

Utilitarianism in Moral Discourse: David Hume

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Abstract

David Hume discussed an important issue in human life that is moral theory although he mainly discusses epistemology, causality and the doctrine of soul ... personality. The important topic discussed in Hume's moral philosophy is virtue, benevolence and justice. He discussed utility in the context of benevolence and justice. He mainly focused on public utility. Hume says public utility is the sole origin of justice. According to Hume the source of all our motivation is the feeling of happiness and sorrow – affection to happiness and aversion to sorrow. We judge the good and bad of my work in the context of happiness and sorrow. According to Hume happiness is only useful after mentioning utility; Hume called utility as the ultimate criterion of moral judgement.

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David Hume mainly known for his empirical analysis. But in addition to these things, he also expresses his doctrine on another important aspect of human life that is moral theory. He says in the third volume of the book *Treatise*– “morality is a subject that interest us above all others.”¹ Hume claims that the doctrines he preaches about morality are as important as the doctrines of the philosophers like Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Butler and just as important as the scientific doctrines of Galileo and Newton. ‘In his moral philosophy, Hume shows himself the empiricist only, not the sceptic.’² Hume thinks that it is possible to know human nature in the same way that external nature can be known through experience, through experimentation. It is possible to have a scientific discussion about the moral life of human being. Just as the laws of the natural sciences can be discovered on the basis of experience, so the rules of ethics can be established on the basis of empirical experiments. Hume thinks that, in order to determine what is good or bad in human life, empirical knowledge is more important than reason. ‘Hume wishes to discover the fundamental ... principles which operate in human life.’³

Hume's moral doctrine is based on his psychological doctrine. According to psychological doctrine, although man is a thinking being, in practical life man depends more on belief than rational argument. According to Hume, the basis of moral judgment, of good and evil judgment, is not reason, but feeling. Hume acknowledges that in the case of a moral problem or in making moral decision, man sometime depends on reason and thought, however at the root of that

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judgment or argument is man's feeling, his sentiment. Only reason cannot be the source of human moral action, unless it is driven by a feeling or sentiment. 'Reason is, and ought to be the slave of the passions'.⁴

The passions are divided by Hume into direct and indirect passions. The former are those which arise immediately from the experience of pleasure or pain; and Hume mentions desire, aversion, grief, joy, hope, fear, despair, and security. The pain of gout, for instance, produces direct passions. Hume also mentions direct passions which arise 'from natural impulse or instinct, which is perfectly unaccountable. Of this kind is the desire of punishment to our enemies and of happiness to our friend; hunger, lust, and a few other bodily appetites.' These passions are said to produce good and evil (that is pleasure and pain) rather than to proceed from them as other direct passions do. Indirect passions do not arise simply from feeling of pleasure or pain; they arise from what Hume calls 'a double relation of impression and ideas. His meaning can best be explained by using examples, such as pride and humility, love and hatred.

Therefore, according to Hume, the source of all our motivation is the feeling of happiness and sorrow, affection for happiness and dislike for sorrow. By associating utility with happiness, we are judging the moral judgment of work, goodness and evil. Clearly, Hume is a hedonist. Like the hedonists, Hume says that happiness is the only self-worth in human life, and everything is worth it. Although money, wealth, health, knowledge, etc. are desirable things, the ultimate goal of all of them is to gain happiness and avoid sorrow. People do not desire money for money, but they desire for happiness. But people desire happiness only for happiness, not for anything else. If a person is asked, why does he exercise? Then his simple answer would be, he exercises to maintain his health. Now if the question is, why does he want to protect his health? Then his simple answer would be, illness is sorrowful and he wants happiness instead of sorrow. Now if the question is, why does he want happiness? Then his simple answer would be, he seeks happiness only for happiness, not for any other higher attainment. Then the hedonists are of the opinion that happiness is the ultimate object of human life and that people judge the good and the bad of their deeds by measuring happiness and misery on a mental scale.

Although Hume is a proponent of hedonism, he is not a supporter of egoistic hedonism like Hobbes. People want happiness- even admitting that, Hume said that the happiness that people seek is not only their own happiness, but also the happiness of others. Hume goes to say that, whatever own happiness or other happiness, happiness is only useful in the end. After

referring to utility, Hume says that utility is the ultimate standard of moral judgement, especially in the field. If an action is useful in the life of an individual and in the life of a group, that is, in the social life, then the work can be called a morally good only by judging that usefulness without judging happiness. Many may object that Hume here considers utility to be the criterion of moral judgment rather than happiness. If Hume's discussion is properly understood, then it is understood that Hume considers him useful only for those which is pleasing to the individual and to society. Therefore, according to Hume happiness is the same as utility.

Hume thinks that morality is related to utility. Hume clearly considers the utility to be at the heart of morality. Hume's importance to utility is so wide that we can infer that he adopted some version of utilitarianism. Hume's theory is completely different from that of Bentham's advanced utilitarianism. Bentham and many other utilitarian focus on action as the primary subject of evaluation. Hume thinks that we accurately focus on the enduring traits of the mind or character and evaluate the actions when they reflect these traits. If Hume is a utilitarian, he is naturally a motive or virtue utilitarian. Hume emphasizes that "virtue in rags is still virtue; and the love which it procures attends a man into a dungeon or desert, where the virtue can no longer be exerted in action, and is lost to all the world". (T.158)⁵

We have seen that according to Hume its utility is one of the reasons why benevolence wins our moral approbations. But it is not the only reason. He maintains, however that public utility is the sole origin of justice and that reflections on the beneficial consequence of this virtue are the sole foundation of its merits. In his moral theory benevolence person have given the sovereign place, friendly, generous, grateful these are the key characteristic of happiness in the society but benevolence is the highest virtue among these and benevolence has given the society satisfaction. Though this type of benevolence should have an utility aspect. Hume has always focused on public utility.

Hume should be considered a utilitarian who thinks that, a person is considered a virtue not only because his character contributes to the utility but also because he has a character that contributes to it. However this formula fails to match Hume's actual viewed. Hume never accepted Hutcheson's doctrine for "the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers"and he refrained from accepting anything like moral arithmetic.

Society is naturally advantageous to man. Left to himself, the individual cannot provide adequately for his needs as a human being. Self- interest therefore, drives men into society. But

this alone is not sufficient; for disturbances inevitably arise in society if there are no conventions establishing and regulating the rights of property. There is need of a convention entered into by all the members of the society to bestow stability on the possession of those external goods, and leave everyone in the peaceable enjoyment of what he may acquire by his fortune and industry. It is by that means we maintain society; which is so necessary to their well-being and subsistence, as well as to our own. This convention should not be conceived as a promise. It is only a general sense of common interest ; which sense all the members of the society express to one another, and which induces them to regulate their conduct by certain rules- once this conventions about abstaining from the external goods of other people has been entered into there immediately arise the ideas of justice and injustice. Hume does not mean; however that there is a right to property which is antecedent to the idea of justice. He explicitly denies this. A general sense of common interest express itself in the general principles of justice and equity; in fundamental laws of justice and our property nothing but those good whose constant possession is established by the laws of society; that is by the laws of justice. The origin of justice explains that of property. The same artifice gives rise to both.

Justice, therefore, is founded on self-interest on a sense of utility. And it is self-interest which gives rise to what Hume calls the 'Natural Obligation of Justice'. But what gives rise to the moral obligation, or the sentiment of right and wrong? Or why do we annex the idea of virtue to justice and of vice to injustice? The explanation is to be found in sympathy. Even when injustice does not effect as personally as victim it still displease us, because we consider it as prejudicial to society. We share the uneasiness of other people by sympathy. Since that which in human actions produces uneasiness arises satisfactions is called virtue. We regard justice as a moral virtue and injustice as a moral vice. Thus self-interest is the original motive to the establishment of justice. But a sympathy with public interest is the source of the moral approbation which attends that virtue. Education and the words of statesmen and politicians contribute to consolidate this moral approbation but sympathy is the basis.

Hume does not give any clear definition of justice nor even, as it seems to me any really clear indication of what he understands by the term. In the second Enquiry he asserts that general peace and order are the attendants of justice or a general abstinence from the possessions of others, in the Treatise and in the Treatise under the general heading of justice and injustice, he considers first of all matters relating to property. He tells us the three fundamental laws of

nature are those relating to stable possession of property. The transference by property by consent and the performance of the promises. However, is that in his opinion all the laws of justice, general and particular are grounded on public utility? We can now understand what Hume means by calling justice and artificial virtue. It presupposes a human convention based on self-interest. Justice produces pleasure and approbation by means of an artifice or contrivance which arise from the circumstances and necessity of the sense of justice arises from a convention which is a remedy for certain inconveniences in human life. The remedy then is not deriving from nature but from artifice. Or more properly speaking nature provides a remedy in the judgment and understanding for what is irregular and incommodious in the affections. The sense of justice and injustice is not deriving from nature, but arises artificially, though necessarily from education and human conventions. Justice is artificial in the sense that it is an invention of man. Invented as a remedy for human selfishness and rapacity combined with the scanty provision which nature has made for his words. If these conditions did not obtain there would be no virtue of virtue of justice. By rendering justice totally useless, thereby totally destroy its essence and suspense its obligation upon mankind.

The particular laws of justice and equity may, of course operate in a manner prejudicial to the public benefit if we concentrate our attention on someone particular instance. For instance an unworthy son may in here a fortune from a wealthy father and use it for bad ends. But it is the general scheme or system of justice which is of public utility. And here we find a difference between virtue such as benevolence and a virtue such as justice. The social virtues of humanity and benevolence exert there influence immediately by a direct tendency or instinct, which chiefly keeps in view the simple object, moving the affection and comprehend not any scheme on system, nor the consequences resulting from the concurrence. The case is not the same with the social virtues and fidelity. There highly useful or indeed absolutely necessary to the wellbeing of mankind: but the benefit resulting from them is not the consequence of every individual single act, but arises from the whole scheme or system concurred in by the whole, or the greater part of the society.

Hume, therefore, will not allow that there are eternal law of justice independent of man's conditions and of public utility. Justice is an artifice, an invention. At the same time it does not depend on a social; contract, on a promise. For it is justice itself which gives rise to contracts and binding promises. It depends on felt utility, and this utility is real. Men establish the laws

of justice out of a concern for their own and the public interest. But this concern is derived not from reasoning about the eternal and necessary relations of ideas but from our impressions and feelings. The sense of justice therefore is not found in our ideas, but on our impressions. Men feel their interest in establishing in a scheme of justice and they feel approval for customary conventions which remedy the inconveniences that accompany human life. But in elaborating particular rules reason is, of course, employed. Hume thus brings the virtue of justice within the general pattern of his moral theory, feeling is fundamental: but this does not mean that reason has no part to play in morality.

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