not at a loss for a proper object of our actions, and we are by these means best able to promote the interests of humanity.

My reading of Hume's motivation for positing the narrow circle here is distinct from a superficially similar reading suggested by Michael Gill.²⁰⁹ In discussing the scope of a person's generosity in judging her virtue, Gill suggests that the narrow circle is used because it circumscribes what we generally expect of people: "in the past we have observed that generally people care strongly only about those within their narrow circle. We judge that a person who benefits her narrow circle is good because our past experience has led us not to expect a more expansive generosity."²¹⁰ Gill is arguing that Humean goodness is relatively attainable, based on normal expectations, but his account suggests that it is the intended benefactors of a person's action that determine the scope by which we evaluate virtue. To the extent that our natural sympathies lead us to care for those in our narrow circle, our generosity is significantly determined in proportion to this concern. To be a good friend, parent, and neighbor is obviously a major factor in being a virtuous Humean agent. But I see a danger in this account of the narrow circle in that it might lead to the elimination of all unintended effects in judging a person's virtue. This concern is similar to Erin Kelly's worry noted earlier. I take it Gill is intending to make a point about one's actual (usual) influence here, but his account needs to distinguish the extent to which we can be wrong about our usual influence, and that we need more than our natural expectations to account for the boundaries of the narrow circle. On my reading, I want to distinguish what we *can* reasonably expect from people—which I see as a factor in Hume's reasoning—from whatever we might *in fact* (ignorantly or otherwise) expect of people.

What Gill's reading does indicate, however, insofar as it makes basic virtue reasonably attainable in everyday life, is that some traits do not require a grand scope to be denominated virtuous. However, some do, and I will argue in the next section that the sphere of influence by

²⁰⁹ Gill, *British Moralists*. 2006.

²¹⁰ *ibid.* p.254

which we judge a person's character might shift according to different traits. A president's cleanliness, for example, is not evaluated by how it effects the sphere that includes all her citizens, but is likely limited to her family and coworkers. The effects of her even-temperedness, on the other hand, reach more widely. This highlights an additional variability in how we establish one's sphere of influence. This feature of Hume's view is noted by Geoffrey Sayre-McCord in his introduction to a recent edition of Hume's moral philosophy: "Just how wide the narrow circle [is] seems, on Hume's view, to vary with the character trait in question."²¹¹ He does not elaborate in this context, but his mention of the point supports my reading of Hume.

Hume's claim that the general interest of humanity is better served by individuals focusing on the benefit of their communities is an empirical claim, and may prove to be false. We have a large capacity to be of direct assistance to starving children in Africa, for example. What is interesting about this claim, however, is that its potential falsity in twenty-first century society does not bear on its potential truth in eighteenth century society, and if it does prove to be false, or less true, today, Hume leaves room in his theory for this change to be accommodated. As we will see below, virtues can change based on one's society, and if our present-day society stretches its boundaries much wider, so much the better for Hume's theory if it is able to allow for this change. Hume's fundamental point in both of the footnotes cited above is that complete indifference to one's ties can leave one without a definite object for our affections and actions; this implies that a definitive object (a particular person or set of people toward whom we aim to be agreeable and useful) is necessary to avoid an inability to determine our actions. He makes a practical point that we should have some sense of whom we aim to benefit by our actions in order to be able to evaluate the effects of our actions, and if whom we aim to benefit is humankind as a species, it will be too hard to determine vice and virtue. Nevertheless, whom we aim to benefit should depend not simply on those whom we care about,

²¹¹ Sayre-McCord, editor's introduction to David Hume, *Moral Philosophy*. (2006), p.xxxii.

or we return to Erin Kelly's concern about the limits of our natural sympathies. On my reading, in addition to the requirement of distinguishable relations, the relative proximity of these relations is a determining factor in virtue as proximity tends toward better success in effectively benefiting others.

As I read Hume, the question, "Who falls inside the narrow circle?" cannot be answered by giving a list of typical relations. It is answered according to (a) whose perspectives meet the criteria of producing shared sentiments by judicious spectators and (b) what can be reasonably expected of an agent. The answers to (a) and (b) depend on looking at the individual in question, in ways that will be elaborated in section four, below. But the short answer is that different people assume different spheres of influence by occupying or taking on different positions and social roles; these can include, for example, being an informed member of a relatively wealthy nation in a global society. To some extent, depending on our situations, ignoring the distant effects of our actions, such as indirectly supporting sweatshop labor, might reflect on us; but if a low-income family can only afford to shop at Walmart, their failure in this regard is secondary to the obligations they have to clothe their children and does not reflect on their relative virtue. We see in this account both a descriptive and a normative function for Hume's narrow circle; given Hume's general tendencies, the descriptive account is primary, but he also expects that the normative function of the narrow circle follows from a descriptive account of the sentiments of well-informed spectators. The nature of his account is descriptive and explanatory, but given examples such as those discussed in this section, it seems there is some hope that his normative account can have a secure descriptive foundation.

2.2 Interpretive options

Given the various phrases already noted that Hume uses to discuss a person's sphere of influence, perhaps hanging on to the iteration that refers to the "narrow circle" is obfuscating.

Baier argues that the narrow circle was only the proper measure for some virtues, and that “It is some of his commentators, not Hume himself, who have given that passing phrase, ‘narrow circle,’ a currency and import that there is no reason to think he intended.”²¹² Baier’s advice is to rely more heavily on Hume’s account of “extensive sympathy” as it is given in the second *Enquiry* to understand the scope of the effects of traits. However, I think there is even more we can say, if we read Hume carefully, about the scope of influence relevant for evaluating certain traits. Specifically, we can look at factors of a person’s individual situation that inform us of the scope of her influence.

One option is to follow Baier’s suggestion and read Hume’s references to the narrow circle as only one manner of judging a particular subset of traits. She says that it is best suited to judge goodness or benevolence.²¹³ This option is supported by passages such as the one from T3.3.3.9 (SBN 606) noted earlier, where Hume writes, “when we enumerate the good qualities of any person, we always mention those parts of his character, which render him a safe companion, an easy friend, a gentle master, an agreeable husband, or an indulgent father.” In other cases, Baier suggests we use the “extensive sympathy” Hume discusses in T3.3.1.23 (SBN 586) because in some cases, “sympathetic understanding of the impact of a person’s character on anyone, however remote, seems needed.”²¹⁴ She notes that in some cases, one’s actions have effects on persons unknown to the agent, such as in the case of giving to Oxfam. Hence, she concludes, the narrow circle is too restrictive to recognize all the effects of our actions, all of which need consideration in our assessment. She argues, finally, that Hume’s view as expressed

²¹² Baier, “How Wide...?” (2006), p.116

²¹³ *ibid.* p.116. Cohon makes a similar claim, saying that the narrow circle is suited for judging the natural virtues, but not the artificial virtues (Cohon, p.242).

²¹⁴ p.116. In the cited passage, Hume discusses the “extensive sympathy” requisite for moral sentiments in contrast to the “limited generosity” to which we are prone, arguing that we may not strongly *feel* the former, but imagining them is enough to influence our judgments. The passage contrasts the general view with the view from our “particular and momentary situation.”

in his second *Enquiry* is more aligned with his discussion of extensive sympathy in the *Treatise* and does not make use of the earlier text's reference to the narrow circle.

For reasons already discussed, it is certainly important that we be able to extend the boundaries of our moral consideration of a person's actions beyond her immediate acquaintances. However, Baier minimizes what I take to be the most important feature of Hume's reference to a "narrow circle," namely that it gives us a framework within which to use our sympathies. Without some frame of reference, for which I think the circle or sphere metaphor is quite useful, sympathizing with everyone affected by an action leads to the pragmatic difficulties in light of which, as already noted, Hume posits the circle to begin with.

One further significant piece of Baier's argument that I would be remiss to neglect is her reading of changes over the course of Hume's texts. She argues that Hume's early reference in the *Treatise* to a "narrow circle" is tempered by the later absence of the phrase in his account of the scope of our influence; while the phrase may not be prominent in his later writings, I take the key feature of its import, as I have highlighted it, to remain present. The footnote from the second *Enquiry* cited earlier maintains this practical import. Since I take the term "narrow" to mean less than it is commonly understood to mean, I take the phrase "narrow circle" to mean only something like a determinable scope of one's practical influence, the significance of which is still clearly present in Hume's later writing.²¹⁵ In Section Two of the second *Enquiry*, Hume discusses how merit tracks "the happiness and satisfaction, derived to society from his intercourse and good offices," which by itself sounds more general, but is followed immediately by an elucidation of how such a person affects his parents, his children, his friendships, his dependants and domestics, as well as more general categories such as the hungry (EPM 2.6 / SBN 178). Here Hume writes of a person's merit, "If confined to private life, the sphere of his

²¹⁵ e.g. In the second *Enquiry*, Hume still refers to "the usefulness or agreeableness of qualities to the person himself possessed of them, or to others, *who have any intercourse with him*" (EPM 9.13 / SBN 278, emphasis mine).

activity is narrower; but his influence is all benign and gentle. If exalted into a higher station, mankind and posterity reap the fruit of his labours” (EPM 2.7 / SBN 178). In this passage, we see Hume still using the circle/sphere metaphor, but downplaying the rigidity of the narrowness of that sphere.

Another interpretive option, which I contend is more suited to Hume’s purposes, is to understand the narrow circle as a variable sphere of influence, determined by distinct relations (which need not be limited to people who are personally *known* to the agent), and prioritized according to the effectiveness of focusing our consideration.²¹⁶ In rare cases, it might be important to sympathize with everyone even remotely affected by an action, but in the cases where those affected have no distinguishable relation to the moral agent, it seems impractically extreme to allow everyone affected to influence our assessments of virtue and vice. On the other hand, if a person is the president of a large country, she bears a distinct relation to every citizen in her country, even though she will never encounter most of them, and though these citizens fall well outside the usual, restricted understanding of the “narrow circle,” this person certainly is evaluated according to the effects her traits have on all of these people. She also has effects on citizens of other countries, in certain respects, but will be evaluated with some priority given to her effects on her own citizens. This is in part because, as noted above, this wide consideration would leave agents in “want of a duly limited object, on which they could exert themselves” (EPM 5.38 / SBN225f). That said, I think the sphere of influence can, in some cases, be said to be very wide, and can include people such as future readers affected by a writer’s words, or

²¹⁶ Interestingly, Baier offers in her earlier book what appears to be an allowance for the variability of one’s sphere: “what makes a person an indulgent father may unfit him from being a successfully ruthless general, or even an austerely upright man like Cato.... A larger circle, a view to public good, forefathers’ laws, [etc.]... have to be considered, to appreciate Cato’s unamiabable virtues” (Baier (1991), p.213). In her more recent account, however, she does not emphasize the flexibility of the narrow circle, and rather delimits its scope to function for a subset of our moral evaluations.

strangers in Japan affected by one's generosity or frugality. The factors by which we determine the boundaries of an agent's circle are the subject of the next section.

This reading also maintains the suggestion made earlier, in response to Gill's argument, that the circle within which we evaluate certain traits may be smaller, for the same person, than the circle for other traits that person possesses. Again, while many of a president's traits to have regular and direct effects on the citizens of her country, certainly some of her traits, such as cleanliness, only affect a much smaller circle. So, the scope of the "narrow circle" changes not only from person to person, but even for different traits in the same person.

I find support for this view implicit in Abramson's reading of the criteria of usefulness and agreeableness to others.²¹⁷ Her argument focuses on how we understand these criteria in terms of our "relations," and while she does not suggest the consequence that virtue is variable, her reading of Hume's reference to "relations" lends support to my reading of the significance of one's sphere of influence. She argues that the best way to understand this reference is that a virtue is "any trait that makes one well suited for participation in some sphere of interpersonal interactions."²¹⁸ Since this is the primary determining factor of virtue, she argues, when we take up a general point of view, "the only relevant persons *are* those who interact with—who have 'commerce' with—the agent."²¹⁹ She does not further comment on the exact nature of relations that "commerce" is expected to cover, though she notes it is not simply *relationships* or roles that determine these relations.²²⁰ Given her focus on one's "sphere" of "interactions" which are not merely relationships, I take my reading of the significance of the sphere, and the variability of its narrowness, to be compatible with her view. In the next section, I will offer a detailed argument for what constitutes these relations, and how an expanded understanding of the role of

²¹⁷ Abramson (2008).

²¹⁸ *ibid.* p.252

²¹⁹ *ibid.* p.253

²²⁰ *ibid.* p.252

the “narrow circle” gives us a much more concrete account of who falls within the boundaries of those to whom we are primarily responsible.²²¹

There is one potential drawback to viewing Hume’s narrow circle as referring to the specific people that are generally affected by a particular person’s actions: how can we explain Hume’s judgment of virtue in rags? Hume says that a person still has a virtue even if she is in a dungeon and has no circumstances in which to use it. But if the merit of her traits is due to its effects on people around her, and there are no people around her who might be affected by this trait, it doesn’t make sense why he maintains that she has the virtue. I think the best solution to this problem is to read virtue in rags as a special case, which requires an inference to a typical, but not actual, narrow circle. Charlotte Brown offers this reading of the narrow circle in all cases²²², but for the reasons I have offered here, I think that this account of the narrow circle could fail to be specific enough in many respects. Nevertheless, this seems the best solution for the virtue in rags case. Hume challenges himself in this assertion, regarding the concern that we are in such a case sympathizing with no one, and his solution is to argue that our judgment in such cases does generalize to typical effects: “Where a character is, in every respect, fitted to be beneficial to society, the imagination passes easily from the cause to the effect, without

²²¹ My reading is further supported by Charlotte Brown’s comment in a footnote, where she writes,

I do not mean to suggest that everyone’s narrow circle is narrow. Most people’s sphere of influence is rather narrow and so we only have to consider the effects they have on their family, friends, co-workers and so on. However, some people—politicians or military leaders—will have a much wider and extensive sphere of influence. In these cases we judge the character traits in terms of whether they are good or bad for the people they substantially affect. (Brown (1994), p.34n12)

Brown makes this comment in passing, and the lack of significant argument for it on her part suggests that this is a natural way to read Hume’s meaning, although much of the literature, as already discussed, has failed to fully acknowledge this straightforward reading of Hume’s text. Developing an account of who is “substantially” affected is, therefore, essential to understanding the proper scope of our evaluations.

²²²She argues, “we do not survey a person through the eyes of her actual narrow circle but rather through the eyes of what would be a person’s normal or usual narrow circle” (Brown (1994), p.24).

considering that there are still some circumstances wanting to render the cause a compleat one” (T3.3.1.19). In such cases, our imagination makes up the difference.²²³

If we take Hume’s references to an agent’s sphere of influence seriously, and note that, as in the passage cited above from EPM 2.7 (SBN 178), the narrowness of this sphere might fluctuate, we are now in a position to consider the factors that affect the boundaries of a person’s morally relevant sphere of influence. I have argued that it is helpful to understand the sphere as including those to whom we have distinguishable relationships (which does not imply that we *know* all these people), and that different relationships receive different priority. We will see in section 4.2 some of the many factors that determine these relationships and their relative priority.

3. A Catalogue of Virtues

At first glance, my claim that for Hume virtue is variable might appear to contradict many things he says about specific virtues, and so before discussing the details of the factors by which traits are variously virtuous or not, I will briefly account for these apparent counterexamples. In many places, for example, Hume appears to give a list of context-independent virtues, or qualities that are always and everywhere viewed as virtues. For example, much of Book III of the *Treatise* is supposed to be a “catalogue of virtues” in which Hume describes many, if not all, of the virtues. If he sets out to offer a list of the virtues, how can we say that virtues are not fixed? He speaks of “the virtues” in a general sense, noting that “[e]ach of the virtues, even benevolence, justice, gratitude, integrity, excites a different sentiment” (T3.3.4.2 / SBN 607). However, he immediately proceeds to claim that different characters can both be

²²³ This movement of the mind from the first idea to the second is not philosophically insignificant, for Hume; one of his definitions of a cause is just such a mental association between one object and the second that we expect will follow (EHU 7.29 / SBN 77). We can read this phrase as making a strong statement about this person’s causal power, in spite of circumstances.

virtuous: “The characters of *Caesar* and *Cato*, as drawn by *Sallust*, are both of them virtuous, in the strictest sense of the word; but in a different way.... The one produces love; the other esteem: The one is amiable; the other awful: We cou’d wish to meet with the one character in a friend; the other character we wou’d be ambitious of in ourselves” (T3.3.4.2 / SBN 607-8). In this passage Hume is clearly saying that these two men have different, incompatible virtues, and they are seen as virtuous for different reasons.²²⁴

Nevertheless, this does not get us to a full acceptance of the variability of virtue; all it has shown so far is that there are at least two classes of virtuous people: the good and the great. Though Hume explicitly acknowledges some difference between what it is to be “good” and what it is to be “great” (a distinction that we will examine more closely later), we might think that this is the only distinction he offers, and that these two sets comprise the lists of virtues. (“Good” and “great” should not be read as “better” and “best” here; by “great” Hume is referring to a certain status in society, or history—queens and conquerors might often be “great” characters.) He still offers lists of virtues to characterize each of these classes: “From these principles we may easily account for that merit, which is commonly ascrib’d to *generosity, humanity, compassion, gratitude, friendship, fidelity, zeal, disinterestedness, liberality*, and all those other qualities, which form the character of good and benevolent.” (T3.3.3.3 / SBN 603) In this passage he listed the virtues of a “good” person, and elsewhere he lists the virtues of “great” people: “Their *prudence, temperance, frugality, industry, assiduity, enterprise, dexterity*, are celebrated, as well as their *generosity, and humanity*” (T3.3.1.24 / SBN 587). Still, Hume notes a feature of these virtues that supports my argument for variability: these are the traits which make these people

²²⁴ Though as I have noted, many Hume scholars recognize some degree of variability in Hume’s account of the virtues, this is by no means universal. An extreme example of a failure to recognize this feature is William Davie’s reading of Hume’s “catalog” of virtues, which claims that on Hume’s view, we make unwavering “lists” of virtues and vices based simply on our sentimental reaction to descriptive words (such as “ambitious”). Davie’s view makes no recognition of the contextual information that is essential to these sorts of evaluations (Davie, “Hume’s Catalog” (1976)).

suites to “perform their part in society; and...render them serviceable to themselves” (ibid.). In spite of these apparently universal lists of virtues, I argue that this last phrase allows for my interpretation that virtues are much more variable than the single distinction between a “good” character and a “great” character. These traits are only virtues to the extent that they meet the criteria of virtue, and as we will see, whether or not a trait meets these criteria depends in part on situation-specific details.

In other places Hume makes strong statements about certain traits being necessary for virtue, or always eliciting the moral sentiment of approval. For example, in the second *Enquiry*, he says that frugality is a fundamental virtue: “all prospect of success in life, or even of tolerable subsistence, must fail, where a reasonable frugality is wanting” (EPM 6.11 / SBN 237). Hume goes on to make an even stronger claim about the virtuousness of many of these traits, arguing that the mere suggestion of them *forces* approval:

“Besides *discretion, caution, enterprise, industry, assiduity, frugality, economy, good sense, prudence, discernment*; besides these endowments, I say, whose very names force an avowal of their merit, there are many others to which the most determined skepticism cannot for a moment refuse the tribute of praise and approbation. *Temperance, sobriety, patience, constancy, perseverance, forethought, considerateness, secrecy, order, insinuation, address, presence of mind, quickness of conception, facility of expression*; these, and a thousand more of the same kind, no man will ever deny to be excellences and perfections. (EPM 6.21 / SBN 242-3)

Though this passage appears to confirm that some virtues are universal, taken in context it still allows for a form of the variability that I am outlining. Hume is making a rhetorical point here, arguing that in spite of the cynics who are skeptical of the existence of anything that falls under the definition “virtue,” that there are qualities which we admire, and of course this is all he needs to get the cynic to accept his argument. So the force of Hume’s statement here is not its implied universality, but rather the fact that in at least some cases, we indubitably approve of such traits useful to an individual. He follows this passage with the qualification noted earlier: “*As their merit consists in their tendency to serve the person, possessed of them, without any magnificent*

claim to public and social desert, we are the less jealous of their pretensions, and readily admit them into the catalogue of laudable qualities” (EPM 6.21 / SBN 243, my emphasis). This last statement reminds us that we qualify our appraisal of these traits according to their usefulness, so while they may almost universally prove to be useful, as a matter of fact, they are only praiseworthy to the extent that they carry this tendency. Furthermore, to the extent that they might make a serious claim on public utility, their virtuousness is tempered.

In arguing for the variability of virtue in Hume, I do not wish to deny that there are some, perhaps many, traits that are usually, if not always, virtues. The variability I am highlighting in Hume’s account is not a drastic variability, but it is not insignificant either. My primary goal is simply to show that there must be some variability, which means that there is not a definite, complete set of virtuous traits, and our evaluations are importantly and essentially based on the individual. Despite these lists as they appear, there is overwhelming evidence for the context-dependence, and so the non-universality, of these traits.

4. Factors that Determine Relative Virtue

In this section, I will draw out the numerous factors that Hume acknowledges to play a role in determining the relative virtue of particular traits. Some of these factors relate to the narrow circle—certain features of a person’s life determine the scope of her circle of influence. Other factors relate to the larger environment in which a person lives and acts, as well as various individual factors, such as one’s age, or other traits that one possesses, that play a partial role in determining the relative virtue of one’s traits. The aim of this section is to elaborate the extent to which virtue is variable on Hume’s account, according to all these different factors.

4.1 Variation across nations, societies

Hume has a particular interest in what he calls “national character,” meaning shared character traits amongst members of a single nation. Whatever the source of these distinct characters, whether they be social customs, shared historical experiences, or perhaps even climate, these factors on a national level can influence which traits are most useful and agreeable within that country. For example, he writes,

In countries, where men pass most of their time in conversation, and visits, and assemblies, these *companionable* qualities, so to speak, are of high estimation, and form a chief part of personal merit. In countries, where men live a more domestic life, and either are employed in business, or amuse themselves in a narrower circle of acquaintance, the more solid qualities are chiefly regarded. Thus, I have often observed that, among the French, the first questions, with regard to a stranger, are, *Is he polite? Has he wit?* In our own country, the chief praise bestowed, is always that of a *good-natured, sensible fellow*. (EPM 8.4 / SBN 262)

What is deemed to be of most value in regard to status or success in a country can also influence which character traits are virtuous, insofar as different traits are more and less suitable for promoting certain values:

Where birth is respected, unactive, spiritless minds remain in haughty indolence, and dream of nothing but pedigrees and genealogies: The generous and ambitious seek honour, and authority, and reputation, and favour. Where riches are the chief idol, corruption, venality, rapine prevail: Arts, manufactures, commerce, agriculture flourish. The former prejudice, being favourable to military virtue, is more suited to monarchies. The latter, being the chief spur to industry, agrees better with a republican government. And we accordingly find, that each of these forms of government, by varying the *utility* of those customs, has commonly a proportionable effect on the sentiments of mankind. (EPM 6.35 / SBN 249)²²⁵

In “A Dialogue,” where Hume presents Brutus as a fictional character out of context, to highlight the context-dependence of assessments, he likewise elaborates on the degree to which national character influences the virtuousness or viciousness of particular traits: “A degree of luxury may be ruinous and pernicious in a native of Switzerland, which only fosters the arts, and

²²⁵ Hume makes a similar observation in his *History*, 5.132.

encourages industry in a Frenchman or Englishman” (EPM “A Dialogue” 41 / SBN 337). On the level of national character, then, shared endeavors, shared values, shared pastimes and customs, and different governmental structures partially determine which traits are useful and agreeable.

On a related point, social environment generally (which may be smaller than national environment, or particular to a certain age in a given nation, or perhaps in some cases in the twenty-first century, larger than national environment) can be a determining factor for virtue. Different social groups have different customs, and the relative usefulness of a trait can depend on these varying factors: “Particular customs and manners alter the usefulness of qualities: they also alter their merit. Particular situations and accidents have, in some degree, the same influence” (EPM 6.20 / SBN 241). Claudia Schmidt briefly notes this level of variability in her account of Hume’s moral theory, pointing out that different qualities fit the criteria of virtue “in relation to specific cultural settings.”²²⁶ Shared interests in a community partly determine whether a trait is useful, in the degree to which it advances those interests: “whatever conduct promotes the good of the community, is loved, praised, and esteemed by the community, on account of that utility and interest of which every one partakes” (EPM 6.22 / SBN 243).

Historically, different societies have promoted different virtues based on their particular needs. Societies more frequently engaged in war, for example, valued physical prowess more highly: “In ancient times, bodily strength and dexterity, being of greater *use* and importance in war, was also much more esteemed and valued than at present” (EPM 6.25 / SBN 245). In societies that are less frequently engaged in physical combat, physical prowess is not, as a matter of fact, as useful. Citing Machiavelli’s arguments, Hume notes that social affairs make various traits more and less valuable: “Fabius, says Machiavel, was cautious; Scipio enterprising: And both succeeded, because the situation of the Roman affairs, during the command of each, was

²²⁶ Schmidt, *David Hume* (2003), p.249

peculiarly adapted to his genius; but both would have failed had these situations been reversed” (EPM 6.9 / SBN 237).

The key point in these passages is that whether or not a trait such as cautiousness is valuable depends on what is valued and required in a society; in societies in which cautiousness is not useful, it will be a vice rather than a virtue. Hume reiterates this in “A Dialogue”:

It is not surprising, that, during a period of war and disorder, the military virtues should be more celebrated than the pacific, and attract more the admiration and attention of mankind.... Sometimes too, magnanimity, greatness of mind, disdain of slavery, inflexible rigour and integrity, may better suit the circumstances of one age than those of another, and have a more kindly influence, both on public affairs, and on a man’s own safety and advancement. Our idea of merit, therefore, will also vary a little with these variations; and Labeo, perhaps, be censured for the same qualities, which procured Cato the highest approbation. (EPM “A Dialogue” 41 / SBN 337)

Which traits are virtuous can depend on the current social environment, and the needs of one’s society. To the extent that social customs and circumstances determine whether a trait is useful, the same trait may be a virtue in one society but not in another.

A final example of the social variability of virtues is seen in Hume’s description of William Rufus, eleventh century King of England (William II), in Hume’s *History*. In this passage we see how certain traits, given the times, proved more useful than they might at other times:

He seems to have been a violent and tyrannical prince; a perfidious, encroaching, and dangerous neighbor; an unkind and ungenerous relation... and if he possessed abilities, he lay so much under the government of impetuous passions, that he made little use of them in his administration; and he indulged without reserve that domineering policy which suited his temper, and which, if supported, as it was in him, with courage and vigor, proves often more successful in disorderly times, than the deepest foresight and most refined artifices. (*H* 1:237)

In “disorderly times,” a domineering personality can be extremely useful, and so though William Rufus was violent, encroaching and impetuous, these traits were to his and the

general advantage at the time (though Hume's overall assessment of him is still clearly negative).

4.2 Variation across individuals

Some attention has been given in the literature to the variability noted so far. Schmidt, Abramson, Taylor and Cohon all make some acknowledgement that virtue varies across different societies, and that one's social, national, and historical context inform which traits are taken to be useful and agreeable.²²⁷ However, I wish to press on with this point. I am arguing that on a narrower level, virtuous traits can vary even across persons within a society, nation, or historical era. The variation of virtuous traits within a social context can track many different features of the individual's situation. One important variable is a person's role within society. Baier has noted this variability on the basic distinction of "good" versus "great" characters in Hume, where the latter implies a more prominent role (e.g. a monarch or a general): "The good and the great may compete, and so on occasion may the useful and agreeable."²²⁸ But I argue that the distinctions Hume makes are still more subtle, and that factors such as profession, sex, age, and even an individual's other traits, determine whether or not a single trait is a virtue or a vice in that person.

One key factor that informs this individual variability is the scope of one's sphere of influence. Because virtue and vice are judged according to one's sphere of influence (one's narrow circle), determining this sphere of influence is requisite for determining whether a trait is a virtue. However, one person's sphere of influence can be different than another's based on several factors. There is some direct evidence for this reading in Hume's texts, and many more claims he makes implicitly entail this conclusion.

²²⁷ Schmidt (2003), pp.249-53; Abramson, "Hume on Cultural Conflicts" (1999); Taylor, "Hume's Later Moral Philosophy" (2009), pp.331-6; Cohon (2008b), pp.239-67; see also Cohen, "The Notion of Moral Progress" (2000).

²²⁸ Baier (1991) p. 214

One's social roles, such as one's role in business, or one's relative prominence in society (such as a politician), determine the circumference of one's sphere of influence, and so can determine virtue. Hume clearly holds that one's relations, as determined by one's social role, inform our expectations. Insofar as we have expectations of people, we recognize that certain traits are more and less useful or agreeable for someone in their position. Not only does this determine which traits are virtues, but the degree to which they are virtues. Leading into the passage cited earlier about our expectations of a statesman, Hume writes: "In proportion to the station which a man possesses, according to the relations in which he is placed; we always expect from him a greater or less degree of good, and when disappointed, blame his inutility; and much more do we blame him, if any ill or prejudice arise from his conduct and behaviour" (EPM 5.38 / SBN 225*f*). If we expect a greater degree of, for example, agreeableness in a person because she possesses a certain station, this might be because whether she is agreeable or not influences many more people. Someone who accepts a public position also accepts a wider circle of influence. Further, to note Baier's earlier worry, this does not require that a person *know* all the people to whom she bears these relations.

Hume reiterates this point in his discussion of "great" people (that is, people of particular social prominence and influence): "most of the qualities, which are attributed to [great people], may be divided into two kinds, *viz.* such as make them perform their part in society; and such as render them serviceable to themselves, and enable them to promote their own interest" (T3.3.1.24 / SBN 587). Insofar as virtues are assessed according to the part one plays in society, and certainly these parts differ across persons, we can assume a degree of variability according to the scope of one's influence in this regard. In discussing the natural virtues, Hume makes the general point that people who have "extraordinary parts" draw more esteem and regard because "[t]he good and ill of multitudes are connected with their actions" (T3.3.4.14 /

SBN 613-4). The more people distinguishably affected by a person's actions, the more we admire his virtues, and the more his vices dismay us.

On a related point, one's professional engagement can determine which traits are virtuous in a person. Hume makes these claims because of the particular tasks that different professions require, and notes that different traits are more or less useful in accomplishing those tasks:

Particular customs and manners alter the usefulness of qualities: They also alter their merit. He will always be more esteemed who possesses those talents and accomplishments which suit his station and profession, than he whom fortune has misplaced in the part which she has assigned him. The private or selfish virtues are, in this respect, more arbitrary than the public and social. (EPM 6.20 / SBN 241)

The public virtues are particularly subject to variability, he argues, given the variability in people's stations and professions. He recognizes that the purposes of one's profession may require different actions, which should be judged according to their circumstances and so are different in people of different professions. Discussing the origins of justice, he writes, "we must necessarily give a greater indulgence to a prince or minister, who deceives another; than to a private gentleman, who breaks his word of honor" (T3.2.11.4 / SBN 568-9). This is because the justice between nations is not as useful as justice within a nation, and so the obligations of private citizens to each other are greater than the obligations of leaders to other leaders. Certain traits also tend to be generally unsuited to one's public affairs, and so Hume generalizes that they are vices, but this is precisely because they tend (usually, not always) to make us less useful in these roles: "*prodigality, luxury, irresolution, uncertainty*, are vicious, merely because they draw ruin upon us, and incapacitate us for business and action" (T3.3.4.7 / SBN 611).

Hume also discusses how one's traits are virtuous or vicious to the extent that they serve one's personal goals. We have to assume that certain goals are morally neutral to accept this

argument, and of course that different people may have different goals. In the second *Enquiry*, he writes:

The quality, the most necessary for the execution of any useful enterprise, is discretion; by which we carry on a safe intercourse with others, give due attention to our own and to their character, weigh each circumstance of the business which we undertake, and employ the surest and safest means for the attainment of any end or purpose. To a Cromwell, perhaps, or a De Retz, discretion may appear an alderman-like virtue, as Dr. Swift calls it; and being incompatible with those vast designs, to which their courage and ambition prompted them, it might really, in them, be a fault or imperfection. (EPM 6.8 / SBN 236)

Though discretion is *often* a useful trait for undertaking “any useful enterprise,” it is not so for every possible “design.” Hume’s claim here does not diminish the pursuits of Cromwell or De Retz, either, noting that it would *really* be a *fault* in them to have this trait. In his discussion of natural virtues in the *Treatise*, Hume again argues for the variability of virtues according to one’s projects:

When it is ask’d, whether a quick or a slow apprehension be most valuable? whether one, that at first view penetrates into a subject, but can perform nothing upon study; or a contrary character, which must work out every thing by dint of application? whether a profound genius, or a sure judgment? in short, what character, or peculiar understanding, is more excellent than another? ‘tis evident we can answer none of these questions, without considering which of those qualities capacitates a man best for the world, and carries him farthest in any of his undertakings. (T3.3.4.6)

None of these characteristics is in itself useful or harmful, but they acquire these functions according to the goals and projects a person aims to undertake. A goal of climbing Mt. Everest will be facilitated by certain traits that are not required if one’s goal is, for example, to become an Iron Chef; depending on what goals or projects one undertakes, different traits will be useful and agreeable, both to oneself and to the people one encounters in pursuit of this goal.

Hume also argues that virtues can track one’s sex. He argues that chastity is a virtue particularly for females because of the utility it offers (T3.2.12 / SBN 570-3; EPM 4.6-11 / SBN 207-9). It is traditionally a virtue because it ensures paternity, which is socially and economically

required for raising children. (He acknowledges that the virtue absurdly transgresses age boundaries delimited by this reasoning.) Now that we have modern medicine and Maury Povich, perhaps chastity is not so uniquely useful anymore.

One's age can make a difference in whether a trait is a virtue or a vice. Hume claims that we have different expectations of appropriate behavior for people of different ages, and to see a person of a certain age with traits not usually expected or accepted in someone of that age is disagreeable. For example, a sense of gravity is not disagreeable in a person of advanced age, but it is in a young person:

The *decorum* or *indecorum* of a quality, with regard to the age, or character, or station, contributes also to its praise or blame. This decorum depends, in a great measure, upon experience. 'Tis usual to see men lose their levity, as they advance in years. Such a degree of gravity, therefore, and such years, are connected together in our thoughts. When we observe them separated in any person's character, this imposes a kind of violence on our imagination, and is disagreeable. (T3.3.4.12 / SBN 612)

Modesty is another example Hume mentions that is agreeable in young people, though we know from the earlier discussion of pride that it is less agreeable later in life. Hume explains modesty as showing "a diffidence of our own judgment" and suggest that "[i]n young men chiefly, this quality is a sure sign of good sense" (EPM 8.8 / SBN 263). We might also think that a certain naïveté, for example, is agreeable in young students but quite disagreeable in colleagues. In the *History*, Hume describes Henry, son of Henry II, in these terms: "Brave, ambitious, liberal, munificent, affable; he discovered qualities, which give great lustre to youth; prognosticate a shining fortune; but, unless tempered in mature age with discretion, are the forerunners of the greatest calamities" (H 1.9).

Hume also suggests in more than one place that certain traits are virtuous or not depending on other traits that a person has or lacks. We can call this variability by virtue clusters. In the *Treatise*, Hume claims that "Courage and ambition, when not regulated by benevolence, are fit only to make a tyrant and a public robber" (T3.3.3.3 / SBN 604). These

two traits that are typically virtuous, are in fact vicious—leading to more harm—in a person who lacks the third trait. Richard Dees has noticed this feature of Hume’s view in his *History*, particularly in Hume’s discussion of Charles I. Dees writes, “Charles’ loyalty and perseverance, in combination with his poor judgment of character, actually made things much worse than had he been less loyal or less persevering in following the advice of an imprudent friend.”²²⁹ In this case, two traits that are in many cases virtuous, are vicious due to the lack of a third trait. Having these traits led Charles to be more harmful to his people than had he lacked them as well.

From this wide variety of factors that influence the usefulness and agreeableness of traits, we can see that evaluations of traits are significantly context-dependent. This list of factors is representative but not exhaustive, and Hume makes the general point that features of one’s particular situation can influence whether a trait is a virtue or a vice, “Sometimes also the peculiar circumstances of things render one moral quality more useful than others, and give it a peculiar preference” (EPM “A Dialogue” 38 / SBN 336). Several of these factors, including one’s social station and professional role, have clear consequences for the scope of one’s narrow circle. I noted earlier the role of a president and how this determines one sphere of influence. In general, more public roles entail a larger sphere of influence, and so a different account of who is considered as potentially benefited or harmed by a person’s traits, in determinable ways. Recognizing this factor also helps us delineate those with whom we have distinguishable, socially significant relations, which was offered earlier as a determinant of one’s morally relevant sphere of influence.

5. Conclusion

Having fully considered Hume’s account of virtue, we can begin to evaluate the relative merit of his view in contrast to a traditional Aristotelian view. While Hume’s account differs

²²⁹ Dees (1997), p.59

from the Aristotelian account on many features, as noted above, I find three of these differences to be especially noteworthy improvements in how we might pursue a contemporary account of virtue ethics. First, Hume's non-eudaimonistic view is suited to a social account of personhood that I find attractive. If we consider personhood as at least partially socially-defined, then an account of virtue that evaluates the moral life in terms of what is good for the individual agent and her perfection is lacking a dimension of what it means to be a person, whereas an account that describes the moral life in terms of the relations a person bears to other people captures what we are looking for, on such an account, in explaining what it is to be a virtuous *person*. This is, importantly, a normative advantage of Hume's view. Second, on a more pragmatic level, the rejection of the unity of the virtues allows for what I take to be a more commonsense approach to our understanding of virtue. It allows us to acknowledge degrees of virtue, and moderated assessments of people's virtue, without having to deny (as the unity of the virtues thesis would have us do) that people are in some ways, or to some degree, really virtuous. Finally, the variability of virtues across persons and situations, and the notion that virtues might conflict, allow for person- and situation-specific assessments of virtue, as well as genuine moral dilemmas. I believe these offer a better descriptive account of our moral practices. In these concluding remarks, I will discuss both the interpretive conclusions we can draw about Hume's view, as well as these normative and descriptive benefits that it offers. These are a few of perhaps many further lines of thought that can be pursued if we take Hume's virtue ethic as a contending alternative ethical view.

The most significant consequence of this argument for our reading of Hume is that it gives a clearer picture, given his disjunctive measure of virtue, whose benefit we consider in judging the virtuousness or viciousness of a trait. We can see the extent to which various factors of our situation determine to whom our traits are expected to be useful and agreeable, and while this account requires an evaluation of these relations on an individual basis, it gives us the

framework from which to begin. Our understanding of who “stands in relation to us” can be more effectively considered, and is not arbitrarily limited to the obvious categories of family, friends, and colleagues. This helps us avoid worries that have been expressed in the literature about the narrowness of the circle by which we judge merit (e.g. Kelly), and gives more specific information about how to delineate our spheres of influence to give us a reasonable standard by which we, and others, judge the merit of our traits.

With this new framework, we can begin to ask important questions about how a virtue ethic like Hume’s takes into consideration the effects of our behavior on persons more distantly related to us. While it does not establish, by itself, obligations to all human beings, it provides means for us to argue that certain groups of people do fall within the scope of our sphere of influence in ways that reflect on our relative virtue and vice. Even if in Hume’s day, one’s sphere of influence as a typical Scotsman was fairly narrow, this theory allows us to recognize relevant features of our modern world that tie us in distinguishable relations to distant people. It allows us to consider, for example, the vices that may lie behind taking third-world labor for granted, given our better understanding of our role in the global economy.

In addition to helping us recognize distant people within our sphere of influence, this view also allows us to recognize the deep significance of our narrower spheres. We face choices in our lives that can lead us into wider or narrower spheres of influence, but there is nothing inherently more noble in accepting a role that carries with it a wider sphere of influence. We might have to judge which positions our natural traits best suit us for, but a decision to be a kindergarten teacher in Smalltown, U.S.A. is not by nature any less noble, in regard to virtue, than a decision to be a diplomat. This view also allows us to recognize the responsibility that comes with accepting particular roles, and to understand that new expectations for virtue legitimately follow when one becomes a president, a professional athlete, or a television personality. Though we may often over-estimate the value of certain traits for people in these

roles, we can also see that by accepting a wider sphere of influence, they accept a different standard for virtue to which they are then subject. Despite the variability in virtuous traits allowed by this account, it is important to keep in mind the stability of our standard of judgment for these traits—that is, their usefulness and agreeableness. Hume’s account of virtue takes as its standard the quality of one’s relation to other people as the primary measure of virtue, and importantly not anything like an account of the perfection of human nature or a pursuit of *eudaimonia* for the individual.

This exposition of Hume’s view, by highlighting the variability of the traits classified as virtues according to a wide variety of contextual factors, shows us just how unusual Hume’s virtue ethic is. Nonetheless, I contend that this contextually based account of virtue, which produces potential conflicts between our virtues and responsibilities, captures the complexity of our moral experience, and is not in conflict with the assessments we usually give of people’s characters. The notion that being an admirable piano teacher makes one a less admirable military leader is a consequence we should be happy to accept, and it would be a strange account of virtue if we thought a particular virtuous person would be equally admirable in both positions. The qualities that we value in people—qualities such as gentleness or austerity, which are moral qualities—are not the same in such distinct persons. Hume’s view captures this variation while maintaining a clear standard for virtue.

In spite of rejecting the unity of the virtues, and so a traditional account of what it is to be virtuous, Hume’s account does give us new reason to consider a person’s character as a whole when we consider her virtue or vice. This is because of his recognition that certain traits are only virtues when they are accompanied by other traits, and so merely having the trait of “courage” does not guarantee that one is virtuous. So while we do not require the *same* clusters of traits for every virtuous person, we are not left with a thoroughly disjointed view of virtue, where a person’s traits are judged entirely independently of each other.

For all these reasons, I think Hume's account of virtue offers us a unique and nuanced account of admirable behavior, one that is attuned to the variety of factors in our lives that determine our relations to other people, and what those relations demand. I hope to have motivated further interest in taking Hume's moral theory as a virtue ethic that has important contributions to make in the larger sphere of virtue ethic accounts. Furthermore, I think it is even more clear, given the variety of individual and situational factors that determine our assessment of a person's virtue, the extent to which a narrative epistemology of moral evaluation is particularly suited to capture virtue as Hume defines it.

Chapter 6

Do We Lack Character? A Humean Reply to the Situationist Challenge

In recent years, John Doris has mounted a substantive challenge to the viability of character as a morally significant notion. His argument is based on the results of hundreds of studies of human psychology, which indicate that seemingly insignificant features of particular situations play a primary role in determining how people will behave. People are more likely to help if they are in a slightly better mood, or may commit callous and careless actions if they are in a bit of a hurry. Trading on the quite reasonable claim that whatever our moral theory is based on, it must take account of facts about human psychology, Doris has argued that all our traditional notions of character are inconsequential for explaining and predicting people's actions, and so are not useful in our moral dialogue.²³⁰ If features of one's situation are the strongest and most reliable determinants of one's actions, then to appeal to "character" to understand why one acts as one does is at best superfluous, and at worst obfuscating. Reference to character traits does not give us reliable information regarding how people will act in different situations, and continuing to use it as if it does will prevent us from being reliable predictors and inhibit our ability to assess responsibility. Reference to character as grounding people's actions does not give us an empirically adequate account of human action. We're better off, according to Doris, eschewing reference to character traits and becoming better acquainted with the influence of situational factors.

²³⁰ Doris is not alone in his critique (see also Harman, "Moral Philosophy needs Moral Psychology" (1999) and "The Nonexistence of Character Traits" (2000)), but his critique is both lengthier and less antagonistic than others, so it provides a reasonable and fully elaborated representation of the situationist position. This argument focuses on his full view as presented in *Lack of Character* (2002).

If Doris is right that we should give up talk of character traits, this comes at a real cost. For one thing, if we have any inclination to hope for the viability of any virtue ethic, it seems that we have to take Doris's challenge seriously. Insofar as virtue ethic accounts base their theory of morality on the assumption that a person can have virtuous and vicious character traits, if it turns out that these traits are causally inefficacious in action and evaluatively problematic, then virtue ethics are unable to maintain their central tenet. And though we may not all be virtue ethicists about morality, we can all recognize that such a view is at least a reasonable ethical position. Unless, that is, Doris is correct, and the term "character" is useless for moral dialogue.

Even if we do not aim to espouse a virtue ethic, we have reason to want to maintain reference to character. Some consequentialists, Roger Crisp and Dale Jamieson, for example, adopt a focus on virtues. And in our everyday moral dialogue, we refer to character traits all the time. For example, we might say, "Even as a child she was fearless," to explain an adult's courageous behavior. We take there to be significant consistencies in people's personality or character that affect how they behave throughout their lives. But if Doris is right, we may have to give up this kind of talk. At best, we can use it in a sort of rhetorical explanatory way, but it certainly has no bearing on our moral evaluations of the person, or our expectations for how that person will behave in the future. The practice of calling "character witnesses" in court to establish a defendant's innocence is an obfuscating waste of time, by Doris's account; our faith in our partners' fidelity is tenuous; and the belief that my dear mother would never commit murder, because she so respects humane life, is unfounded. If we are not ready to give up these practices and beliefs, we should approach Doris's argument with a wary eye.

Nevertheless, the situationist evidence is impossible to ignore. Though there are different ways of interpreting the results of these studies, one is hard pressed to deny that, at the very least, the evidence shows us that our usual expectations for people's behavior can be seriously mistaken, and that these mistakes result, in some way, from a failure to appreciate

details of the situations in which people are acting. This evidence has drawn a great deal of philosophical interest and replies from a variety of angles. In trying to redeem virtue ethics, some philosophers have tried to reinterpret the meaning of these results²³¹, some have argued that they just show how rare real virtue is²³², and some have argued that the considered situationist position fails to recognize important moral assumptions.²³³ In this paper, I intend to accept the situationist evidence, and the claim that facts about our situations can determine our actions, but I reject the conclusion of Doris and others that this requires the elimination of reference to “character” in our moral dialogue. I argue that a plausible account of character, which captures what we usually mean when we refer to character, acknowledges the necessary role of situationist data, and that by his own account, Doris relies on moral concepts that are not mere features of the situation, implicitly admitting that reference to character—understood reasonably and not as a caricature—is in fact necessary.²³⁴ Doris’s considered view about what our moral evaluations *should* focus on is actually quite similar to what we really, typically mean when we refer to character traits, and so not only can we accept talk of character without violating any of his requirements, we also, by his own standards, must refer to some non-situational factor that looks, by reasonable accounts, to be what we mean by “character.”

The parameters of this argument are fairly narrow. It addresses Doris’s understanding of situationist evidence, specifically, and so does not necessarily stand against all possible situationist challenges to character, though showing that it stands up to this one is not a small success. Doris offers a comprehensive critique of character via situationist evidence, which has generated broad discussion, so I take it to be a thorough statement of a particular view that

²³¹ Sabini and Silver, “Lack of Character?” (2005)

²³² Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics* (2008)

²³³ Annas, “Comments on John Doris’s *Lack of Character*” (2005)

²³⁴ Dana Nelkin has also suggested this reading of Doris, but the argument here is not derived from her suggestion. My argument also addresses, to some degree, the concern she expresses that even if this is true, situationism might threaten such a view of responsibility in serious ways. (See Nelkin, “Freedom, Responsibility, and the Challenge of Situationism” (2005), p.198)

challenges the notion of character. Also, my response succeeds according to Doris's identificationist account of moral responsibility, in particular, and does not necessarily accord with other possible identificationist approaches.²³⁵ In this argument I take Hume's account of character, as it has been described in previous chapters, to be plausible. For the sake of argument, I also assume without defense the bolder Humean claim that only actions stemming from character traits garner moral responsibility; I make this assumption not based on its plausibility but because this is the sort of view that Doris is challenging.²³⁶ If we did not hold this strict view, we would be less subject to Doris's criticism to begin with. I do not intend to be arguing for or promoting this account of responsibility independently, but rather to show that even if we accept such a view, it withstands Doris's charges.

1. The Challenge to Character

1.1 *Situationist position*

I will begin by briefly summarizing the situationist position. Doris refers to the psychology literature as evidence against character traits. It is not my intention to engage in a detailed discussion of the psychology studies here, but in order to move along the argument, I will mention a few of the primary examples touted by situationists. Perhaps the most famous is the Milgram experiment, in which individuals were asked to participate in a study led by a purported psychologist which required them to push a button that, purportedly, sent electric shocks to a participant in another room. The results of these studies showed that despite common expectations that people would resist out of concern for the "participant," the majority

²³⁵ For example, Frankfurt, "Reply to Gary Watson" (2002).

²³⁶ I will argue that Doris is also committed to a similar view about responsibility, and to that extent, whether such a view is plausible or not, the argument I offer here will hold up. I do offer some basic motivation for this bold claim on pp.13-14, below, but this is only intended to advance the dialectic and not to stand as an argument for the view.

of people in this situation followed the directives of the “psychologist” and sent surprisingly high electric shocks to the “participant” who was all the while expressing great pain. These results are seen to indicate that our expectations of behavior according to traits like kindness or compassion can radically fail.²³⁷ Another experiment tested self-reporting compassionate seminarians, intent on living a life in service to others in need. In this situation, some seminarians were told they were late for a presentation they were expected to give on the topic of the Good Samaritan, and those who believed they were late almost all failed to notice a stranger exhibiting signs of a heart attack on the path the seminarians took to their presentation. This result is seen to show that their compassion does not determine how they will behave, but rather their behavior is determined by the situational factor of whether they are in a hurry.²³⁸ A third study showed the result that people were much more likely to help a stranger who has dropped a pile of papers if they had just found a dime in a payphone, suggesting that very minor mood effects are more significant determinants than deep tendencies to help others.²³⁹ Finally, some studies were done on students’ tendencies to cheat when exposed to various methods; these studies showed that while students might cheat using one method, such as copying answers from an answer key, this did not correlate strongly to their likelihood of cheating using another method, such as continuing to work after time expired. This study is taken to refute broad-brushed attributions of virtues such as “honesty.”²⁴⁰ Each of these is meant to show that features of the situation, as opposed to personality traits, determine how people act in a given situation.

As a result of studying this evidence, Doris argues for the situationist view, which maintains three primary theses. First, the situationist believes that situational features are the best predictors of how people will act in a given situation—people’s behavior is most likely to

²³⁷ Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (1974)

²³⁸ Darley and Batson, “From Jerusalem to Jericho” (1973)

²³⁹ Isen and Patrick, “The Influence of Positive Feelings” (1983)

²⁴⁰ Hartshorne and May, *Studies in the Nature of Character* (1928)

approximate the norm for people in such-and-such situation. Second, by the language of traditional trait attribution (Suraj is honest, Sally is generous, etc.), people will behave inconsistently (consider the seminarians who are compassionate if not in a hurry, but callous if running late; or students who are dishonest in using an answer key to cheat, but honest about stopping when time is called). Third, people may have more specific traits that are, in Doris's terms, "evaluatively disintegrated," meaning that while a person may be a patient father, he may be a terrifying boss. These conclusions, drawn from the situationist experiments, indicate that character or personality traits are indeterminate predictors of behavior, and we can best predict people's actions by studying how people generally behave based on features of the situation.²⁴¹

While disavowing traditional character traits, Doris allows for the possibility of what he calls "local" traits. These traits will be exhibited stably and consistently, but only in situations that are highly similar: "Where such temporal stability obtains, we are justified in attributing highly contextualized dispositions or 'local' traits. However, local trait attribution does not fund expectations of cross-situational consistency; the answer-key cheat may be score-adding honest."²⁴² Due to this only highly specified, contextualized regularity, and due to the lack of integration of similar traits, Doris concludes that we should view character as at best "fragmented" and as such not stable enough to ground our moral theory.²⁴³ Our personality traits are "evaluatively disintegrated" and "situation-specific local traits"—our best accounts of "personality" cannot be given in terms of saying people are *compassionate* or *courageous*, but, on Doris's view, must be given in terms such as "dime-finding-dropped-paper compassionate" and "sailing-in-rough-weather-with-one's-friends courageous."²⁴⁴

²⁴¹ Doris, pp.24-5

²⁴² *ibid.* p.64

²⁴³ *ibid.*

²⁴⁴ *ibid.* p.115

1.2 Doris's challenges to "character"

Doris articulates three main challenges to the use of references to "character" in our moral discourse, based on his conclusion that character is fragmented. First, he says character traits are not predictive of behavior. Since it appears that facts about the situation are more explanatory of what people will do than are traits—the seminarians' compassion should cause them to stop and aid the stranger, but the fact that they are running late causes them to pass by—then knowledge of a person's character traits does not give us an indication of how they will behave. Jim may be as generous as they come, but whether or not he will put money in the charity box depends on morally insignificant situational factors.

The second problem Doris highlights is that if we have a moral theory based on character traits, in which responsibility is accorded to people according to their virtuous or vicious traits, then the situationist literature leads us to a radical lack of responsibility for many of our actions. Doris uses Hume as an example here:

According to Hume, a person is responsible only for actions that proceed from her 'character and disposition'; to attribute responsibility is to attribute behavior to an enduring feature of character. People apparently have a more intimate relation to behaviors that are an 'expression of their character' than to behaviors that are not such expressions; my impassioned political activism says rather more about me than does my paying the electric bill, and it seems perfectly natural that I get credit (or blame) for the one and not the other. If such intuitions lead to a view like Hume's, situationism undermines responsibility attribution.²⁴⁵

Since the cause of many of my actions does not lie in my character, but rather in facts about my situation, in these numerous cases I am not responsible for my actions—we are given many moral passes for responsibility.

Doris's third criticism is that accounts of character traits are "globalist" in a problematic way—they are too broad-brushed (expecting an "honest" person to always be honest, on any occasion), and they require a correlation of similar traits (someone who is generous is probably

²⁴⁵ Doris, p.128

also compassionate, etc.). Doris's worries on this point are not ones we have to worry about in the present argument, for two reasons. First, several people have successfully argued that the globalist conception of character, as Doris presents it, is too simplistic for any viable account of character anyway (Rachana Kamtekar, Joel Kupperman, and others).²⁴⁶ And even if such an account is plausible, plenty of accounts of character are not committed to the globalist view. Since Doris thinks that his argument holds against all our usual candidate accounts of "character," if there are familiar or traditional accounts of character that are not globalist, it is worth considering whether such a view is still subject to his critique.

In fact, what I want to show is that a non-globalist character-based account can embrace all of Doris's concerns. Such an account is provided, I think, by Hume. We can see that Hume is not a "globalist" about character if we consider that first, he is not committed to the view that traits are reliably manifested in the face of great situational variability, as will be evident in the following discussion; second, Hume rejects the thesis of the unity of the virtues, which is the view that having one virtue entails having all the virtues.²⁴⁷ Doris's second critique of a globalist view is that on such a view there is a probabilistic relationship between having one trait and having other similar traits.²⁴⁸ Since this is essentially a weaker version of the unity of the virtues, and Hume does not hold this claim, this is further evidence that he does not hold the problematic globalist view of character.

Since Hume has a theory of character not committed to the problematic globalist theses, it is a useful theory with which to start considering whether Doris's concerns are in fact true of all accounts of character. In this argument, I will show that a Humean account of

²⁴⁶ See Kamtekar, "Situationism and Virtue Ethics" (2004); Kupperman, "The Indispensability of Character" (2001); and Sreenivasan, "Disunity of Virtue" (2009). Others have more recently argued that there may be these "global" traits, but their existence does not defend virtue ethics against the situationist challenge. (Miller, "Social Psychology" (2009); Prinz, "The Normativity Challenge" (2009))

²⁴⁷ Sreenivasan also argues against the situationist conception of character based on the claim that the virtues are not unified. See Sreenivasan (2009).

²⁴⁸ See Doris, p.22

character is in fact quite amenable to Doris's view. Not only does it not fall prey to the concerns he voices, but it is in fact closely reflective of Doris's more considered view, though couched in slightly different language. If Hume's view of character can be understood to capture what we normally mean in discussing character, then Doris himself implicitly accepts the concept and is rejecting only a rather different, and much less plausible conception of character.

2. Humean Reply to the Situationist Dilemmas

2.1 Hume's commitments

Starting with Hume's view as a response to Doris poses its own challenges, since Hume appears to be clearly committed to both of the claims laid out above as problematic for an account of character. That is, Hume views character traits as predictive of behavior, contra Doris, and he also allows for excusing conditions that appear to run into Doris's responsibility problem.

Knowledge of character gives us knowledge of behavior, according to Hume: "a spectator can commonly infer our actions from our motives and character; and even where he cannot, he concludes in general, that he might, were he perfectly acquainted with every circumstance of our situation and temper, and the most secret springs of our complexion and disposition" (T2.3.2.2 / SBN 408-9). In other words, if you know my character, you can infer or predict my actions. He also says, "our actions have a constant union with our motives, tempers, and circumstances" (T2.3.1.4 / SBN 401) The connection between motives and actions is taken by Hume to be a necessary connection—certain actions stem from certain motives, and certain motives bring about certain actions.

Hume also says that actions that are not caused by characteristic motivations are not blameworthy:

Actions are by their very nature temporary and perishing; and where they proceed not from some cause in the characters and disposition of the person, who perform'd them, they infix not themselves upon him, and can neither redound to his honour, if good, nor infamy, if evil. The action itself may be blameable; it may be contrary to all the rules of morality and religion: But the person is not responsible for it; and... 'tis impossible he can, upon its account, become the object of punishment or vengeance. (T2.3.2.6 / SBN 411)

Hume clearly believes that traits are predictive, and that responsibility tracks traits. This will be a problem, assuming that our use of traits as predictive leads to false predictions (as in the Milgram experiment), or if the account makes too many excuses for “uncharacteristic” behavior. If our beliefs about responsibility cannot be accommodated by Hume’s analysis, Doris’s challenge will prevail.

2.2 Responsibility Problem considered

I will address the responsibility problem first. This problem refers to Doris’s concern that a character theory makes too many excuses for “uncharacteristic” actions, so an agent is not responsible for actions that are “out of character” (whether good or bad). If features of a situation are what bring about action, as opposed to their coming from character traits, then we can neither be praised or blamed on any occasion in which the situation is seen as the cause of action. (Note: When I talk about “excusing conditions” in what follows, I mean conditions that exempt a person from any responsibility, good or bad.)

Again, Hume clearly uses this language as exculpatory: an action may be “contrary to all the rules of morality and religion” but if it doesn’t stem from character, the person can’t be blamed. Hume also holds that actions done impulsively, as opposed to reflectively, are less blameworthy *because* they do not speak as strongly to the person’s character. Hume allows for these kinds of excuses, so we must put his theory up against Doris’s theory to see if (a) he allows for more excuses than Doris, and (b) our beliefs about responsibility track Doris’s response, rather than Hume’s. I argue that neither is in fact true.

Doris thinks that accounts that make responsibility track only those actions stemming from our character traits leave us unable to attribute responsibility in cases in which we wish we could. To make his point, he uses the case of Max Redlicht, a Jewish man in Krakow during WWII. Redlicht had a reputation as a gangster and a trouble maker who was not in the least religious. But when he and many other Jews were ordered by the Nazis to spit on the Torah, he alone refused, saying “I’ve done a lot. But I won’t do that” (recounted in Doris, p.130). Doris interprets Redlicht’s action as follows: “Redlicht was an ignoble person who behaved nobly.” This is an example, Doris says, of an admirable deed not linked to an admirable character trait, and he maintains that “those that do such things are justly credited, however their character should finally be judged.”²⁴⁹ In short, Redlicht’s action is praiseworthy in spite of the fact that it does not stem from a character trait. And, as Doris reads the situation, the Humean could not consider Redlicht praiseworthy for his action.

One Humean response to this challenge is, “so what?” Maybe we shouldn’t consider Redlicht praiseworthy. Another is to say that he *might* be praiseworthy, but we have to understand better what motivated him. The Humean can respond that either these sorts of actions *can* be understood as praiseworthy, or that they *shouldn’t* be. That is to say, the Humean is free to say that either we have misunderstood Redlicht’s character, or that he does not in fact deserve any praise. If we respond in the latter manner, we have to contend with Doris’s apparently contradictory intuition.

The first step in proceeding here is to understand what it means, for Hume, to make a moral evaluation of an action. As I argued in Chapter Four, on Hume’s view, the moral significance of actions cannot be understood if we view the actions in isolation of their circumstances, and of features of the agent performing them. I articulate this view in the language of narrative, arguing that because Hume is interested in the *causes* of actions as the

²⁴⁹ Doris, p.131

source of our moral praise and blame, and because these causes (that is, people's motivations) are elusive and context-informed, that we cannot look at a single action and read from it the causes that produced it (we don't usually immediately know a person's motivations or traits). So in order to begin to determine one way or another, we have to have a proper Humean account of Redlicht's action, which entails a narrative describing his past actions, his environment, and his intentions.

Given this commitment to a narrative understanding of actions, the Humean can interpret Redlicht's action in one of two ways. First, he might construct a narrative that shows us our evaluation of Redlicht as a dastardly and irreligious trouble-maker was wrong, and that in some way he is in fact more noble, if not always perfect, than we thought; this noble nature shines through in the act described above, and this may lead us to reinterpret some of his past actions. His statement that "I have done a lot..." suggests that though Redlicht has behaved badly, he is aware of his own shortcomings, which itself suggests that there may be something more noble, if usually repressed, in him. In a weaker version of the same story, we might think Redlicht has had a sense of what is noble in the past but no particularly strong desire to act on it; but here, in the last moments of his life, he decides that just this once he will do the noble thing. This case, too, tells us something about Redlicht's character, though something weaker, and we might say that he is responsible and does merit some praise, but not unqualified praise because this motive from which he acted, though apparently having been a part of him in the past, is not a deeply definitive part of him.²⁵⁰

²⁵⁰ Hume also regards the motivation based on recognition of one's duty and one's failures to be less than fully indicative of a character trait: "When any virtuous motive or principle is common in human nature, a person, who feels his heart devoid of that principle, may hate himself upon that account, and may perform the action without the motive, from a certain sense of duty, in order to acquire by practice, that virtuous principle, or at least, to disguise to himself, as much as possible, his want of it" (T3.2.1.8 / SBN 477). I take Hume to imply here that the development of this trait comes upon repeated action of this nature, and so if Redlicht's motivation in this weaker case were something like, "I know this is what I should do, and now, at the end, I will do what I should do, just this once," then Hume would likely say this does not indicate a trait in him. He lacks the trait of being motivated by respect for religious belief (or

Alternatively, the Humean might just say that his act was not noble. If Redlicht really is the jerk that we thought he was, where did this act come from? If it was just by *mere chance and fleeting whim* that he behaved in this way, we're unlikely, speaking intuitively, to call the action praiseworthy. By chance and whim, I mean that the cause of the action is *merely* an insignificant situational feature, that something like the fact that Redlicht stubbed his toe on the way into the synagogue is *the cause* of his action.²⁵¹ More likely, there may be another explanation for his action in this situation, one that accords with what we know of him. For example, he may have an overriding tendency to resist demands from other people, and so his act in this case is best interpreted as an act of defiance to his captors, rather than respect for the Torah. Redlicht's motivation here might be quite superficial and unreflective—he resists any external authority, and the fact that this happens to be an abhorrent authority asking him to do an abhorrent act is an insignificant and coincidental feature of the situation—in which case I see no need to interpret his act as “noble.”

Once we have this narrative account, we see that either we have been mistaken, and the action *is* noble because it *does* stem from a trait we hadn't recognized; or we are comfortable maintaining that it is not a noble act, despite appearances. Doris looks at this single act in isolation—that is, as a type of action typically understood as noble—and tries to make this interpretation bear on what we know of Redlicht. By Hume's account, we are not entitled to

whatever pertinent admirable motive we think is at issue here), but he does have some minimal respect for the fact that other people have this motive, and he recognizes it as a good motive to have. I think the best reading of this case, in the present context, is that it does indicate something good and semipermanent about Redlicht—at least a minimal respect for what is right and good—but still does not reflect deeply on his character. He is only mildly praiseworthy in this case.

²⁵¹ I do not mean to imply here with the terms “chance” and “whim” that any factor outside of his full, free control would excuse him. Hume is also a determinist, but certain chance circumstances, such as how we are raised, still play a much more determinative role in action than the sorts of chances I am concerned with here. The former are still identifiable features of persons, even if not of their own volition.

make a judgment about the action until we have looked at it *as an act performed by this person (specifically)*.²⁵²

Someone might object here that I am begging the question against Doris. To insist that an action cannot be assessed in isolation is to insist on the very point in question—are we really only concerned with actions traceable to character traits? In response to this objection, I'd like to suggest that such a view is not entirely implausible, and that Doris himself makes a very similar requirement in other cases.

First, let me offer some initial motivation for this requirement for responsibility. Both Hume and Doris, as I will argue, maintain this standard for personal responsibility, and to advance the discussion I will suggest some reasons one might hold such a view. We do not typically attribute praise or blame to people for actions independently of all relevant circumstances—we do not view an act in complete isolation from who performed it and for what reasons, and attribute praise or blame to the agent based only on this information. We might have a view of the goodness or badness of the action, but this does not necessarily tell us anything about the moral culpability of the agent. When a wealthy broker donates a large sum to a charity, it matters to us, in our moral assessment of him, to know if he is on trial for financial corruption—the act could be generous, or it could be a political ploy, and the context matters in our judgment of his virtue. In our courts of justice, which assign responsibility for actions, it

²⁵² Julia Annas makes a similar sort of analysis of how we make sense of disparate sorts of behavior from the same person, though she doesn't talk about narrative specifically. She argues that evidence against our initial trait attributions causes us to re-evaluate our attributions, in a manner similar to how I argue we might re-evaluate Redlicht's character. However, she does not make the further step that I go on to make, which is to show that Doris himself holds such a view of analysis. Rather, she argues only that Doris fails to recognize the value of evaluative integration. Furthermore, Annas maintains a sense of globalist traits that I argue Hume denies, and globalism faces further challenges from the situationist. (Annas, 2005)

Kristján Kristjánsson offers an Aristotelian response to Doris wherein he gives a series of examples of motivational structures that lead to the same action, arguing that only when we know which motivation a person acted on can we know his virtue or lack thereof. While not discussing this case in particular, Kristjánsson's suggested manner of interpretation and investigation are amenable to my reading of the Redlicht case. Kristjánsson is not suggesting a narrative structure in particular, but the general ambiguity in interpreting actions, as I highlight in the Redlicht case, is helpfully elaborated in his article. See Kristjánsson, "An Aristotelian Critique of Situationism" (2007), pp.68-71.

matters whether an act is premeditated, whether it was intentional, and whether the person was of sound mind while committing it. The act of killing someone does not garner the same amount of blame, depending on these various circumstances. The murder is always bad, regardless of its circumstances, but the responsibility we attribute to the person who committed it varies.²⁵³ In practice, we do not usually, if ever, praise people for actions without any regard for their motivation or circumstances. At the very least, consideration of these factors tempers our judgments. For these reasons, I think we can understand at least some motivation for holding such an account of responsibility that assigns praise and blame only when acts reflect something stable about the person (a character trait, or in Doris's terms, an identifying motive.)

In addition to the claim that the requirement of contextual information is a reasonable requirement for evaluation, Doris himself nearly concedes this point. Immediately following his discussion of Redlicht, Doris offers a strikingly Humean example:

you may quite fairly be unmoved if after making a biting remark I offer the excuse that I am generally the most collegial of fellows.... If I go on to explain that my back's gone out, I had a tiff with my partner, and the dog got after my shoes again, you may be inclined to forgive my surliness; but here the grounds are familiar sorts of excusing conditions, not my remark being atypical from the perspective of a character assessment. The defense, 'I'm not myself today,' if it is a good one, is not a bare assertion but comes with an explanation of why this is so.²⁵⁴

We all recognize that we tend to forgive people in these kinds of situations, when we know there is another factor in play which is not a deep feature of the person involved (it is rather more trivial, like the dog getting to your shoes). But shouldn't this work in the other direction, too? That is, couldn't it be that many apparently virtuous actions turn out not to be praiseworthy at all?²⁵⁵ Doris more readily refrains from attributing blame than praise, but why think that

²⁵³ We might think an act itself has moral value, if we are non-Humeans, and say that the act of killing 30 people was morally bad. But even if we maintain a theory that gives moral value to actions, this can be said independently of whether, or to what degree, we blame the shooter (the shooter might herself have been held at gunpoint and acting under orders.)

²⁵⁴ Doris, p.131

²⁵⁵ Someone might worry about justified asymmetry in attributing responsibility. While this has been a debate regarding free will, with some people arguing that people are always responsible for their good

circumstances may provide conditions for withholding blame, but not for withholding praise?

(Considering one of the situationist examples, if it really is *merely* the fact that a person found a dime that causes her to help someone in need, does she really deserve praise for her actions?²⁵⁶)

In expanding on this analysis, Doris actually begins to make room for character traits in an explanatory way, though not conceding their predictive value. He writes,

A rare moral transgression may still be blameworthy, yet when faced with such anomaly, it is quite right to look for possible excusing and exempting conditions. Thinking in terms of character, insofar as it accurately ‘summarizes’ previous behavioral trends, may serve an epistemological role in responsibility assessment; it highlights behavioral anomalies that may fall under exempting or excusing conditions, but this summary use of characterological discourse need not invoke the conception of character I have argued against.... Further, allowing this epistemological role does not motivate a conceptual thesis to the effect that character assessment is necessary for responsibility attribution.²⁵⁷

Doris is willing to allow that our assessment of any given action can be informed by knowledge of the agent’s past behavior. But what does it mean for an action to be excusably anomalous, if not that we know that generally speaking this person does not behave in this way? The claim that “I am not myself today,” when justifiably invoked, *does* refer to *something lasting* or *semi-permanent* about me, and suggests that *that feature* is what garners me praise or blame. Doris still maintains, however, that allowing for certain excuses does not make character assessment *necessary* for responsibility attribution. Now we can turn to Doris’s account of what *is* necessary for responsibility attribution, which I will argue becomes effectively indistinguishable from character assessment.

acts, but only responsible for the bad if they could have done otherwise (see e.g. Wolf, Nelkin), the question of freedom is not at issue here. There is no similar feature in this situation to justify the asymmetry.

²⁵⁶ Even if only this additional factor brings her to be helpful, we might say that she is more praiseworthy than a person who found a dime and still was not helpful, but I maintain that she would not be judged particularly virtuous if her virtue depended entirely on minor mood swings. And if she does help only when her mood has been improved by chance factors, I do not think she is especially likely to be seen as helpful, for example, since her assistance cannot be counted on. This pushes us ahead to the predictive problem, discussed in the next section.

²⁵⁷ Doris, p.131

So far, I have argued that Doris's approach to the moral assessment of an action is, in cases like the Redlicht case, too simplistic and abstract. It turns out that on his considered view, he might acknowledge this. We do care about what the statement "I'm not myself today" means for our assessment of actions, and we all think that with the right kind of explanation, this kind of statement *does* bear on our moral assessment. On the Humean account, I have argued, this kind of explanation requires looking at the action as part of a narrative, which entails a story relating features of the person's past, intentions, and circumstances to explain the present action. Now, I turn to a discussion of how we make responsibility attributions on Doris's considered view.

Doris says that we can attribute responsibility in these kinds of cases by using a model of identification with motives and narrative integration. He claims that amongst our varied motivations are some with which we identify, and these motives are the ones for which we are responsible: "We bear an intimate relation to those motives we identify with; somehow, it is these that are most properly our own."²⁵⁸ Doris recognizes that we may not always be willing to claim these motives as identifying motives—we may reject these motives consciously, and we may not want to identify with them but we nevertheless do. He cites his own need for paternal approval as a motivation which, if he were conscious of it, he would reject. But, he says, "despite the fact that I would not have avowed identification at the time such motives were in play, they may be integrated into a narrative that manifests identification" where such a narrative gives insight by "illuminating the ways in which the motive expresses the subject's operative priorities."²⁵⁹ So Doris could construct a narrative that illuminates the role of this need for paternal approval within his personal priorities, his attachments, etc. Recognition of this factor reminds him of something true of himself, which he recognizes even if he does not like it.

²⁵⁸ *ibid.* p.140

²⁵⁹ *ibid.* p.142

Doris goes on to argue that sometimes this narrative integration is understood in terms of *plans* with which we identify. If a motive follows from a plan with which we identify, then we are responsible for the effects that follow. He uses the example of a busy stockbroker who, because he is so busy, often fails to stop and help people in need. He says of this person, “The driven stockbroker might reject his many hasty omissions, but wholeheartedly endorse the way of life that leads to them. The hard-charging broker embraces a life-plan that eventuates in the unfortunate omissions.”²⁶⁰

Even in cases in which there is no obvious plan with which we identify, Doris says there is a way to explain responsibility in these terms. He uses an example of a cheating partner, who does not wish to cheat, and does not identify with this motive or any plan that includes it, but nevertheless, under intense situational pressures, is *akratic*. In this situation, Doris says,

Appeal to plans or policies won't help. The thing about *akratic* infidelities is that they may occur *despite* a plan or policy.... The way to soften this result is to notice that many such behaviors have histories; they do not spring from isolated circumstances like desert flowers. The difficulty in the case of *akratic* infidelity comes from considering the sexual contact atomistically, as an isolated event, instead of holistically, as part of a motivational sequence.²⁶¹

So even in cases in which we think the situational factors are pressing—the person is not normally unfaithful, but in high pressure situations may be—we establish the person's level of responsibility by considering this action *as part of a motivational sequence*, as opposed to atomistically. I do not simply look at the action in isolation but rather as part of a sequence of events. What Doris says we should look for in this sequence is a link in the chain of motives with which the person does identify. And recall that the motives with which we identify “are most properly our own.” In other words, then, we look for a motive that belongs more intimately to the person, one that is not merely popping up out of circumstance, but which is rooted in the person's plan, or their identifying life narrative.

²⁶⁰ *ibid.* p.144

²⁶¹ *ibid.*

Bringing this to bear on the situationist challenges, Doris says that in many of the situationist cases, we are responsible if and when our action can be traced to a motive with which we identify, or which is a consequence of a life plan that we embrace. For example, recall the Milgram study, in which participants followed the directives of a supposed psychologist and sent very high electric shocks to a person in another room. Doris gives the following explanation for responsibility in the Milgram case: “The subjects did in fact identify with their initial commitment to obey the experimenter and that is enough to hold them responsible, even if they did not identify with everything they did.”²⁶²

But this model of identifying with motives that are narratively integrated into our lives looks suspiciously like the narrative account of character traits that Hume requires. The epistemology of Doris’s account of evaluating actions appears to require narrative in the same way that Hume’s account does. Unless I want to say that a person is not responsible for her action in a case like the Milgram experiment, I need to locate a motive within the causal chain that brought about the action and with which the person would identify, or at least which fits into a narrative with which the person would identify. That is, I have to find something in the chain of events that is identifiable as one of the person’s motives. How could we determine whether, somewhere in the chain of causes, there is a motive with which the person would identify, and which motive this is, except by some kind of narrative account of the action and the person’s history? Doris agrees:

Given that any motive has a myriad of causal and motivational antecedents, how do we decide which antecedents are relevant to a particular case? And once these questions are decided, there’s further work to decide whether responsibility-grounding identification appears anywhere in the story. Like all history, there’s more art than science here.... But this is nothing to be feared; it’s just the business of psychologically serious ethical reflection.²⁶³

²⁶² *ibid.* p.145

²⁶³ *ibid.* pp.144-5

If we push Doris on this point, it seems he would have to give an account of the Redlicht case that bears striking resemblance to one or the other of the narratives offered by the Humean. We need to examine whether there is an identifying motive in the causal chain of motivation, and what that motive is. Either Redlicht identifies with a motive of disobedience, or he identifies with a deep respect for what is sacred in spite of his general behavior, or something. Doris comes near this point himself, saying that “Perhaps Redlicht, more savvy than others in the ways of brutality, knew that he would be killed no matter what he did; his conduct was not so much brave as resigned. Or perhaps he was not a bad man acting out of character, but a defiant man doing what he had always done. But my reading of the story... is a perfectly natural one.”²⁶⁴ Doris leaves us wanting in this example, but given what he says about responsibility attribution generally, it is clear that what we might construct from his principles looks to be the same as what the Humean would construct. Given his account of responsibility, he owes us more of an explanation. To say Redlicht is responsible, by Doris’s own standards, requires a narrative account of Redlicht’s life, which would highlight for us his identifying motives. And if there is no identifying motive that leads him to act as he does, we do not attribute responsibility to him. As Doris says later, “If there is no identification exhibited in any of a sequence of behaviors, the sequence looks more like something that happened to the individual than like something he did. I’m not denying that some sort of negative assessment is appropriate... but I am questioning the wisdom of couching the negative assessment in terms of responsibility.”²⁶⁵ Doris clearly maintains that responsibility tracks identifying (not circumstantial or whimsical) motives in the person acting, and our assessment of responsibility depends on “whether responsibility-grounding identification appears anywhere in the story.”²⁶⁶

²⁶⁴ *ibid.* p.131

²⁶⁵ *ibid.* p.145

²⁶⁶ *ibid.* p.144

Doris's reading of the Milgram case is that the individuals are responsible because we can trace the cause of their behavior to their embraced or identifying obedience. Hence, they are blameworthy for their actions even though these actions are not stemming from an explicit vice of wishing people harm. Consider a Humean reading of the Milgram case: we might say the person was not cruel, but he was obedient to a fault. (The obedience is the trait that motivated the action, and the one for which he can be held responsible.) And how we know that it is obedience driving this person to cooperate obviously requires a narrative of the individual. In the other case Doris mentions, the hurried stockbroker, we might say the person is ambitious, leading the lifestyle that has a "packed schedule that induces haste"—this ambition is a trait for which he is responsible. And given the analysis of the Redlich example above, if we find the two possible Humean answers to be a plausible interpretation of how we respond, then it seems character assessment *is* necessary for responsibility attribution, though we might just call it assessment of identifying motives. At the very least, it seems Doris finds this plausible.

On the question of responsibility, then, Hume is not making any more excuses than Doris is making. His requirement that responsibility be traceable to character traits does not entail any more intimate relation between motivation and action than does Doris's account of narrative identification.

2.3 Predictive Problem considered

Now we are left with the predictive question raised earlier, the first of the three situationist challenges: this challenge says that inconsistent behavior across situations is proof that character traits are not predictive. Being honest on an exam does not make you predictably honest in reporting your taxes. And if I assume otherwise, my predictions will fail. Doris says that the best way to predict how a person will behave is to look at how most people behave (the statistical norm) *in that situation*.

The situationist psychology evidence shows us that situational factors play a role in our behavior. Predictions of behavior based on character will fail if they do not take into account situational factors because situational factors are determinatively relevant. For example, predicting that the seminarians will help someone having a heart attack, based on the attribution of compassion to them, will fail if it does not take into consideration the effect of the fact that some of them are running late. So now we must ask, is Hume committed to a predictive value of character traits that leads to systematically false predictions?

First, we should recognize that Hume's argument that character is predictive of people's behavior is not as straightforward as, "If he is generous, he will always give freely." (In fact, it is unlikely that anyone has this view of character, but that is a separate point.) This conception of a character traits lacks the complexity that Hume requires. On Hume's view, as we have seen, traits are known to us by an investigation of the person's motives from within the context in which she acts. For example, if I observe you giving money to charity, I can only claim that you are generous with your money if I know that you have been similarly giving in the past, that you have done so even if there is no promise of recognition, that you aren't doing so just for the tax breaks, that we live in a society in which charity is a sign of compassion rather than condescension, etc. Furthermore, having all this evidence that you are generous does not tell me for any particular instance whether you will give a donation. If I observe you withholding a donation, I do not automatically assume that you are *not* generous; I have to consider your perception of whether money is useful in this instance, whether you are perhaps saving your money for another charitable purpose, even whether you might be failing to recognize the need in this situation (noting that if you did recognize it, you would give aid). And if I do know you to be generous, I can predict that you will not withhold your surplus in a situation in which you perceive a grave need, unless there is a reason for you to do so. I also take these claims to be fairly uncontroversial regarding our everyday ascriptions of character traits. When Hume makes

his statements about deducing actions from traits, he really is saying that traits are a *factor* in our prediction. Look at the quote given earlier, now with new emphasis: “a spectator can commonly infer our actions from our motives and character; and even where he cannot, he concludes in general, that he might, were he perfectly acquainted with *every circumstance of our situation and temper*, and the most secret springs of our complexion and disposition” (emphasis mine, T2.3.2.2). In making moral judgments, Hume says, our evidence is “nothing but a *conclusion* concerning the actions of men, deriv’d from the consideration of their *motives, temper and situation*” (emphasis mine, T2.3.1.15). So reference to traits is necessary for predicting and evaluating actions, but it is not sufficient.

Hume certainly attributes a certain regularity and predictability to people’s behavior based on our knowledge of their character:

Were a man, whom I know to be honest and opulent, and with whom I live in intimate friendship, to come into my house, where I am surrounded with my servants, I rest assured that he is not to stab me before he leaves it in order to rob me of my silver standish; and I no more suspect this event than the falling of the house itself, which is new, and solidly built and founded. (EHU 8.15 / SBN 88).

But Hume does not expect this prediction to be infallible. He notes that in this case, someone might object that his friend “may have been seized with a sudden and unknown frenzy” to which Hume replies, “So may a sudden earthquake arise, and shake and tumble my house about my ears” (ibid.). But this knowledge does not interfere with my ability to *rely* on the assumption that my friend will not steal my silver.

Still, we are obviously often wrong in our predictions based on character. The Milgram case is an extreme example, but we encounter this problem all the time. Any number of factors in my daily life can make me behave “uncharacteristically,” even something as simple as my being hungry. It appears that for Hume, if situational factors do interfere, this does not change our confidence in the predictive nature of character traits:

The most irregular and unexpected resolutions of men may frequently be accounted for by those who know every particular circumstance of their character and situation. A person of an obliging disposition gives a peevish answer: But he has the toothache, or has not dined. A stupid fellow discovers an uncommon alacrity in his carriage: But he has met with a sudden piece of good fortune. (EHU 8.15 / SBN 88)

Despite this recognition of other causal factors, Hume's conclusion is not to dismiss talk of character traits. But if character traits are not the sole, or even the strongest, determinants of behavior, why look to them as predictive?

I am now in a position of having to justify the value in referring to character as a predictive factor at all. Is the Humean just being obstinate by insisting on the predictive value of trait ascriptions, having acknowledged the predictive force of situational factors? Doris argues that the best predictions are those based on situational statistics. But does this require that character traits can tell us nothing further? Do they lack any predictive value?

Consider again the case just mentioned, Hume's assertion that I can be certain my friend will not steal my silver. If my friend *does* steal my silver, I figure something must be up. My first thought may be to look for some extenuating circumstance. But if everything else seems normal, I might wonder whether he was really the honest person I believed him to be. In other words, if my prediction that he won't steal my silver turns out to be wrong, I might find a situational factor that is explanatory, *or* I might second guess the evidence upon which I based my prediction. Either way, however, though I may be surprised by my friend's behavior, I am not astounded by the realization that such a prediction could possibly be wrong. Although I may have relied on my judgment of his character, I can account for my judgment being wrong.

So there are two ways that our predictions of people's behavior can fail. One way, as these psychology studies have shown, and as Hume acknowledges, is if we fail to appreciate or recognize causally relevant features of the situation. But if we maintain talk of character traits, there is another way in which our predictions can fail: we do not occupy an ideal epistemic

position from which to judge character. Though I may have evidence for my belief that, for example, my friend will not steal my silver, I could just be wrong about my friend's character. Though having another means of failure might sound like a bad thing, it also gives us another means of explanation, and another means of directing our future expectations. Whereas the situationist can only explain the failure of predictions according to our lack of knowledge about the force of situational factors, and can only explain unexpected behavior accordingly, the character theorist can also explain unexpected actions by re-examining our evidence for the beliefs upon which we based our predictions.

If I can't identify a situational feature that influenced how a person behaved, what am I left with? On Doris's account, merely the claim that there must have been one that I missed (and this not a great help for future endeavors, since I then lack the necessary information to know what kind of situation this is, and so how to recognize similar situations). On Hume's account, if I can't locate this "x" factor, I might rethink my character assessment of my friend. In such cases, it is not that my friend is in fact honest, but still did not act honestly when he stole my silver (so prediction fails), but perhaps he is not as honest as I first thought. This ability to reassess my beliefs about my friend is a valuable tool for how to proceed in my relationship with him. I think we make these kinds of judgments all the time, and the reserve they give us is important.

Doris uses these kinds of situations to argue that no matter how well I knew my friend's "character," I couldn't have predicted what he would do in this situation. But just because we make character evaluations, the fact that we are sometimes surprised only means that these evaluations can be—perhaps often are—fallible. Neither Hume nor any other reasonable character theorist will deny this. Even Aristotle said we cannot properly judge a life until it is over. The process of character evaluation is progressive, and we are perpetually amending our judgments. This does not make those judgments worthless, only fallible.

And even if I do not give up the belief that my friend is honest entirely, I can certainly amend it. I may know that my friend is compassionate, obedient, deferent to authority, honest, etc., and knowledge of each of those traits can inform my expectations of my friend's behavior. But this knowledge doesn't tell me that any one of those traits will always trump another—that he will be honest even if it means being disobedient, for example. Knowledge that certain situations, such as when psychologists request assistance, tend to trigger people's propensity to be obedient, will also help me to know which motivation, which trait, will be driving my friend's behavior in a particular situation.

Another way to put this point is that when I face a situation in which I cannot locate a relevant situational factor that influenced behavior, I have new information which recasts the narrative I construct of my friend's character. Though Doris seems at first glance unable to make this further explanation, given his account of responsibility assessment outlined earlier, which drew on identifying motives and narrative integration, it seems he also might have reason to want to make such a reassessment. If he did, and he recognized the predictive value of knowing a person's identifying motives (or character traits), he would have the resources to make this further point about our moral epistemology, and so the resources to have more explanatory and predictive knowledge.

The point I wish to emphasize here is that a Humean account of character can accept the situationist evidence, and the value of studying it, while still discussing character (as Hume himself appears to do). This is enough to show that Doris's conclusion does not follow from his evidence—we do not have to give up meaningful reference to character. Furthermore, as has been implied in my argument and as I will briefly motivate here, I believe there is value in maintaining talk of character.

Take again the Milgram example. Doris said in this case that these people are responsible if, for example, they identify with the motive of obedience. In the language of

character traits, we might say of the participant: “I expected him to act compassionately. He may still be compassionate, but he is so obedient that this can blind him from being aware of other people’s suffering.” Here we have re-assessed our knowledge of this person, and have formulated a new judgment about the traits or motives that determine his action. And this does not only get us an assessment of responsibility, but also provides valuable information about the more subtle workings of this person’s character.²⁶⁷ Doris must also acknowledge this kind of predictability, since it is not simply an issue of the Milgram situation determining action, but the fact that this situation draws out a motive with which the person identifies. Why would Doris be any less able or less required to say that knowing that Joe is a very obedient person, we know that in this kind of a situation his first inclination is to obey? Knowing that in two thirds of cases this situation results in obedience to the experimenter—which is the best kind of predictive knowledge Doris says that we have—tells us that Joe is more likely to obey than not to obey; but knowing that Joe identifies with this motive to obey generally speaking is providing us with more predictive knowledge. If I know that Joe prides himself on being *rebellious* and *disobedient*, then knowing that this kind of situation generally draws obedience still will not give me good information for predicting how Joe will behave. My knowledge of Joe gives me unique insight here. Perhaps much of the time we lack this kind of knowledge of individuals, and in these cases

²⁶⁷ In arguing for a dispositional rather than behaviorist reading of character, Jonathan Webber gives a reading of this case that is compatible with my suggestion here:

Subjects in the Obedience Experiment, for example, are presented with the competing demands of concern for the wellbeing of the learner and obedience or deference to the authority of the experimenter, and so may have inclinations against administering the shocks, but also stronger inclinations towards obedience or deference.... One’s overt behaviour is the result of the relative strengths of one’s competing inclinations, on this picture, and the differences between the levels at which different subjects ended the experiment reflect differences in the relative strengths of their competing inclinations just as do their differing manifestations of stress. (“Virtue, Character and Situation” (2006), pp.204-5)

In some ways Webber’s argument substantiates the argument offered here; for example, he argues that this dispositional reading, which is compatible with my reading of Hume, has predictive advantages over other readings. However, Webber offers a more Aristotelian reading of character in other respects which runs counter to the Humean picture.

statistical averages are our best information. Hume has no reason to deny this. But in those cases when we do have knowledge of this individual, that knowledge can be predictive, and this is all Hume needs to avoid Doris's challenge.

3. Character, or Not?

We've now seen that the Humean character account is not required to give any more "excuses" than Doris himself allows, or at least should allow by his own standards; furthermore, character, on the Humean view, is predictive in a way that even Doris can and should acknowledge, and the view does not require that it is the sole predictor of our behavior. Even if the Humean account of character is able to respond to the challenges that Doris poses, is there any reason to prefer one account over the other?

Let me suggest a couple of reasons for wanting to maintain reference to character. We naturally refer to a person's past to explain their current behavior, and our expectations of their future behavior. For example, lawyers sometimes use the strategy of establishing behavioral patterns as evidence for a person's guilt; a criminal's eligibility for parole depends in part on whether she has exhibited behavior that gives us confidence her future good behavior.

We also value the ability to make character judgments in choosing our friends. On Doris's view, the closest we can come to character attributions is by attributing "localized" traits. In the seminarian case, in which it was shown that most "compassionate" seminarians failed to show compassion when they were in a hurry, ten percent still stopped to help the stranger. We might say of the ten percent who did stop even when they were running late that they are "in-a-rush compassionate." But I don't choose my friends based on whether they are "in-a-rush compassionate"—I choose them based on whether they are generally compassionate and considerate. I might gather quite a collection of these localized trait attributions of a friend: he is

“in-a-rush compassionate,” “helpful if he’s in a good mood,” “obedient-if-he-is-helping-a-psychiatrist-conduct-a-study,” etc. But none of these tell me what I really care about in choosing or maintaining my friendships. I don’t just want to know that Sam will help me if he’s in a hurry. What I want to say about my friends is that “Theo is compassionate, though sometimes factors get in the way,” or, “Susana is an assertive person, though certain situations inhibit her assertive nature.” It just makes more sense to talk this way. So without a good reason not to talk this way, which Doris has failed to provide, why not maintain it?

We only have reason to prefer Doris’s account of narrative integration and identification of motives if reference to “character” leads us astray from the way things actually work. That is, only if referring to “character traits” masks what is really important about a situation, or if it inhibits our ability to predict and evaluate people’s actions. But the general Humean view of character seems to be compatible with what we typically mean by character—that it predicts, but not always; that our judgments are fallible and always being adjusted; that situational factors like being hungry can inhibit our ability to act on traits that we nevertheless possess; etc.—and it does not lead us down a primrose path of false and blind predictions, nor does it prevent us from making attributions of responsibility in cases when responsibility seems required. The fact that we are often bad predictors is a point about our epistemic responsibility, not about character traits. And so, I contend that Doris has provided us with a valuable analysis of important psychological data, but that he has failed to provide us with any reason to stop making reference to character in our moral dialogue.

Conclusion

The primary explicit goal of this dissertation was to give a full account of Hume's view of character; the second aim was to highlight some interesting descriptive and normative features that follow from his view. This second goal carries promise for further investigation of Hume's view as a normative ethical account. As a conclusion to this dissertation, I offer a brief recapitulation of what I have said to meet both of these goals, and give some suggestion for where we can go from here.

I have argued that Hume can account for character traits as lasting mental qualities of persons by reference to the ideas and impressions, and their associated beliefs, that constitute the mind. I have argued that the relative similarity of the mind over time, given Hume's bundle theory, is all that is needed for attributing lasting beliefs and associations of ideas which can, under the right stimuli, produce reliable motivating passions, and thereby consistent actions. Although Hume does not elaborate the nature of character traits in this or any other way, I believe this is a straightforward reading of the text, and it explains personal regularity of traits according to two basic tenets of Hume's philosophy, namely the association of ideas and the role of belief in this process. This account is also compatible with the significant role Hume gives to passions in explaining (causing) actions. An additional merit of this reading is the significant role it gives to belief in determining character, which satisfies intuitions that moral education, and the knowledge we have of the world can play significant parts in character formation.

Taking this account of character traits as what Hume must have meant, I have examined two features of the process of moral evaluation: how traits are identified, and which traits are considered virtuous. Given the elusiveness of people's motives and traits, I've shown that a narrative structure of evaluation captures Hume's account of how we identify a person's traits,

and furthermore that this narrative account gives us a new appreciation for why Hume thought the study of history was so important for moral theory. There are a couple of merits to this reading. First, it helps us understand what is required in moral evaluation on Hume's account, which, I think quite plausibly, entails a lot of room for human error in evaluation and expects more approximation than assurance in our judgments. In addition, this gives us new reason to look to Hume's *History of England* for enlightenment about his moral philosophy.

The second feature of the process of moral evaluation that I have exposed is the extent to which contextual factors influence the virtuousness and viciousness of traits. This account requires that our assessments of virtue and vice take into consideration important details unique to the person in question and her situation. This element of Hume's virtue ethic helps us understand whose benefit and harm are morally most significant in determining the virtue of our actions, and thereby whose benefit and harm we should be concerned about in our own moral decision-making. This feature of Hume's view, as it is distinct from most mainline virtue ethics, gives us a non-eudamonic alternative account of virtue that we can take into consideration when engaged in larger debates about the viability of virtue ethics and the unique problems they face. The presentation I have given of Hume's account as not only coherent but also robust shows its promise as a contender in these debates. One example of this promise is seen in its response to situationism, as it can clearly accept a great deal of context-dependent evaluations and the significance of situation-specific factors.

Some might find Hume's view, as I have presented it, lacking in the stability of judgment that we might think a moral theory needs. For example, the extent to which contextual features play a role in one's virtue might make accurate moral assessment very difficult; likewise, the extent to which we can be wrong in our assessments might raise concerns for the plausibility of this view as a viable theory. We might think that Hume's account requires too much knowledge and so puts us at a serious epistemic disadvantage in our moral evaluations. I do not

share these reservations, but they are legitimate concerns. In this regard, I have not given here a separate argument for why we should accept a Humean or a revised Humean view; however, I hope to have shown that there is a detailed and coherent underpinning in Hume's theory for these results. If I have succeeded, then whether we agree or not, we can make use of Hume's view as a potential contending ethical view in future debates about virtue.

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