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Effects on the Mind as Objects of Reasoning: A Perspectivist Reading of the Reason–Passion Relation in Hume's Ethics

HENRIK BOHLIN

Abstract: Hume's ethics is concerned not only with the metaphysical status of moral qualities but equally, if not more, with the problem of determining to what extent and under what conditions issues of moral disagreement and inquiry can be decided by rational argumentation. This paper argues that Hume's solution to the second problem is a form of perspectivism: the rational decidability of moral issues depends on the existence of shared perspectives, or sets of assumptions and correlated dispositions to feelings, and is largely independent of the metaphysical status of moral qualities. An issue of disagreement may thus be rationally decidable among people with certain dispositions to feeling but not among others. A similar perspectivist reading is suggested for Hume's analysis of knowledge about causes and effects.

Hume maintains that vice and virtue are ultimately "distinguished by our *sentiments*, not by *reason*" (T 3.3.1.27; SBN 589),[1] but he is unclear about the exact relation between reason and sentiment. On the one hand, he says that moral approbation and disapprobation "cannot be the work of the judgment, but of the heart" (EPM App. 1.11; SBN 290)[2]: the wrongness of a crime, for example, is

Henrik Bohlin, School of Historical and Contemporary Studies, Södertörn University, SE-141 89 Huddinge, Stockholm, Sweden. E-mail: henrik.bohlin@sh.se.

not a "particular fact or relation, which can be the object of the understanding" (EPM App. 1.16; SBN 292–93), but "lies in yourself, not in the object" (T 3.1.1.26; SBN 468). On the other hand, Hume holds that virtue and vice are qualities that exist independently of the moral spectator's sentiments about them: virtue is the tendency to be "useful or agreeable" to oneself or others, vice the disposition to have effects of the opposite kind, and it is a "plain matter of fact," determinable by "the experimental method," which actions and character traits have such causal tendencies (EPM 9.1, EPM App. 1.10, EPM 1.10; SBN 268, 289, 173–74; cf. T 3.3.1.3; SBN 575).

Part of the difficulty, I think, is to be clear about the problem, or problems, that Hume is addressing. As he states it when first introducing it, the general problem about reason and passion in morality is "whether it be possible, from reason alone, to distinguish betwixt moral good and evil, or whether there must concur some other principles to enable us to make that distinction" (T 3.1.1.4; SBN 457). This immediately leads him to a more specific problem concerning the metaphysical status of moral qualities, namely, whether or not they are factual properties, or in Hume's terminology, relations between ideas or matters of fact (T 3.1.1.18; SBN 463, cf. EPM App. 1.6; SBN 287).

Focusing on the metaphysical problem, interpreters of Hume's ethics have taken him to say that moral statements do not state facts but merely express the speaker's feelings (expressivism), that they are descriptions of the speaker's feelings (subjective naturalism), that they describe tendencies of actions and characters to excite moral pleasure or pain in beholders (dispositionalism), or that moral merit and demerit consists in the largely observer-independent property of utility and agreeableness to others or oneself (objectivism).[3] A common trait in these interpretations is that Hume's theory is thought to address problems of the same kind that typically figure in today's meta-ethics: whether moral statements can be true or false or merely express the attitudes of the speaker, whether there exist mind-independent or perhaps mind-dependent states of affairs that make moral views and their linguistic expressions true and false, and so on.

The first main point I argue is that an equally if not more important problem in Hume's sentimentalism is to what extent and under which conditions issues of moral disagreement and inquiry are rationally decidable or, in other words, in principle possible to determine one way or the other by sound arguments. (By "in principle possible to determine," I mean that they are one or the other in an ideal case where no participant in the disagreement or inquiry proceeds from false or misleading evidence or draws ungrounded conclusions from the evidence.) This, I think, is a distinct problem, a solution to which does not essentially depend on any particular metaphysical meta-ethical stance. That is, if morality were entirely a matter of subjective individual taste, then no moral issue would be rationally decidable, and if moral discourse had the same degree and kind of objectivity as

non-evaluative discourse about the physical world, then all moral matters would be rationally decidable; but apart from such hard-line subjectivism and realism, the problem of rational decidability as it arises for the sentimentalist is independent of any particular position on the metaphysics of morality.

My second main point is that Hume's solution to the problem of rational decidability is what I will call moral perspectivism. According to this view, the rational decidability of an issue of disagreement depends on the perspectives of the participants in the disagreement or debate. If the disagreeing parties share a perspective, they can reach agreement by sound arguments, provided that none of them reasons from false or misleading evidence or draws hasty conclusions. If their perspectives are different, however, then even the best evidence and the most faultless reasoning from it may not be sufficient for agreement.[4] By a perspective, I here mean a set of factual or normative presuppositions, the accepting of which may, in turn, depend on affective dispositions, such as the capacity to share other people's feelings. For example, an issue of debate may be decidable by argument between two people who both have a fully developed capacity for what Hume calls sympathy or sympathy and humanity but not between someone who has that capacity and someone who lacks it.

It seems to me that Hume himself suggests a perspectivist understanding of morality in a footnote to the essay "The Sceptic." Comparing morals to secondary qualities, the skeptic says that virtue and vice, like tastes and colours, "lie not in the bodies, but merely in the senses." He adds:

> This doctrine, however, takes off no more from the reality of the latter qualities, than from that of the former . . . . There is a sufficient uniformity in the senses and feelings of mankind, to make all these qualities the objects of art and reasoning, and to have the greatest influence on life and manners. And as it is certain, that the discovery above-mentioned in natural philosophy, makes no alteration on action and conduct; why should a like discovery in moral philosophy make any alteration? ("The Sceptic," 166n)[5]

Contrary to what one may expect, it is thus *not* a necessary condition for something to constitute an "object of reasoning," or inference and argumentation, that it be a relation of ideas or a matter of fact. Because of the uniformities in human perception and feeling, virtue and vice can be such objects even if they are merely effects produced upon the mind (as Hume's skeptic says of beauty a paragraph earlier). Hence, the rational decidability or non-decidability of moral issues does not essentially depend on the metaphysical status of moral qualities—or at least so I will argue.

A possible objection to this claim is that Hume seems to say elsewhere that only relations of ideas and matters of fact can be objects of reason (for example, "reason judges either of *matter of fact* or of *relations*" (EPM App. 1.6; SBN 287) and "morality is not an object of reason" (T 3.1.1.26; SBN 468; see also T 3.1.1.9; SBN 458, EHU 4.1; SBN 25[6]). But in these passages reason is either conceived narrowly—as equivalent to what Hume often calls "the understanding" (see below on different usages of "reason")—or is used interchangeably with "reason alone" or "reason in itself" (for instance T 3.1.1.4–7; SBN 456–57; EPM App. 1.3; SBN 286). In either case, Hume is not denying that morality can be an object of reason operating together with passion or, in other words, within a perspective partly determined by sentiments of sympathy and humanity.

What follows is an attempt to elaborate and defend a perspectivist reading of the reason-passion relation in Hume's sentimentalist theory of morals. Among other things, I will try to make clearer the notions of perspectivism, perspectives, and rational decidability. This will require a conceptual apparatus beyond anything available to Hume himself, so one may ask whether the result can possibly represent a view that Hume held or could have held. The answer, I think, is no, but this is not deeply problematic. Hume seems to vacillate between different positions, possibly because he was simply not entirely clear about certain aspects of his own argument.[7] To my mind the interesting task is, therefore, not so much to establish what Hume "really thought" as to develop his argument further. What I will try to show is that moral perspectivism represents a line of argument that Hume would have done well to accept because it solves an important problem which he does not fully solve, is compatible with the main lines of his argument, and is suggested by important parts of it.

The term "perspectivism" is intended to stress the parallel to what Robert Fogelin has called a radical perspectivism in Hume's analysis of inductive knowledge, where Hume shifts back and forth between points of view that are treated as incompatible but nevertheless equally legitimate: the unreflective stance of everyday thought, the intellectually sophisticated standpoint of a cautious inquirer who believes only that for which he can find sufficient evidence, and the philosophical outlook of a radical skeptic who considers nothing more likely than anything else (Fogelin, 163–64). For example, Hume first argues at great length for skepticism about causation, and then goes on to state criteria for determining causes and effects in particular cases (T 1.3.15; SBN 173–76, cf. EHU 4, 10; SBN 25–39, 109–31). In a similar way, Hume shifts between the moral perspective of someone with a fully developed capacity for moral feelings and the perspective of someone who lacks that capacity, when saying, for example, that it is not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of one's finger (T 2.3.3.6; SBN 416). In both cases, certain important issues are considered rationally decidable within a perspective, while it is impossible to decide by reason

alone, without some other contributing factor, between the perspective as a whole and a certain conflicting perspective.

I begin by taking a closer look at the notion of reason in Hume's account of the reason-passion relation, arguing that Hume is concerned with reason as the capacity to decide matters of disagreement and inquiry by argumentation and that his account of this capacity is perspectivist. I then go on to explore the idea of perspectivism along with the related notions of rational decidability and perspectives, and discuss parallels between moral perspectivism and perspectivism about inductive knowledge, while also noting their differences.

1. Reason as Rational Decidability

In the first appendix of the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hume sums up his view of the relation between reason and sentiment in moral thought:

> The former conveys the knowledge of truth and falsehood: The latter gives the sentiment of beauty and deformity, vice and virtue. The one discovers objects as they really stand in nature, without addition or diminution: The other has a productive faculty, and gilding or staining all natural objects with the colours, borrowed from internal sentiment, raises, in a manner, a new creation . . . . After all circumstances and relations are laid before us, the latter makes us feel from the whole a new sentiment of blame or approbation. (EPM App. 1.21; SBN 294)

Here the basic division of cognitive labor seems clear: reason discovers facts, while sentiment (feeling, passion, taste) determines their moral qualities. But as already indicated, the different strands in Hume's account are difficult to fit into a coherent picture. The difficulty is partly due to an ambiguity in the notion of reason, or at least a shift in Hume's focus when using the term. When Hume talks of "reason," he sometimes has in mind what he also calls human understanding, sometimes a particular part or aspect of the understanding—namely, causal reasoning—and sometimes the settling of issues of disagreement and inquiry by argumentation.

"Reason" is used in the first way when Hume talks of the "objects of human reason or enquiry" and divides them into relations of ideas and matters of fact, the former being objects of mathematical intuition and demonstration and the latter of immediate sense experience and causal inference (EHU 4.1; SBN 25, cf. EPM App. 1.6; SBN 287 and T 1.3.1–1.3.2; SBN 69–78). Thus understood, reason is the mind's capacity to gain empirical and non-empirical knowledge by applying intuition, demonstration, observation, and causal inference to their respective objects.

Hume uses "reason" more narrowly when it is said to direct the impulses of passion by showing how objects holding the prospect of pleasure or pain are causally connected to other objects. This is followed by the remark that "reason is nothing but the discovery of this connection" (EPM App. 1.2; SBN 285–86, T 2.3.3.3; SBN 414). In other words, "reason" is here thought of as being just causal inference or reason*ing* on empirical matters (or, possibly, inference more generally, including mathematical and logical demonstration).

But "reason" is not just the capacity to gain knowledge of matters of facts and relations of ideas. With the possible exception of his remarks on animals, Hume associates reason with the practice of giving reasons, of using argument to defend and question beliefs, opinions, judgments, and statements. Reason—"sound reason" (T 3.2.10.15; SBN 563), "accurate and just reasoning" (EHU 1.12; SBN 12)—is characterized by the employment of arguments answerable to certain standards, which Hume calls "rules of just reasoning" (EHU 10.1; SBN 109) and explores in his investigations of human understanding. However conceived, reason is therefore opposed to superstition (for instance in T 3.2.10.15; SBN 563 and EHU 1.12; SBN 12), to the debating practices of those who exhibit "blind adherence to their own arguments" (EPM 1.1; SBN 169), to non-rational influences on thought, such as education when its teachings are contrary to reason (T 1.3.9.19; SBN 117), and to attempts by metaphysicians to go outside the "proper province of reason" (EHU 1.12; SBN 12). More positively, it is associated with common sense (EPM 1.2; SBN 170) and with the impartial enquirer, "who will be satisfied with nothing but sound reason and philosophy" (T 3.2.10.15; SBN 563). The emphasis is thus on argumentation and on deciding issues of inquiry and disagreement by sound arguments.[8]

What depends on differentiating these usages of 'reason'? To begin with, Hume needs such a differentiation to avoid contradiction when arguing that the mind's transition from cause to effect "is not determined by reason" (T 1.3.6.12; SBN 92; see also EHU 5.20; SBN 54).[9] If reason is equivalent to human understanding or causal reasoning, this means, paradoxically, that the inferences of reason are not determined by reason. But if reason is understood as argumentation, then what Hume claims is that the operations of the understanding when associating causes and effects are ultimately not justifiable by sound arguments. In other words, human understanding is, to that extent, not based on argumentation but on custom and habit and, ultimately, on human nature.

More important for our present purposes, the interpretation of reason as argumentation has implications for the understanding of Hume's moral sentimentalism. If "reason" stands for human understanding, then the idea that sentiment rather than reason distinguishes vice from virtue implies, or at least strongly suggests, that moral qualities are not facts or properties of a kind that can become objects of knowledge (the understanding). But if Hume is primarily referring to argumentation, then what he says is either that argumentation is unnecessary for

moral thought and discourse or—much more plausibly—that it is necessary but not sufficient for it. Argumentation is part of moral thought and discourse, but it also depends on sentiments. What is the nature of this dependence?

2. The Case for Moral Perspectivism

When Hume introduces the controversy between rationalists and sentimentalists in the moral *Enquiry*, he explains that the question debated is whether the foundations of morals are "the same to every rational intelligent being" or, like our ideas of beauty, are founded "entirely on the particular fabric and constitution of the human species" (EPM 1.3; SBN 170). One way to formulate this problem is to ask whether anything *more* than reason is required for resolving moral issues and, more precisely, for making it possible to resolve them by argumentation. Hume's answer is, of course, that morality depends on "some internal sense or feeling, which nature has made universal in the whole species" and which pronounces "the final sentence" that stamps characters and actions as praise-worthy or blameable (EPM 1.9; SBN 172–73). Similarly, the investigation of human understanding by tracing it "to its first principles" led him to conclude that the connection between causes and effects really lies in us and not in the objects and that reason itself depends on principles that cannot be defended by argumentation (T 1.4.7.5; SBN 266). In both cases, the conclusion is that the practice of deciding issues by sound arguments depends on factors outside reason itself, factors that are part of human nature. In his moral theory, Hume specifically stresses that those foundations of reason outside itself must be universal. If different humans or groups of humans had radically different moral feelings or dispositions to feeling, or if some of them lacked such feelings altogether, then it would be possible to argue rationally with members of the same group but not with members of other groups. Rational discussion on moral matters is possible only where there exists a common ground of feelings or dispositions to feelings. (See below on the notion of common ground.)

How is the need for a common ground to be reconciled with the fact that people differ widely in their emotional responses to objects and facts? Part of the answer is that moral thought and discourse require a special, moral point of view (EPM 9.6; SBN 272 and T 3.3.1.15; SBN 581–82), in contrast to what one might call our natural or undeveloped individual points of view. If I call someone my "enemy" or "rival," Hume says, then it is clear that I "speak the language of self-love" and do not make a moral judgment. I thus judge the other according to my own self-interest in my present circumstances and by my utterance express what I feel from that individual point of view, which may be quite different from what other people feel. If I call someone "vicious" or "perverted," however, then I have shifted to characteristically moral terminology and aim to express feelings that I expect others to share or at least have reason to share. When a speaker uses moral

language, he must therefore "depart from his private and particular situation, and must choose a point of view, common to 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" (EPM 9.6; SBN 272, cf. T 3.3.1.15; SBN 581–82).

Adopting the moral point of view is a precondition for rational decidability not only in discourse with others but also in individual moral reasoning. Just as sense impressions of external things change with distance and light conditions, for instance, moral feelings change with circumstances and state of mind, so that even an individual subject would hold contradictory beliefs unless he compensated for those variations. The moral point of view must be constant under variation within as well as between individual points of view. It must be "steady" and not just "general" (T 3.3.1.15; SBN 581). (By "the moral point of view" or "the moral perspective" I here mean the point of view adopted by someone who shifts from the "language of self-love" to moral language; I leave open the question whether it is identical to what Hume calls the common or steady and general point of view.)

The moral point of view both allows for and, in a sense, requires argumentation. If people speak entirely from their individual viewpoints, then the fact that their judgments differ is not, in itself, a sign that someone is in error or has reasoned badly. You consider someone your enemy while I consider the same person my friend because our interests and circumstances are different (including our relations to other people). There is no real contradiction and nothing to debate. But if you say of someone that he is vicious, and I say of the same person that he is virtuous, then argumentation for and against our respective views is both possible and called for.

When we see things from the moral perspective, we disregard our self-interest and share other people's feelings and opinions through sympathy (T 3.3.1.14; SBN 580–81, T 3.3.1.30; SBN 590–91, EPM 5.43–45; SBN 230–321, and EPM 9.6, SBN 272–73). This can happen by means of direct emotional and cognitive contagion, as when seeing someone else's sad or angry face puts one in a low spirit. But it can also result from what contemporary empathy theorists call perspective-taking, that is, by viewing the others' situation the way they themselves do, as when the sight of a city in ruins makes one imagine how the inhabitants must feel (T 2.2.9.17; SBN 388 and T 2.1.11.2; SBN 317).[10]

In sum, taking the moral perspective both makes argumentation on moral matters possible and requires argumentation when there is contradiction or disagreement. According to sentimentalism, only someone who has certain dispositions to feelings can assume that special perspective on others and himself.

In arguing that Hume is a moral perspectivist, I take the main tenets of his moral perspectivism to be as follows:

> *Perspective-dependence of rational decidability*: Moral issues of disagreement and inquiry are rationally decidable only among speakers and thinkers who share a particular perspective.

Contingency of the moral perspective: The moral perspective is partly determined by contingent traits of the subject, such as the tendency to have feelings of particular kinds.

Universalism: The capacity for such feelings is shared by everyone (all humans, or perhaps all humans with normally developed intellectual and emotional abilities).

Hume commits himself to perspective-dependence by what he says about moral discourse and the common point of view, to contingency by the sentimentalist thesis that morality is founded on sentiment and thus "on the particular fabric and constitution of the human species" (EPM 1.3; SBN 170), and to universalism by saying that the moral sentiment is "so universal and comprehensive as to extend to all mankind" (EPM 9.5; SBN 272).[11]

As a universalist, Hume rejects the relativist view that what is right or good for people in one tradition or group may be wrong or bad for people in another. Morality depends on feelings of a particular kind, but these are feelings "which nature has made universal in the whole species" (EPM 1.9; SBN 173). In *A Dialogue*, Hume specifically argues that there exist universal moral standards grounded in sentiment that hold independently of particular traditions.[12] But Hume also makes it clear that morality cannot be grounded in arguments that would hold for intelligent beings with a different "fabric and constitution" than humans (EPM 1.3; SBN 170).[13] Thus, if someone had a psyche deviant enough to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of his finger, then even if he reasoned faultlessly and were presented with the best argument possible, he could not be convinced of the opposite (T 2.3.3.6; SBN 416). Although Hume repeatedly stresses the universality of moral feelings among human beings, something similar might also be the case with psychopaths, who for some reason or another lack the disposition to "sympathy and humanity" crucial to moral sentiment.

Perspectivism in the sense just outlined is concerned with the rational decidability of moral issues. What is meant by rational decidability here? And how can something that is supposed to be a "mere effect on the mind," such as beauty or virtue, be determined by argument in the same way as mind-independent qualities? Hume's answer to this question is at best incomplete, so in searching for a solution, we must temporarily part company with him.

We may begin by noting that the distinction between rationally decidable and non-decidable matters is one that speakers make in everyday communication, whether they reflect on it philosophically or not. People tend to argue on certain matters but find argument on other matters pointless. If someone says there are polar bears in Alaska and someone else replies that there are not, then they will be likely to dispute each other's views and adduce evidence for and against them (consulting the zoological literature, for example). But if one speaker says that clams are

delicious and another replies that they are not, it is likely that they will choose not to dispute the matter. Certain topics seem to be such that they cannot be rationally decided by even the most thorough investigation by the most conscientious and well-informed enquirers imaginable. Some people find clams delicious and others do not, and there is no objective truth of the matter to be right or wrong about. Other topics seem to be such that an objective truth (or something like it) about them exists and holds independently of individual perspectives. The polar bears are either there or not, regardless of what anyone thinks about the matter. If two persons disagree on an issue of the second type, it is possible, in principle if not always in practice, to decide it by argumentation, but when people have opposite views on matters of the first type, no argument can show one side to be right and the other wrong. The maxim *De gustibus non disputandum est* is an over-simplified but handy criterion for recognizing topics of this kind and helps speakers avoid wasting time and energy on fruitless argumentation.[14]

A proposal for a more precise criterion is that a statement *s* is rationally decidable if there cannot be faultless disagreement about it and rationally non-decidable if there can. In other words, it is not rationally decidable if one speaker can assert *s* and another *not-s* without either of them having made a cognitive error, and it is rationally decidable if whenever one speaker states *s* and another *not-s*, one of them must have made a cognitive error.[15]

By a cognitive error, I here mean a violation of what Hume calls the rules of just reasoning. Proceeding on the (broadly Humean) assumption that we reason about the world by making observations and inferences from observation, we can make a basic division of cognitive errors into those that concern observation and those that concern inference. One can err in one's thinking by making observational mistakes (conflating perceptual objects of different kinds, for example), by reasoning from insufficient evidence, or by making purely inferential errors (such as affirming the consequent). Hence, a thinker has made a cognitive mistake whenever he has reasoned from erroneous, incomplete, or misleading evidence or drawn conclusions that do not follow from the premises.

As defined so far, the criterion of rational decidability categorizes all statements as either rationally decidable or not. There is reason to be more nuanced on this point, however. Among the statements on which there can be faultless disagreement among speakers with different perspectives, and which are thus rationally non-decidable according to this criterion, there may be some that nevertheless involve cognitive errors when speakers with the same perspective disagree about them.[16]

Suppose, for example, that at a dinner Peter, Paul, and Simon are served fermented herring and discuss the question: "Is it good?" (Fermented Baltic herring, *surströmming*, is a traditional dish in parts of northern Sweden.) Peter hates fermented herring altogether, but Paul and Simon both love it, especially when it

is firm in consistency and not very salty. Resisting his impulses, Peter takes the first bite and immediately expresses his total disgust. Paul also tries the herring and responds by praising the dish and blaming Peter for not appreciating it appropriately. Here it is obvious that neither of the two has made a cognitive mistake. Both are in possession of all relevant evidence and neither has drawn hasty conclusions. Nonetheless, they cannot reach agreement because the matter under debate is not rationally decidable. But suppose, instead, that Paul praises the herring on the basis of its producer's reputation. He is challenged by Simon, this time on the ground that Oskar's, the particular brand of fermented herring served, is not up to standard. "Oskar's herring isn't that good this year," he says. "It's too salty and not as firm as last year's." They taste it, and Paul admits that he was wrong; the fish was indeed mushy and too salty. Paul had only tasted last year's brand and not this year's, and so had drawn hasty conclusions from incomplete evidence. Being due to a cognitive error, the disagreement could thus be resolved by the introduction of additional empirical evidence.[17]

This type of case shows that the rational decidability of a matter of disagreement depends on the perspectives of speakers. The proposed criterion of rational decidability would allow for this if revised as follows: a statement is rationally decidable among the members of a certain group of speakers if there cannot be faultless disagreement on it between members of the group, and otherwise not rationally decidable among them (Kölbel, *Truth Without Objectivity*, 107–109).

According to moral perspectivism, rational decidability depends on perspectives. What, then, can be meant by a perspective here? The notion of a perspective occurs in ordinary language and has special uses in the theory and history of visual arts, in philosophy, linguistics, sociology, history, and psychology.[18] As we have noted, taking other people's perspectives is part of empathetic understanding and thus also of what Hume calls sympathy. In a very wide sense, perspectives are that which makes the same thing appear different to different subjects or to the same subject on different occasions. For example, an object looks small from a distance but large when the observer is close, a certain character trait commands respect and admiration in one historical period but is looked down upon in another. In the present context, perspectives can be thought of as that which makes a claim warranted or justified for a particular person or group of persons but unwarranted or unjustified for another person or group.

A perspective, both in the sense indicated and in ordinary usage of the term, includes explicit and implicit factual and evaluative background assumptions, which typically function as implicit premises in arguments for and against assertions made in discourse between speakers who share them. People who share such assumptions will often express their evaluative views by talking about objects and their properties in the same way that they would talk about non-evaluative physical properties. In this particular linguistic mood and frame of mind, the tastiness

or non-tastiness of herring is ascribed to it in the same way as its length or weight. What is described, disputed, or inquired into, one might say, is the herring, not the views or attitudes of the speakers and thinkers. Talking with people who do not share their perspective, however, the same people will often shift from "object-talk," about the herring, for example, to mentalistic "attitude-talk" about beliefs, feelings, desires, or intentions.

In moral object-talk, the relevant feelings—of sympathy, humanity, or benevolence—are part of the common ground and are, therefore, presupposed but not asserted. Uttered in such a context, a statement about right or wrong or about moral good or evil expresses something about which one can be right or wrong within the perspective, and arguments about it can be good or bad according to shared standards. By contrast, if the speaker addresses someone with a conflicting perspective, he can shift to attitude-talk in order to facilitate communication. However, he may also maintain his perspective and continue in the object-talk mood, as when someone cries out "You can't do that!" to another who has a different opinion and is not open to argumentation on the matter.

In the herring example, taste is a decisive element in the perspectives of the speakers. Hume occasionally talks of a "moral taste" (T 3.3.1.15; SBN 581) or "taste or sentiment" (T 3.3.1.27; SBN 589–90) and of "moral beauty and "deformity" (T 3.2.2.1; SBN 484, EPM 1.7; SBN 172), thus indicating continuity between the two types of evaluative thought and discourse. Arguing that both reason and sentiment are essential to moral thought, in the following passage he draws a distinction between "immediate" moral and aesthetic feelings, on the one hand, and feelings resulting from argumentation, on the other.

> Some species of beauty, especially the natural kinds, on their first appearance, command our affection and approbation; and where they fail of this effect, it is impossible for any reasoning to redress their influence, or adapt them better to our taste and sentiment. But in many orders of beauty, particularly those of the finer arts, it is requisite to employ much reasoning, in order to feel the proper sentiment; and a false relish may frequently be corrected by argument and reflection. There are just grounds to conclude that moral beauty partakes much of this latter species and demands the assistance of our intellectual faculties, in order to give it a suitable influence on the human mind. (EPM 1.9; SBN 173; see T 3.3.1.30; SBN 591)

Feeling and taste of the first kind informs us of the immediate agreeableness of actions, character traits, or objects, while feeling of the latter kind informs us of their utility, or agreeable effects not directly discernible in sense experience. Our tendencies to feel certain ways determine the way we perceive virtuousness

and viciousness when we see people acting and displaying character traits. The fact that we perceive (or react to perception) in this way causes us to accept, if only implicitly and unreflectively, a principle that is presupposed in all moral discourse, namely, "that Personal Merit consists altogether in the possession of mental qualities, *useful* or *agreeable* to the *person himself* or to *others*" (EPM 9.1; SBN 268, cf. T 3.3.1.30; SBN 591). This principle, Hume says, is "implicitly maintained" "in common life," "nor is any other topic of praise or blame ever recurred to, when we employ any panegyric or satire, any applause or censure of human action and behavior. If we observe men, in every intercourse of business or pleasure, in every discourse and conversation; we shall find them no where, except in the schools, at any loss upon this subject" (EPM 9.2; SBN 268).

Hume does not say that people always judge in accordance with the fundamental moral principle (as I will call it). We have a strong tendency to see things from the point of view of self-interest, or "self-love," as opposed to the moral point of view. Moreover, some people lack the well-developed capacity for sympathy, humanity, and benevolence that is required for moral feelings, either because it has not been sufficiently developed by education and intercourse with others or because it has been perverted by "artificial" philosophical doctrines or religious superstition and "enthusiasm" (Dial. 52–57; SBN 341–43).[19] Although the moral point of view is based on dispositions to feelings that everyone has, it is thus not the perspective of everyone, or even of anyone all of the time. But among people who do think and speak within that perspective, there exists a crucially important common ground for moral discourse and argumentation. Hume gives the example of a man being praised for his cheerfulness, wit, fairness, kindness, and magnanimity, all qualities that contribute directly or indirectly to the man's own happiness or that of others. By selecting these character traits as praiseworthy rather than, say, fasting or self-denial, the speakers display their "preference of what is useful and serviceable to mankind, above what is pernicious and dangerous." That preference is in turn caused by their sentiments of benevolence and humanity (EPM 9.3–4; SBN 270–71). To someone who lacked any such sentiments, none of the qualities mentioned would be a reason to hold a person in high regard.

In ordinary usage, "perspective" often means little more than belief or opinion. In the present context, however, it stands for something that is typically shared by people of opposite opinions. It is, so to speak, the background against which discourse and argumentation for and against different views take place. Thus understood, a perspective is a set of presuppositions made in communication or reasoning. In discourse with others, we normally take for granted facts that all participants are assumed to know and norms they are taken to share, but which would have to be explained and justified if we were talking to people with other perspectives. And arguing for and against statements, we are typically satisfied with reasons that are only sound if further assumptions are made, assumptions that

are not themselves explicit parts of our arguments. Our explicit statements and arguments make sense only against the background of these other assumptions, which are implicitly presupposed but not asserted.

One of the things that make the distinction between presupposition and statement important is that both agreement and disagreement with a statement normally implies acceptance of its presuppositions (Stalnaker, *Context and Content*, 47). Suppose, for example that I say: "It's wrong that my father-in-law's second wife will inherit almost everything he owned." On a reasonable interpretation of this statement, I assert that the fact about the inheritance referred to is wrong, but I presuppose a large, perhaps indefinite, number of other things: that I am married, that my wife or husband has at least one father, that the father was married first to one woman and then to another, that he had fairly considerable assets, and that his second wife will inherit most of those assets. Depending on the context, I may also presuppose, for instance, that the content of the letter from the lawyer that informed me of my father-in-law's will was true and that the person I am addressing is not a close friend of his second wife. If someone responds to my statement about the inheritance by saying "But he only married once," or "In fact, he had nearly nothing," he thus challenges my presupposition, but if he replies either "Yes, it's a shame" or "No, she deserves the money," then in both cases he accepts my presuppositions and only expresses agreement or disagreement with what I assert.

A pragmatic, or contextual, presupposition of a sentence is a belief that a speaker would normally expect to be part of the "common ground" of beliefs accepted by everyone who takes part in the discourse in which the sentence is uttered (Stalnaker, *Context and Content*, 48 and "Common Ground," 25). In other words, it is something that "goes without saying" because everyone accepts it and everyone knows that everyone else also accepts it (Stalnaker, "Presuppositions," 448). Implicit assumptions, or suppressed premises, are a special form of contextual presuppositions. Stephen Turner's attempt to explicate the idea of presuppositions in this sense will be helpful for our present purposes. According to Turner, "One shows that a person 'presupposes' something by showing that, if one or more of the person's beliefs were made the conclusion of an explicit logical argument, premises in addition to those explicitly avowed by the reasoner would be required to make the argument valid" (*Social Theory*, 29).[20] On this account, one presupposes something if one reasons as if one holds it true, whether or not one has explicitly reflected or even thought of it (Stalnaker, "Presuppositions," 448–49). For instance, someone who infers future events from observations in the past (as everyone does) presupposes the uniformity of nature even if he has never reflected on the matter or even heard of the principle of uniformity of nature (T 1.3.16.3; SBN 177).

It is in the same sense, I propose, that all moral discourse can be said to presuppose the principle that virtue is usefulness and agreeability to others and oneself.

If someone says that a certain action is morally right or a character trait virtuous, then if his statement were made the conclusion of an explicit deductive argument, the principle would be required to make the argument sound (assuming Hume is right), and if someone takes the opposite view, he presupposes the same principle in the same way.

The fermented herring example illustrates the crucial difference between discourse with and without a common ground for argumentation. Sharing a particular taste and therefore certain evaluative assumptions, the two herring-lovers, Paul and Simon, could give perfectly sound reasons for and against aesthetic judgments about fermented herring, ranking different brands, for instance. No such argumentation was possible with Peter, who took no pleasure whatsoever in the herring and with whom they, therefore, lacked a common ground for discussion. Although Hume does not use the term presupposition, he takes moral feelings to play the same role in moral thought and discourse as gustatory taste in this example. Sentiments, so to speak, put the foundations in place on which moral argumentation can build. These foundations are not derived from reason but depend on extra-rational, contingent features of human nature.

This reading of Hume's sentimentalism suggests that aesthetic and moral "taste"—or sentiments or tendencies to pleasure and pain of particular kinds—are presuppositions of aesthetic and moral statements and arguments. But presuppositions are usually understood as propositional attitudes, and, more precisely, attitudes of holding something true (Stalnaker, "Presuppositions," 450). Is it an implication of the perspectivist argument above that moral sentiments are propositional attitudes? And if not, how is their apparent presupposition-like role to be understood? This question calls for a more thorough discussion than is possible here,[21] but very briefly it can be replied that if moral sentiments are propositional attitudes, then it is clear in what sense they are also presuppositions of aesthetic and moral statements, and if they are not, then strictly speaking, it would not be the moral taste or sentiments themselves that are presupposed in moral discourse but the fact, or presumed fact, that everyone who participates in the discourse (and thus takes the common point of view) are causally determined by such sentiments in their judgments of character traits and actions.

A possible objection to the idea that moral sentiments are presuppositions is that Hume sometimes talks of reason and sentiment as two consecutive and distinct steps in a mental process where sentiment comes after rather than before reason. For instance, Hume writes that "in moral deliberations, we must be acquainted, before-hand, with all the objects, and all their relations to each other . . . . All the circumstances of the case are supposed to be laid before us, ere we can fix any sentence of blame or approbation (EPM App. 1.11; SBN 290). If this is correct, the objection would be that moral judgment cannot properly be said to presuppose feelings in any sense (but rather to "post-suppose" them).

However, Hume's remark simply emphasises the logical distinction between moral premises and conclusions and does not imply any psychological claims about the existence of phenomenologically separable mental entities. It is like saying that the mind must "first" be acquainted with constant conjunction of objects or events "before" it can draw any conclusions about necessary connections or causes and effects. This is true in a logical sense but not as a description of any introspectively available mental goings-on. Hume himself emphasizes this when he says in his analysis of causal reasoning that the mind is not led by "reflection" from the idea of a cause to the idea of its effect (T 1.3.8.13; SBN 103–104). Apart from exceptional cases, we do not explicitly formulate arguments with previous experience and its presumed conformity to future experience as premises. Instead, we are carried by habit along a certain train of ideas as by "a wonderful and unintelligible instinct," just like animals when they associate causes and effects (for instance, a dog who hears his master's angry voice and thinks of his own punishment (T 1.3.16.6–9; SBN 178–79). Similarly, non-evaluative ideas and the moral feelings they prompt are not temporally and phenomenologically distinct phenomena—or at least it would be both implausible in itself and unnecessary from Hume's vantage point to claim that they were. We simply see certain things as good or bad, right or wrong, and can only later and by a mental effort, if at all, separate the value-free facts or factual beliefs from the evaluation.

Another problem for my interpretation concerns Hume's fundamental moral principle. This principle figures prominently in the moral *Enquiry* but plays a much more modest role in the *Treatise*, which suggests that it may not really be of crucial importance to Hume's analysis of morality. Moral perspectivism, however, depends only on the assumption that *some* such principle or belief, or set of principles or beliefs, constitutes a common ground of presuppositions shared by everyone who takes the moral perspective. For the sake of simplicity, I have followed the main line of argument in the moral *Enquiry* by taking the principle of agreeableness and usefulness to others and oneself to be the ultimate foundation of moral thought, but moral perspectivism is compatible with other ways of understanding the moral perspective.

3. Epistemic and Moral Perspectivism

Because there are reasons to consider Hume a perspectivist in both his epistemology and his moral theory, a comparison between the two types of perspectivism may be illuminating. Hume argues in his analysis of causality that reason depends on the principle "*that instances, of which we have had no experience, must resemble those, of which we have had experience, and that the course of nature continues always uniformly the same*" (T 1.3.6.4; SBN 89, italics in the original). This principle is presupposed whenever we draw conclusions from observed to unobserved facts, but

no argument can be given for it that does not already presuppose it (T 1.3.6.11–12; SBN 91–92). Thus, Hume writes, "In all reasonings from experience, there is a step taken by the mind, which is not supported by any argument or process of the understanding" (EHU 5.2; SBN 41), and "all probable reasoning is nothing but a species of sensation. It is not solely in poetry and music we must follow our taste and sentiment, but likewise in philosophy . . . . When I give the preference to one set of arguments above another, I do nothing but decide from my feeling concerning the superiority of their influence" (T 1.3.8.12; SBN 103).

The fact that we sometimes make this presupposition and sometimes (when thinking philosophically) do not explains why Hume can shift back and forth between the perspectives of skepticism and common sense without regarding the one as rationally more defensible than the other. The point is not, of course, that we should give up common sense, but that in holding on to it, we are driven by custom, habit, and nature and not by reason (cf. T 1.4.7.7; SBN 267). However, if we do accept the basic presuppositions of common sense—the reliability of inductive reasoning and the uniformity of nature—then reason has what it needs to ground all sorts of claims about the future, unobserved causes, laws of nature, and so on.

In his moral theory, Hume ascribes a very similar role to the fundamental principle of virtue as utility and agreeability to others and oneself. This principle functions as a premise in all moral discourse and reasoning, but one for which we can give no reason that does not already presuppose it. The amoral perspective of someone who does not care about the well-being of others is no less rational than the moral, common point of view. It is not reason but feeling and taste that make us see things from the moral perspective. If we do see things from that perspective, however, then we can take part in moral discourse and decide moral issues of disagreement and inquiry by argumentation.

While there are parallels between epistemic and moral perspectivism, there are also divergences. Except for short moments of philosophical reflection, it is impossible to avoid relying on inference from observed to unobserved cases. Our very mental constitution seems to force upon us the "indolent belief in the general maxims of the world," so that we find ourselves "absolutely and necessarily determined to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life" (T 1.4.7.10; SBN 269). The tendency to moral thought and feeling seems much less compelling. People may be too egoistic to take up the moral point of view, their moral feelings may be perverted by superstition and enthusiasm, and some, like the "sensible knave," might perhaps even lack any tendency whatsoever to think in moral terms (EPM 9.22; SBN 282).

Moreover, Hume treats the capacity and tendency to engage in inductive reasoning as an ultimate principle of human nature that does not allow of further explanation. By contrast, there is a detailed account in the *Treatise* of the origins of moral thought and feeling in the mechanism of sympathy. Interestingly, though,

Hume in the moral *Enquiry* seems to downplay this difference between causality and morality, saying little more about the roots of sympathy, humanity, and benevolence than that they derive "from the original frame of our temper" (EPM App. 2.13; SBN 302).

Despite these differences, the parallel between epistemology and moral theory is helpful. Epistemic perspectivism is a view about the foundations of empirical thought, or in more Humean terms, reasoning about matters of fact. As such, it obviously does not support any particular empirical theory against another. The common sense, non-skeptical epistemic perspective is not a special theory or view of the world but that which makes us draw inferences from observed to non-observed objects, regardless of what we infer. Similarly, moral perspectivism concerns the nature of moral as opposed to non-moral thought, not the relation between competing systems of moral beliefs. With regard to the latter, Hume's view is the universalist, non-relativist one that all moral thought ultimately rests on the fundamental moral principle as a shared premise. (See Bohlin, "Universal Moral Standards.") This premise defines the moral point of view in the same way that reliance on induction and the uniformity of nature defines the common sense epistemic point of view.

4. Concluding Remarks

I have argued that in his analysis of reason and passion in morality, Hume addresses a problem about the range and limits of rational decidability and proposes a perspectivist solution to it. As the term suggests, the notion of perspectivism is bound up with that of perspectives, or sets of presuppositions, that make possible argumentation and discourse on factual, moral, or other matters. Discourse and argumentation between people takes place against backgrounds of implicit premise-type presuppositions. According to moral perspectivism, issues about right and wrong and good and bad are rationally decidable only among people who share a common ground of presuppositions—according to Hume, what I have called the fundamental moral principle and the tendency to feelings of sympathy and humanity that make us accept that principle. If there are people who have no such feelings, there is no common ground for moral argumentation. For instance, we cannot argue with the man who prefers the destruction of the world to the scratching of his finger.

If "reason" in the distinction between reason and passion stands for human understanding—the capacity to gain knowledge of "objects as they really stand in nature" (EPM App. 1.21; SBN 294)—then the idea that sentiment rather than reason distinguishes vice from virtue would imply, or at least strongly suggest, that moral qualities are not facts or properties of a kind that can become objects of reason. But if, as I have argued, "reason" means argumentation and inquiry, then

what Hume says is that the possibility of deciding moral issues by reason depends on the existence of a shared perspective, which, in turn, depends on the existence of common dispositions to feelings. Rational decidability and non-decidability thus depend on context and are not inherent, context-independent properties of moral statements, problems, or issues.

Moral perspectivism does not presuppose universal perspectivism: a moral perspectivist may well regard truths of physics or mathematics as decidable independently of any particular perspective (although skepticism about causality would count against it) and some aesthetic questions as inherently non-decidable by argumentation (whether sunbathing is pleasant, for instance). Neither does it follow from perspectivism that all moral issues are rationally decidable. I have argued elsewhere that Hume holds some matters of value to be rationally decidable but others non-decidable (Bohlin, "Universal Moral Standards"). Right and wrong sometimes depend on context, so that there can be no simple, context-less answer to an issue debated; for example, the general virtue of obedience to the law may imply rigorous loyalty to the ruler in the absence of a legal system, because public justice then depends entirely on the sovereign, while the same principle has different implications when applied to countries or historical epochs with well-developed laws and law enforcement (Dial. 33; SBN 335). Some aesthetic matters (although clearly not all according to Hume) are such that the principle *de gustibus non est disputandum* applies to them—for instance, whether joined eyebrows are a mark of beauty, as the Greek poet Anacreon thought (Dial. 36; SBN 336).[22] Furthermore, people may be unable to take a genuinely moral point of view because their moral sentiments have been distorted by superstition or philosophical or religious enthusiasm; Hume illustrates this fact with the philosophers Diogenes and Pascal, who, he thinks, led "artificial lives" and were "in a different element from the rest of mankind" (Dial. 57; SBN 343). Finally, moral principles may be too imprecise to give an unequivocal verdict in particular cases, so that more than one view on the matter may be rationally allowable. Hume argues, for instance, that although sexual relations between close relatives are generally considered to be wrong, this principle does not specify the precise allowable degree of proximity in family relations and, hence, does not determine whether it is morally permissible to marry one's half-sibling, as is said to have been the practice in ancient Athens during a certain period (Dial. 29; SBN 334).

Moral perspectivism can easily accommodate this Humean reply to relativism. Context-dependent matters are in principle decidable by argument once relativized to a specific context, and thus pose no special problem. The non-decidability of disagreement with "artificial" views and of some aesthetic matters is due to incompatible perspectives and, hence, is likewise unproblematic. Imprecision in moral principles seems initially more problematic, but can be understood in analogy to a problem about property that Hume discusses in the moral *Enquiry*.

Sometimes the interests of society require regulation of a certain matter without giving reason to prefer any particular rule among a set of alternatives any of which, if implemented, would serve equally well. When new land is settled, for example, a certain time of possession ought to be required for acquiring property rights to a particular piece of land, but the exact number of days, months, or years "is impossible for reason alone to determine"; this is purely a matter of convention, and conventions may vary from one country to another without any one of them being more right or wrong than any other. That *some* such rule is required is not a matter of convention, however. "*Civil laws* here supply the place of the natural *code*," and, one may add, of imprecise general principles (EPM 3.31–3.33; SBN 195–96). The same line of reasoning, I believe, is applicable to incest and other cases of imprecision in moral principles.

NOTES

1 References to the *Treatise* are to Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Norton and Norton, hereafter cited in the text as "T" followed by Book, section and paragraph, and to Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Selby-Bigge, rev. Nidditch, cited in the text as "SBN" followed by the page number.

2 References to the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, referred to in the text as "the moral *Enquiry*," are to Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Beauchamp, hereafter cited in the text as "EPM" followed by section and paragraph, and to Hume, *Enquiries Concerning the Principles of Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, rev. P. H. Nidditch, cited in the text as "SBN" followed by the page number.

3 Some alternative interpretations are Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism*; Kail, *Projection and Realism*; Cohon, *Hume's Morality*; Norton, *David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist*; Sturgeon, "Moral Skepticism and Moral Naturalism"; and Swain, "Passionate Objectivity." For other interpretations, see for example, Olson, "Projectivism and Error."

4 Karl Schafer proposes what he calls perspectivalism about normative truth in his "Constructivism." Kölbel, in *Truth Without Objectivity*, conceives truth in general, both normative and non-normative, as dependent on perspectives. My concern here is with perspective-dependence of rational decidability, or justification, and not of truth.

5 See also T 3.1.1.26 (SBN 469). The skeptic holds that beauty is an effect on the mind: "Beauty is not a quality of the circle . . . . It is only the effect, which that figure produces upon a mind, whose particular fabric or structure renders it susceptible of such sentiments" ("The Sceptic," 165).

6 References to Hume's *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* are to Hume, *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Beauchamp, hereafter cited in the text as "EHU" followed by section and paragraph, and to *Enquiries Concerning the Principles of Human*

Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals, ed. Selby-Bigge, rev. Nidditch, cited in the text as "SBN" followed by the page number.

7 On the ambiguities in Hume's theory, see, for instance, Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, 280, and Mackie, *Hume's Moral Theory*, 72–73.

8 What I here call understanding and argumentation are roughly equivalent to what Karl Schafer calls "reason as demonstrative and probable inference" and "responsiveness to reason," respectively. Schafer reckons with a further Humean conception of reason, including both demonstrative and causal reasoning ("Practical Reasoning," 190–91).

9 On Hume's concept of reason, see Winters, "Hume on Reason" and Cohon, *Hume's Morality*, 65–77.

10 See Bohlin, "Sympathy, Understanding, and Hermeneutics," 145–50.

11 Schafer defines metaethical perspectivalism as the view that (A) "normative judgment can only be assessed as true or false from within a normative perspective," and (B) "in particular, the truths of a normative judgment about an individual is grounded (in the relevant respects) in facts about the normative perspective of the individual assessing the judgment (or her community)" ("Constructivism," 80). Since what I call perspectivism is concerned not with truth but with rational decidability, it shares assumption (A) but not (B) with Schafer's view.

12 References to Hume's *Dialogue* are to Hume, *A Dialogue*, ed. Beauchamp, hereafter cited in the text as "Dial." followed by paragraph number, and to *A Dialogue*, ed. Selby-Bigge, rev. Nidditch, cited in the text as 'SBN' followed by the page number. On the *Dialogue*, see Bohlin, "Universal Moral Standards."

13 For a fuller discussion of this claim, see Frankena, *Ethics*, 109–11, and Bohlin, "Universal Moral Standards."

14 My argument is based on Kölbel, *Truth Without Objectivity*, especially 98–100, 104. See also Kölbel, "Faultless Disagreement." The clam example is from Kölbel, *Truth Without Objectivity*.

15 The criterion is taken from Kölbel, *Truth Without Objectivity*, 31, with "objective" replaced by "rationally decidable" and "content" by "statement."

16 Kölbel, *Truth Without Objectivity*, 107–108.

17 I have used this example in Bohlin, "Perspective-dependence."

18 For an overview of different uses of "perspective," see Graumann, "Explicit and Implicit Perspectivity," 25–39.

19 See Bohlin, "Universal Moral Standards."

20 Like Turner, we may disregard for our present purposes the otherwise useful distinctions between types of assumptions drawn in R. H. Ennis, "Assumption-finding," 161–78.

21 For further discussion see Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism*. According to Blackburn, "What starts life as a non-descriptive psychological state ends up expressed, thought about, and considered in propositional form" (5). On the relation between accounts of moral thought and discourse as perspective-dependent and meta-ethical

views inspired by expressivism, see Schafer, "Constructivism," 99–100. For an analysis of judgments of taste in terms of presuppositions, see Parsons, "Presupposition, Disagreement, and Predicates," 163–73.

22 For Hume's view on rational decidability in aesthetic matters, see "Standard of Taste."

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