Reflections on Human Nature

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We shall be concerned in this lecture chiefly with certain aspects of the reflections on ethics of Hume and Adam Smith. There are, evidently, two classes of phenomena pertinent to morals that need to be analyzed; moral judgments, and the motivation of moral choices or acts. An account of the nature of the feelings or desires from which what is called moral behavior springs would not, of itself, clarify the nature or meaning of the judgments which men are constantly making as to what is to be considered good or bad, right or wrong, behavior. A purely contemplative angel, who himself never had anything to do except think, might still make judgments of this sort. We must, then, consider first the nature of the moral judgment and second the nature of the moral motive.

Now moral judgments are, or appear to be, propositions; and the question about a proposition is (except for some of our latter-day pragmatists) not what actions result from accepting it, but whether it is true or false; and the question whether a proposition is true or false would seem to fall within the domain of the understanding, not of the emotions or desires. None the less, moral judgments must obviously be somehow connected with moral motives; a set of propositions or reasonings in ethics which was declared to be true, but also declared to be incapable of affecting anybody's con-
duct, would be the most useless thing in the world; indeed, it would be hard to see what could be meant by calling it true, as ethics.

Hume's first problem, then—and, as he would hold, the problem of any ethical theorist—is to formulate a conception of the moral judgment which will make it intelligible that such a judgment can also be, or give rise to, a moral motive, a spring of action. And, in accordance with his central thesis, this can be done only if the moral judgment itself is, at least in part, the expression of an affective, or emotional, state or attitude of the person making the judgment, what I have earlier called a hedonic susceptibility. And this is, Hume maintains, the fact. When you examine what a moral judgment means, you find that it is primarily, if not exclusively, a proposition asserting, or rather, disclosing, the existence in the subject of a certain state of feeling, which can eventuate in a desire.

In considering this account of the moral judgment, it is to be borne in mind, in the first place, that moral judgments are for Hume (and for Adam Smith) exclusively judgments of approbation or disapprobation of persons or their motives, feelings, or purposes. They are concerned with what I have called adjectival, not with telic, values—qualities manifested in action, not with ends to be attained through action. It is true that Hume in the end seeks to connect adjectival values with telic, or terminal, values; we approve, he finds, those qualities of persons which seem to us to have as their effect the realization of a certain kind of end; and this attempted synthesis of the two kinds of values is a distinctive feature of his doctrine, when considered in its en-
tirety. Nevertheless, the moral judgment as such is never the evaluation of an end to be attained, but always the approba-
tion (or disapprobation) of a personal quality, feeling, mo-
tive, or character; and though it may contain, so to say, a cross-reference to an end, it does not in fact always do so.

But what, specifically, is the feeling and desire of which a moral judgment is the expression? Hume observes, in sub-
stance, it is an obvious fact about us that we feel pleasure or pain not only in ourselves actually experiencing various states-of-things, but also in the ideas of states-of-things—in his own phraseology, in the “view or contemplation” of them. The relative date of the pleasure or pain must be noted here. The pleasure, or its opposite, occurs at the moment of “viewing” or “contemplating” whatever the thing is the idea of which is accompanied by pleasure. Hume himself does not make this point explicit and is, in fact, rather confused about it; but it is an obvious implication of his reasoning. And among the things of which the mere “view” gives us pleasure are certain kinds of action on the part of human beings or, more precisely, certain kinds of subjective qualities or characters in them which we infer from their actions. This is just an empirical fact about human nature, to be recognized as such; it does not need to be, and, indeed, cannot be, either explained or justified. We are, and, he thinks, cannot but be, pleased by the “spectacle” of actions which seem to us to manifest in those who perform them such qualities as generosity, magnanimity, benevolence, fortitude, self-
control; we are displeased by the spectacle of actions which seem to manifest cruelty, treachery, meanness, cowardice, and weakness. And we love or hate, praise or blame, those
qualities of which the contemplation "excites in us a satisfaction or uneasiness."

Now, in describing this type of affective reaction of ours to the ideas of certain kinds of human qualities, we have, Hume declares, already described the moral judgment. Approval and disapproval are these reactions and nothing more. We express these attitudes by saying that certain qualities or motives are virtuous, excellent, or admirable, or are vicious, evil, or contemptible; but what we mean by these adjectives is simply that the ideas of the qualities give rise in us to pleasant or unpleasant feelings, of varying degrees of intensity.

An action, or sentiment, or character, is virtuous or vicious; why?; because its view causes a pleasure or uneasiness of a particular kind. . . . To have the sense of virtue is nothing but to feel a satisfaction of a particular kind from the contemplation of a character. The very feeling constitutes our praise or admiration.1

What, however, does Hume mean by speaking here, and elsewhere, of a "satisfaction" or "pleasure of a particular kind." In strictness, I take it, there are no differences of kind (as distinct from degree) among pleasures. There are, however, differences in the total complexes of content of consciousness of which pleasantness may be an ingredient. The pleasure may be associated with or conditioned by one or another sensation, image, or concept of a state-of-things. And by the "particular kind" of pleasure which distinguishes the moral judgment, what Hume apparently signifies is pleasure arising from the "view" of certain human qualities when these are

1 *Treatise*, Bk. III, Pt. 1, Sec. 2; Selby-Bigge, ed., p. 471.
regarded disinterestedly, that is, in abstraction from their possible relation to any future satisfaction of our own, distinct from the present satisfaction which we have in contemplating them. For Hume points out that our judgments of approbation are neither identical with, nor inferred from, our judgments as to what will be to our advantage or disadvantage. " 'Tis only when a character is considered in general, without reference to our particular interest, that it causes such a feeling or sentiment as denominates it morally good or evil."

These characteristics which Hume considers the essentials of the moral judgment are evidently the same as those usually attributed to the aesthetic judgment; and Hume may be said to regard the former as a variety of the latter, differing from the other varieties in that it relates, not to external objects or works of art, but to subjective human qualities actually or potentially manifested in voluntary acts. For an aesthetic judgment also is, or has very frequently been described as, the expression of a present satisfaction arising directly from the "contemplation" of something, without conscious reference to any future advantage of the beholder. Hume and Smith, therefore, like their precursors Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, frequently speak of "moral taste," of an immediate sense of "moral beauty, deformity, or ugliness" inherent in the qualities or motives of persons.

There is, however, one conspicuous difference between moral judgment and ordinary aesthetic judgments which Hume implicitly recognizes but does not make sufficiently explicit. An aesthetic judgment is an enjoyment in the contemplation of a work of art, for example, and has no necessary reference to action to be performed. A moral judgment,
even though disinterested in the sense that it is not concerned with the "particular interest" of the person making it, does usually have a reference to action to be performed. We may, it is true, simply enjoy contemplating the spectacle of, say, the "moral beauty" of the character of St. Francis; and our approbations or disapprobations of past acts or their motives are commonly of this purely contemplative sort. But obviously the more important instances of such judgments refer to future acts, or motives, of other men or of ourselves, to states-of-things not yet realized, which we wish to be realized; they are, in short, accompanied by desires, in the way previously defined. This fact is one which Hume might have been expected especially to emphasize since his chief concern is to describe the moral judgment in such a way that its power to affect action may be psychologically intelligible.

In spite of omissions in his account of such judgments, Hume, in insisting upon their quasi-aesthetic character, raises one of the fundamental issues of moral philosophy. His descriptive psychology of moral experience here brings sharply into view a question of ethics. It is the question whether what I have called adjectival values are genuine, independent, and irreducible values. Are the qualities of the inner states of human beings from which their actions arise valuable only as instrumental to ulterior ends, to consummatory satisfactions; or have they an undeterminative value, or disvalue, of their own? Doubtless generosity, benevolence, honesty, courage, and the like are useful to the agent or to others; but are they good only because of their utility, or good because of an excellence inherent in their very existence?

Hume's answer to this question (in this part of his doc-
trine) is evident from what has already been said; and I in-
cline to think it is the right answer. If it is assumed that there
are such things as aesthetic, noninstrumental values, there is
no evident a priori reason why they should not be exempli-
fied in the subjective qualities and characters of human
agents, as well as in sensible objects; and it is certain, at
least, as Hume declared, that our actual judgments or ap-
praisals of the former are not usually recognitions simply of
the instrumental value of these qualities, but assertions that
they are themselves good or bad and are so even when,
through force of circumstances, they are prevented from
producing their external consequences. On the higher de-
grees of approbation or disapprobation—that is, admiration
or contempt—this is especially evident. We admire or despise
persons as agents, not the ends which their acts accomplish;
and we admire them because of what they are (or are be-
lieved by us to be), what types of thoughts and feelings and
attitudes are present in them, and what motives prompt their
acts. An ethics which ignores this fact, which concerns itself
with the nature of ‘the good’ and not also and primarily with
the nature of goodness, misses the most conspicuous and dis-
tinctive characteristic of the moral judgments which men ac-
tually make.

But Hume’s account of the moral judgment thus far seems
to leave out another of its actual components. When people
—or at all events most people—say ‘Socrates was a good
man,’ or ‘generosity is a virtue,’ or ‘it is wrong to oppress
the helpless,’ they do not in fact conceive themselves merely
to be reporting upon the state of their own emotions. They
are not, or do not appear to themselves to be, talking about
themselves at all, but about Socrates, or generosity, or op-
pression of the helpless, and they are uttering what they suppose are true, or at least potentially true, propositions about the subjects to which these sentences relate. According to Hume's reasoning up to this point, the predicates of such propositions have no meaning except as designations of a pleasant or unpleasant feeling on the part of the person speaking; the predicates, in fact, all have the same meaning though expressed by different words, namely: 'something causing pleasure in me when contemplated.' That is to say: one of these sentences means 'the character of Socrates causes pleasure in me when I contemplate it'; another, 'the class of acts commonly called generous cause pleasure in me when I contemplate them'; and so on.

Now it may be true, and I think it is, that people in general would find it impossible to say what more than this they mean when they form the judgments expressed by such sentences; but I think it also true that they intend to mean something more, and believe that they do so. This belief may be illusory. Nevertheless, it occurs; and psychological analysis of the moral judgment which leaves this feature of it unmentioned is incomplete. The case is, of course, much the same with the ordinary aesthetic judgments; but, though some philosophers of aesthetics are zealous to maintain that in these too something more is meant than a report on the subjective hedonic reaction of the observer, the plain man, I suspect, does not think it so important to assert, when he calls a work of art 'beautiful,' that he means more than "I like it very much." But when, for example, with Mr. Churchill, he (the common man) calls the conduct of Adolf Hitler "wicked," if I am not mistaken, he does think it important to
assert that he means something more than "I am very unpleasantly affected when I think of it."

Hume, however, in the end does not reduce the meaning-content of the moral judgment strictly to the assertion of an individual affective reaction to the idea of one or another motive or quality of character. For he believes that all men's quasi-aesthetic reactions to the ideas of such motives or qualities—their disinterested approbations and disapprobations—are, at any rate in the main, identical. Certain kinds of actions, and the motives from which they are assumed to arise, he thinks are approved by everybody; and this is above all true of benevolence.

In whatever light [he says], we take this subject, the merit ascribed to the social virtues appears still uniform, and arises chiefly from that regard which the natural sentiment of benevolence engages us to pay to the interests of mankind and society. If we consider the principles of human make, such as they appear to daily experience and observation, we must, a priori conclude it to be impossible for such a creature as man to be totally indifferent to the well or ill-being of his fellow-creatures, and not readily, of himself, to pronounce where nothing gives him any particular bias, that what promotes their happiness is good, what tends to their misery is evil, without any farther regard or consideration.2

Hume's language here sounds rather like that of an intuitionist in ethical theory, one who holds that there are certain self-evident propositions about good and bad, certain

2 Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, Pt. II, Sec. 5; Selby-Bigge, ed. p. 230.
moral axioms, the truth of which our reason recognizes; and that our apprehension of their truth can, and should, of itself determine our choices. But that, of course, is not Hume's real position. He is still simply propounding what he regards as an empirical generalization, or approximate generalization, about a species of state-of-things, the idea of the realization of which arouses a present "satisfaction." Because of our susceptibility to pleasure from this idea, we approve of acts, or motives, which tend to realize that state-of-things, or disapprove the opposite, since 'approbation' and 'disapprobation' are only other names for the feelings of pleasure or uneasiness arising on the contemplation of certain acts or motives. But since, as Hume believes, all men—subject to some qualifications—react emotionally in the same way when they contemplate (for example) "the well or ill-being of their fellow creatures," a judgment of approbation may be said, for Hume also, to mean *something* more than 'I am pleasantly affected when I view a certain kind of action;' it means 'I and everybody else are so affected.' And thus he conceives that moral judgments are not, as his doctrine might at first seem to imply, just expressions of the personal and arbitrary likes and dislikes of individuals; they have, or aim at, the kind of objectivity which consists in conformity with the general consensus of mankind. When a man...
him with others; he must move some universal principle of the human frame, and touch a string to which all mankind have an accord and symphony."

When you approve an action, or class of actions, then, you are asserting one factual proposition, though it is a proposition about feelings or desires; namely, that people in general would, in "viewing" it, experience the same feeling or desire that you do.

In thus asserting the universality and uniformity of the approbations and disapprobations of all men, Hume was obviously in error. Though he was right in saying men are moved in their judgments of the conduct of others by their feelings of approval and disapproval, it was not true that the kinds of conduct approved or disapproved are the same among all peoples and cultures; they have varied immensely in the course of human history.

In all this, as I have said, Hume has simply been trying to give an account of moral judgments, that is, of approbations and disapprobations, which will be consistent with the fact that it is possible for them to function as motives determining the choice and action of the individual making them. No account of them would be consistent with this fact which represented them merely as the apprehensions of the truth of propositions—at least, of propositions referring to anything other than the affective states or the desires of that individual and of other men. Yet to describe them in terms consistent with their potential efficacy as motives does not

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3 Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, Pt. I, Sec. 9; Selby-Bigge, ed., p. 272.
really tell us their *modus operandi*; the detailed analysis of the actual processes of motivation in which approbation and disapprobation figure has still to be made. It is this analysis that constitutes the most original part of the doctrine of Hume and Adam Smith.

In this inquiry into the way in which the "moral sentiments" originate and operate in the individual who is moved by them, both Hume and Smith begin by considering the individual as an approver or disapprover, not as the object of approbation or disapprobation. They seek to show how his habit of passing judgments upon other men gives rise to motives which influence his own conduct. In order to show this they both employ, though Smith does it more clearly, what may be called the approbational triangle. In order to understand the phenomenon of approval or disapproval we must recognize that three persons, and not two, are involved in it. There is John, the spectator, who is approving or disapproving; there is James, the agent, whose acts or motives are to be the subjects of John's approval or disapproval; but there is also Thomas, who is, so to say, the patient or victim, the third person, on whom James is acting, or who is affected by his acts. Thomas may, of course, represent a multitude of persons.

Now, there is in John a propensity to sympathize with Thomas. "Sympathy," in the terminology of Hume and Smith, does not mean, though it includes, pity or kindly feeling; it is the tendency which they believe to be universal in man, to receive by communication the feelings and inclinations and, indeed, also the opinions of others, when no interest of one's own intervenes to prevent. "This propensity
makes us enter deeply into each other's sentiments, and causes like passions to run, as it were by contagion," from one individual to another. John, then, tends to share Thomas' emotional reactions to what James does to him (Thomas). If James's acts cause pain to Thomas, John will feel pain, though doubtless in a weaker degree; and he will in some degree share Thomas' feeling towards James—anger, indignation, hatred. These attitudes towards James which John acquires by sympathy with Thomas, the victim, constitute John's disapprovals, or approvals, of James; he disapproves those acts of James (or the motives which he believes to inspire them) that produce a vicarious feeling of pain in himself. When John approves of James he sympathizes with, "enters into," his "sentiments" and regards them with satisfaction on the basis of his own participation in the sentiments produced in Thomas by James's behavior. These reactions on John's part towards Thomas and James, it is true, vary widely under differing circumstances; it is in distinguishing their variations and the conditions which limit or modify John's ability to sympathize with, and reproduce, Thomas' attitudes towards James that Adam Smith is especially ingenious and penetrating.

But into these minutiae we cannot enter. The general point is that, in deriving approbation or its opposite from sympathy with a third party or parties, Hume and Smith find reason for concluding that approbational judgments are essentially disinterested and impersonal, not merely expressions either of John's own desires or of his private opinions, and also that they are, in their broad features, uniform. For Thomas will never be pleased at being injured by
James; and in so far as John's judgments of James are a reflection of Thomas', they will be equally invariable.

Such judgments, moreover, naturally take on a generalized form. John does not in each separate instance go through the process of "entering into the sentiments" of a particular Thomas or James; it becomes habitual with him to approve certain kinds of acts and disapprove others, to feel pleasure or displeasure at the "view" of them.

When John has thus become habituated to passing judgments of approval or disapproval, praise or blame, upon the acts or assumed motives of James and everybody else, it is impossible that he should not pass similar judgments upon his own acts, or those to which he may feel an inclination. John, who at first played the role merely of critical spectator, now becomes both critical spectator and agent. When he does so, what determines his judgments of his own acts, actual or prospective? What are the laws of self-approval or disapproval? The simplest answer would be that John as spectator tends to apply to himself as agent the judgments which he is accustomed to apply to James—or the whole tribe of Jameses, that is, of agents—under similar circumstances; and this simple answer, I think, is in general correct, as was previously intimated when I spoke of the boomerang-effect of the approbation of others.

But this is not, for Hume and Smith, the whole story—though this point is developed more clearly and fully by Smith. When John was judging James, in the light of the James-Thomas situation, he was acting as an impartial spectator. He himself was outside of that situation, in the sense that his private interests were not involved and that he had
no initial bias as between James and Thomas. Now, says Smith in substance, when John turns to judging himself, he is aware that his judgment must be such as would be made upon him by a spectator in the same situation in which he originally was vis-à-vis James and Thomas, that is, by a detached spectator.

We can never [Smith declares] survey our own sentiments and motives, we can never form any judgment concerning them, unless we remove ourselves, as it were, from our own natural station, and endeavor to view them as at a certain distance from us. But we can do this in no other way than by endeavouring to view them with the eyes of other people, or as other people are likely to view them. Whatever judgment we can form concerning them, accordingly, must always bear some secret reference, either to what are, or to what, upon a certain condition, would be, or what we imagine ought to be, the judgment of others. We endeavour to examine our own conduct as we imagine any other fair and impartial spectator would view it. If, upon placing ourselves in his situation, we thoroughly enter into all the passions and motives which influence it, we approve of it by sympathy with the approbation of this supposed equitable judge. If otherwise, we enter into his disapprobation, and condemn it.4

In short, when we take a favorable or an unfavorable view of an act or motive of our own, we implicitly assert a claim that any disinterested observer, fully acquainted with the facts and constituted as human beings are generally con-

stituted, would feel the same way about that act or motive; and if we have any doubt about this, we feel an uneasy suspicion of our self-judgment. There is thus created a sort of social situation inside the individual; he has, as it were, admitted another man within his breast, to sit in judgment upon him, and with whom he engages in a sort of internal debate. The man within John's breast is, it is true, a construct in John's imagination; but he cannot be constructed just as John fancies; on the contrary, he is often a very independent and annoying fellow. And since he is the hypothetical internal spokesman of the judgments of any actual disinterested spectator, John's impressions as to what this inner critic would say can, and by implication should, be checked, by comparison with what actual spectators, so far as they can be presumed to be informed and disinterested, do say about the kind of acts or motives which characterize John's actual or contemplated conduct.

All this—allowing for a certain figurativeness in the expression of it—appears to me to be a correct description of an aspect of ordinary moral experience. But it does not, so far, seem to explain how John's judgments of himself motivate his action. It tells us that these judgments must be in accord with those which he passes upon other people, but it does not show us how desires come to be connected with them. To this question, two different answers can, I think, be distinguished in Hume and Smith. According to the first, which is to be found in some passages of Hume, the answer is already implicit in the foregoing analysis. John has been shown to find pleasure or displeasure in the "view" of certain actions, characteristics, or motives of James, when they
are considered in the light of the emotional reactions of the person or persons whom they affect. This association of pleasant or unpleasant feeling with the ideas of such acts becomes fixed in John's mind; and therefore, when he thinks of himself as performing similar acts, he is pleased or displeased with himself; which is another way of saying that he feels a desire to act in the way that he habitually approves in other people and an aversion from acting in the way that he disapproves. Here what we have called the desire of self-esteem is a direct derivative from the propensity to pass judgments of approbation, or the contrary, upon others.

According to the other answer, which is also suggested by Hume, but is more evident in Smith, the desire of self-esteem seems to be a derivative from approbative-ness—the "love of praise" is Smith's name for it. While we begin by passing "moral criticisms upon the characters and conduct of other people, . . . we soon learn that they are equally frank with regard to our own." And it is in these approbations or disapprobations of a man by others that "he first views the propriety and impropriety of his own passions, the beauty and deformity of his own mind." This gives rise to a new "passion"; he wants to be approved, or not to be disapproved; "he will be elevated in the one case, and cast down in the other." But though approbative-ness is (apparently) regarded by Smith as genetically prior, it is not for him the ultimate and decisive determinant of moral behavior—that is, of behavior influenced by moral judgments. For after we discover that, and how, other people actually judge of us, "we become anxious to know whether we deserve their censure or applause." We do not accept their judg-
ments as necessarily final, and accordingly we—in the man-
ner previously indicated—“suppose ourselves to be specata-
ators [external examiners, so to say] of our own behavior, 
and imagine what effect it would, in this light, produce upon 
us. . . . If this view pleases us, we are tolerably satisfied.”
Here a desire distinct from the simple “love of praise” 
emerges; the “love of praiseworthiness,” the wish to be the 
kind of person who is entitled to the approval of a genuinely 
competent and impartial spectator, and it is the love of 
praiseworthiness that is, for Smith, the distinctively moral 
motive. It is a desire to be and not merely to appear. Yet 
what is desired is still, you observe, the possibility of be-
lieving that one’s qualities or acts are the legitimate sub-
jects of adjectives expressing favorable attitudes on the part 
of a hypothetical ideal observer and critic. In the end this 
last conception, by Smith, as by Milton long before him, is 
identified with the conception of God; for both, the moral 
consciousness finds its completion in the religious conscious-
ness. This conclusion, however, was rather an expression of 
religious piety than any implication drawn from the psycho-
logical analysis of purely moral phenomena and therefore 
does not fall within the province of this lecture.

\[Ibid., \text{Pt. II, ch. 1, p. 101.}\]