

Name: _____

Class: _____

Of the Dignity or Meanness of Human Nature

By David Hume
1742

David Hume (1711-1776) was a Scottish philosopher and historian. Hume was a naturalist, and his writings influenced such great minds as Adam Smith, Emanuel Kant and even Charles Darwin. Hume primarily wrote about metaphysics, morality, and human nature. In this essay, Hume grapples with the age-old question: Are people inherently good or evil? As you read, take notes on Hume's approach to this question, as well as his dissection of other approaches.

- [1] There are certain sects, which secretly form themselves in the learned world, as well as factions in the political; and though sometimes they come not to an open rupture, they give a different turn to the ways of thinking of those who have taken part on either side. The most remarkable of this kind are the sects founded on the different sentiments with regard to the *dignity of human nature*; which is a point that seems to have divided philosophers and poets, as well as divines, from the beginning of the world to this day. Some exalt our species to the skies, and represent man as a kind of human demigod, who derives his origin from heaven, and retains evident marks of his lineage and descent. Others insist upon the blind sides of human nature, and can discover nothing, except vanity, in which man surpasses the other animals, whom he affects¹ so much to despise. If an author possess the talent of rhetoric and declamation,² he commonly takes part with the former: if his turn lie towards irony and ridicule, he naturally throws himself into the other extreme.



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I am far from thinking that all those who have depreciated our species have been enemies to virtue, and have exposed the frailties of their fellow-creatures with any bad intention. On the contrary, I am sensible that a delicate sense of morals, especially when attended with a splenetic³ temper, is apt to give a man a disgust of the world, and to make him consider the common course of human affairs with too much indignation. I must, however, be of opinion, that the sentiments of those who are inclined to think favourably of mankind, are more advantageous to virtue than the contrary principles, which give us a mean opinion of our nature. When a man is

1. Tries
2. **Declamation** (*noun*) eloquent speech
3. **Splenetic** (*adjective*) sad, short-tempered, cynical

prepossessed with a high notion of his rank and character in the creation, he will naturally endeavour to act up to it, and will scorn to do a base or vicious⁴ action which might sink him below that figure which he makes in his own imagination. Accordingly, we find, that all our polite and fashionable moralists insist upon this topic, and endeavour to represent vice unworthy of man, as well as odious in itself.⁵

We find new disputes that are not founded on some ambiguity in the expression; and I am persuaded that the present dispute, concerning the dignity or meanness⁶ of human nature, is not more exempt from it than any other. It may therefore be worth while to consider what is real, and what is only verbal, in this controversy.

That there is a natural difference between merit and demerit, virtue and vice, wisdom and folly, no reasonable man will deny, yet it is evident that, in affixing the term, which denotes either our approbation⁷ or blame, we are commonly more influenced by comparison than by any fixed unalterable standard in the nature of things. In like manner, quantity, and extension, and bulk, are by every one acknowledged to be real things: but when we call any animal *great* or *little*, we always form a secret comparison between that animal and others of the same species; and it is that comparison which regulates our judgment concerning its greatness. A dog and a horse may be of the very same size, while the one is admired for the greatness of its bulk, and the other for the smallness. When I am present, therefore, at any dispute, I always consider with myself whether it be a question of comparison or not that is the subject of controversy; and if it be, whether the disputants compare the same objects together, or talk of things that are widely different.

- [5] In forming our notions of human nature, we are apt to make a comparison between men and animals, the only creatures endowed with thought that fall under our senses. Certainly this comparison is favorable to mankind. On the one hand, we see a creature whose thoughts are not limited by any narrow bounds, either of place or time; who carries his researches into the most distant regions of this globe, and beyond this globe, to the planets and heavenly bodies; looks backward to consider the first origin, at least the history of the human race; casts his eye forward to see the influence of his actions upon posterity and the judgments which will be formed of his character a thousand years hence; a creature, who traces causes and effects to a great length and intricacy, extracts general principles from particular appearances; improves upon his discoveries; corrects his mistakes; and makes his very errors profitable. On the other hand, we are presented with a creature the very reverse of this; limited in its observations and reasonings to a few sensible objects which surround it; without curiosity, without foresight; blindly conducted by instinct, and attaining, in a short time, its utmost perfection, beyond which it is never able to advance a single step. What a wide difference is there between these creatures! And how exalted a notion must we entertain of the former, in comparison of the latter.

There are two means commonly employed to destroy this conclusion: *First*, By making an unfair representation of the case, and insisting only upon the weakness of human nature. And, *secondly*, By forming a new and secret comparison between man and beings of the most perfect wisdom. Among the other excellences of man, this is one, that he can form an idea of perfections much beyond what he has experience of in himself; and is not limited in his conception of wisdom and virtue. He can easily exalt his notions, and conceive a degree of

4. **Vicious** (*adjective*) in philosophy, vicious is the opposite of virtuous

5. Hume writes, "Women are generally much more flattered in their youth than men, which may proceed from this reason among others, that their chief point of honour is considered as much more difficult than ours, and requires to be supported by all that decent pride which can be instilled into them."

6. **Meanness** (*noun*) the opposite of dignity; common, worthless

7. **Approbation** (*noun*) praise

knowledge, which, when compared to his own, will make the latter appear very contemptible, and will cause the difference between that and the sagacity of animals, in a manner, to disappear and vanish. Now this being a point in which all the world is agreed, that human understanding falls infinitely short of perfect wisdom, it is proper we should know when this comparison takes place, that we may not dispute where there is no real difference in our sentiments. Man falls much more short of perfect wisdom, and even of his own ideas of perfect wisdom, than animals do of man; yet the latter difference is so considerable, that nothing but a comparison with the former can make it appear of little moment.⁸

It is also usual to *compare* one man with another; and finding very few whom we can call *wise* or *virtuous*, we are apt to entertain a contemptible notion of our species in general. That we may be sensible of the fallacy of this way of reasoning, we may observe, that the honorable appellations⁹ of wise and virtuous are not annexed¹⁰ to any particular degree of those qualities of wisdom and virtue, but arise altogether from the comparison we make between one man and another. When we find a man who arrives at such a pitch of wisdom, as is very uncommon, we pronounce him a wise man: so that to say there are few wise men in the world, is really to say nothing; since it is only by their scarcity that they merit that appellation. Were the lowest of our species as wise as Tully or Lord Bacon, we should still have reason to say that there are few wise men. For in that case we should exalt our notions of wisdom, and should not pay a singular homage¹¹ to any one who was not singularly distinguished by his talents. In like manner, I have heard it observed by thoughtless people, that there are few women possessed of beauty in comparison of those who want it; not considering that we bestow the epithet of *beautiful* only on such as possess a degree of beauty that is common to them with a few. The same degree of beauty in a woman is called deformity, which is treated as real beauty in one of our sex.

As it is usual, in forming a notion of our species, to *compare* it with the other species above or below it, or to compare the individuals of the species among themselves; so we often compare together the different motives or actuating principles of human nature, in order to regulate our judgment concerning it. And, indeed, this is the only kind of comparison which is worth our attention, or decides any thing in the present question. Were our selfish and vicious principles so much predominant above our social and virtuous, as is asserted by some philosophers, we ought undoubtedly to entertain a contemptible notion of human nature.¹²

There is much of a dispute of words in all this controversy. When a man denies the sincerity of all public spirit or affection to a country and community, I am at a loss what to think of him. Perhaps he never felt this passion in so clear and distinct a manner as to remove all his doubts concerning its force and reality. But when he proceeds afterwards to reject all private friendship, if no interest or self-love intermix itself; I am then confident that he abuses terms, and confounds the ideas of things; since it is impossible for any one to be so selfish, or rather so stupid, as to make no difference between one man and another, and give no preference to qualities which engage his approbation and esteem. Is he also, say I, as insensible¹³ to anger as he pretends to be to

8. **Moment** (*noun*) in this context, important

9. **Appellations** (*noun*) title, label

10. **Annexed** (*adjective*) tied, linked, correlated

11. **Homage** (*noun*) honor

12. Hume writes, "I may perhaps treat more fully of this subject in some future Essay. In the meantime I shall observe, what has been proved beyond question by several great moralists of the present age, that the social passions are by far the most powerful of any, and that even all the other passions, receive from them their chief force and influence. Whoever desires to see this question treated at large, with the greatest force of argument and eloquence, may consult my Lord Shaftesbury's Enquiry concerning Virtue."

friendship? And does injury and wrong no more affect him than kindness or benefits? Impossible: he does not know himself: he has forgotten the movements of his heart; or rather, he makes use of a different language from the rest of his countrymen and calls not things by their proper names. What say you of natural affection? (I subjoin),¹⁴ Is that also a species of self-love? Yes; all is self-love. *Your* children are loved only because they are yours: *your* friend for a like reason; and *your* country engages you only so far as it has a connection with *yourself*. Were the idea of self removed, nothing would affect you: you would be altogether unactive and insensible: or, if you ever give yourself any movement, it would only be from vanity, and a desire of fame and reputation to this same self. I am willing, reply I, to receive your interpretation of human actions, provided you admit the facts. That species of self-love which displays itself in kindness to others, you must allow to have great influence over human actions, and even greater, on many occasions, than that which remains in its original shape and form. For how few are there, having a family, children, and relations, who do not spend more on the maintenance and education of these than on their own pleasures? This, indeed, you justly observe, may proceed from their self-love, since the prosperity of their family and friends is one, or the chief of their pleasures, as well as their chief honour. Be you also one of these selfish men, and you are sure of every one's good opinion and good-will; or, not to shock your ears with their expressions, the self-love of every one, and mine among the rest, will then incline us to serve you, and speak well of you.

- [10] In my opinion, there are two things which have led astray those philosophers that have insisted so much on the selfishness of man. In the *first* place, they found that every act of virtue or friendship was attended¹⁵ with a secret pleasure; whence they concluded, that friendship and virtue could not be disinterested.¹⁶ But the fallacy of this is obvious. The virtuous sentiment or passion produces the pleasure, and does not arise from it. I feel a pleasure in doing good to my friend, because I love him; but do not love him for the sake of that pleasure.

In the *second* place, it has always been found, that the virtuous are far from being indifferent to praise; and therefore they have been represented as a set of vainglorious men, who had nothing in view but the applauses of others. But this also is a fallacy. It is very unjust in the world, when they find any tincture¹⁷ of vanity in a laudable action, to depreciate it upon that account, or ascribe it entirely to that motive. The case is not the same with vanity, as with other passions. Where avarice or revenge enters into any seemingly virtuous action, it is difficult for us to determine how far it enters, and it is natural to suppose it the sole actuating principle. But vanity is so closely allied to virtue, and to love the fame of laudable actions approaches so near the love of laudable actions for their own sake, that these passions are more capable of mixture, than any other kinds of affection; and it is almost impossible to have the latter without some degree of the former. Accordingly we find, that this passion for glory is always warped and varied according to the particular taste or disposition of the mind on which it falls. Nero had the same vanity in driving a chariot, that Trajan had in governing the empire with justice and ability. To love the glory of virtuous deeds is a sure proof of the love of virtue.

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13. **Insensible** (*adjective*) unaffected
14. **Subjoin** (*verb*) to add in, make note of, append
15. **Attended** (*adjective*) in this context, accompanied
16. **Disinterested** (*adjective*) without ulterior motives; without thought of personal gain
17. **Tincture** (*noun*) trace

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best describes a central idea of the text?
 - A. Morality is black and white, and those who argue against this use flawed logic.
 - B. Humans are inherently evil and only do good deeds for their own benefit.
 - C. The debate regarding human nature is logically flawed.
 - D. It is better to disengage from society all together to avoid the question of morality.

2. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "We find new disputes that are not founded on some ambiguity in the expression; and I am persuaded that the present dispute, concerning the dignity or meanness of human nature, is not more exempt from it than any other." (Paragraph 3)
 - B. "That there is a natural difference between merit and demerit, virtue and vice, wisdom and folly, no reasonable man will deny...." (Paragraph 4)
 - C. "When we find a man who arrives at such a pitch of wisdom, as is very uncommon, we pronounce him a wise man: so that to say there are few wise men in the world, is really to say nothing; since it is only by their scarcity that they merit that appellation." (Paragraph 7)
 - D. "I feel a pleasure in doing good to my friend, because I love him; but do not love him for the sake of that pleasure." (Paragraph 10)

3. PART A: According to Hume, what type of people tend to focus on the meanness of man?
 - A. Hume describes this type of people as either eloquent or ridiculous.
 - B. Hume believes that all people are interested in human nature, but lack the capabilities or education to make logical conclusions about it.
 - C. Hume describes these people as indifferent to country and community, for those are the only people who are distanced and cynical enough to be interested in man's meanness.
 - D. Hume places these people in two categories: those who condemn human nature and those who glorify it.

4. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A?
- A. "The most remarkable of this kind are the sects founded on the different sentiments with regard to the dignity of human nature; which is a point that seems to have divided philosophers and poets, as well as divines, from the beginning of the world to this day." (Paragraph 1)
 - B. "Some exalt our species to the skies, and represent man as a kind of human demigod, who derives his origin from heaven, and retains evident marks of his lineage and descent. Others insist upon the blind sides of human nature, and can discover nothing, except vanity, in which man surpasses the other animals, whom he affects so much to despise." (Paragraph 1)
 - C. "I am far from thinking that all those who have depreciated our species have been enemies to virtue, and have exposed the frailties of their fellow-creatures with any bad intention." (Paragraph 2)
 - D. "But when he proceeds afterwards to reject all private friendship, if no interest or self-love intermix itself; I am then confident that he abuses terms, and confounds the ideas of things...." (Paragraph 9)
5. In paragraph 4, Hume brings up the concept of comparison—an issue he continues to develop throughout the essay. He says, "A dog and a horse may be of the very same size, while the one is admired for the greatness of its bulk, and the other for the smallness." Which of the following statements best describes Hume's purpose for including this sentence?
- A. Hume is emphasizing the differences between two animals to further emphasize the physical differences between types of people.
 - B. Hume is providing an example of how comparative analysis leads us to make assumptions that may not reflect reality.
 - C. Hume is mocking other philosophers point out obvious differences between people as revolutionary by comparing a horse and a dog.
 - D. Hume is giving an example of how a person can easily become confused in the attempt to compare to similar objects.
6. Explain the quote: "all is self-love." (Paragraph 9) How does the concept of self-love develop the central idea(s) regarding human nature?

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. Do you think humans are fundamentally good, fundamentally bad, or perhaps a mixture of both? Discuss.
2. Is there something intrinsically special about human beings? What is it?
3. It seems evident from history and everyday experience that human beings have both a capacity for great thought, virtue and creation, as well as ignorance, vice and destruction. Discuss this tension.
4. In general, it seems that the modern west, along with most of the world, has come to a consensus about certain basic human rights. What is a right? Do we really have them? If so, how and why? Discuss the connection between human rights and the question of whether or not man is basically good or evil.
5. Look at your answer to question 3. Do you think we make more progress in life by assuming the best or the worst about people? Explain.
6. In the American justice system, the idea of motive plays a huge part in determining how we judge a particular action (like murder). How do motives play into our judgment of what is right or wrong? Explain using specific examples.
7. Can an action be both selfish and selfless at the same time? How would Hume likely answer this question?