

Phil 104, January 25, 2007
Hume: Moral Judgment, continued

Judgments that an action or character is virtuous or vicious are *not* conclusions of reason, but instead result from certain feelings that result, in turn, from thinking about those actions or characters.

Last time, we asked: What do these judgments *mean*? (Dispositionalism? Expressivism? Projectivism?)

Today, we ask: What *causes* these judgments?

Short answer: *a feeling*. “An action, or sentiment, or character is virtuous or vicious; why? because its view causes a pleasure or uneasiness of a particular kind.”

Which feeling? Not just any old feeling, presumably.

We begin with *sympathy*.

- We cannot actually perceive the passions of others.
- We can only directly perceive the causes or effects of the passions of others.
- When we do so, we readily form an idea, or representation, of those passions.
- This idea then produces a passion in us of the same type: a version, more or less vivid, of what others feel.
- Sympathy is this tendency.

Our ordinary understanding: I sympathize with your pain when I wish, for your sake, that you didn't feel it.

Hume's understanding: I sympathize with your pain when your pain causes me to feel a pain of the same kind.

First approximation:

- S's judging a person's character trait X to be virtuous arises from:
- S's sympathizing with those for whom X is useful or agreeable.

Because of our sympathy, qualities that produce pleasure in others (that are useful or agreeable) tend to produce similar pleasures in us.

First objection to explaining moral evaluation in terms of sympathy:

- (i) Sympathy is variable. We sympathize more with people closer to us than with people farther away, either in our affections, or in place, or in time,
- (ii) Therefore, if our moral judgments were based on sympathy, our moral judgments would manifest the same variability.
- (iii) But our moral judgments do not manifest the same variability.
- (iv) Therefore, our moral judgments are not based on sympathy.

Hume's reply:

We do not make moral judgments simply from our own point of view, but rather from a “steady and general” point of view:

- “steady” in the sense that it does not change over time, and
- “general” in the sense that it takes everyone’s interests into account.

We could neither converse intelligibly with other people, nor have consistent thoughts over time, about moral matters if we did not ascend to this common point of view.

Second objection to explaining moral evaluation in terms of sympathy:

- (i) When a character that, in normal circumstances, would be useful or agreeable to other is, due to abnormal circumstances, less useful or agreeable, we have less to sympathize with.
- (ii) Therefore, if our moral judgments were based on sympathy, our moral judgments would vary in this way.
- (iii) But our moral judgments do not vary in this way. “Virtue in rags is still virtue.”
- (iv) Therefore, our moral judgments are not based on sympathy.

Hume's reply:

When we have experienced the “constant conjunction” of A’s followed by B’s, our “imagination” anticipates a B when it experiences an A. Thus, when we experience a character that is usually useful or agreeable, we automatically anticipate that it will be useful or agreeable in the present circumstances and, regardless of whether the present circumstances permit it to be useful or agreeable, respond with a sentiment of approval.

Hume's theory:

S’s judging a person’s character trait X to be virtuous arises from:

S’s recognition that S *would* sympathize with the people for whom X would be useful or agreeable,

if (i) S adopted a *steady and general point of view* and

if (ii) X *were to have its usual effects*.

How is moral evaluation related to moral motivation?

- Hume may have shown us why we approve of certain traits of character, why we regard them as virtues.
- But this does not yet explain why, as individuals, we seek to develop and exercise those virtues.

If time permits: How do we account for the virtue of *justice*: e.g., respecting property rights, keeping promises, etc.? (III:ii:1–2) Suppose a lawyer honors the secret will of a rich miser to do nothing at all with his estate, when the lawyer might instead donate it to charity? Wouldn’t sympathy lead us to *disapprove*?

We approve of a just action not because we sympathize with the effects of that action *in particular*, but instead because we sympathize with the effects of the *general convention* to which that action belongs. This is why it is an “artificial” virtue.