

An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals A Very (not) Impartial Reading Guide

"Of all my writings, historical, philosophical, or literary, incomparably the best." (Hume. *My Own Life*)

SECTIONS 1 THROUGH 8

Examination of the Merit of Various Mental Qualities

Section I

ECPM opens with a discussion of moral controversies.

Controversies unworthy of entertaining; because reasoning is not their source:

- (a) The dogmatists' (of the divines),
- (b) The "disingenuous disputants" ["selfish-theorists] who deny the reality of moral distinctions.

Controversy deserving to be taken up concerns the foundation of morality. Does the latter lie in

- (a) reason?—Morality is a matter of truth, arrived at through a consideration of the facts and arguments or
- (b) sentiment?—Morality must engage our feelings, for otherwise we would be indifferent to it.

Hume chooses not to begin by examining their respective arguments, however. Instead he proposes an "experimental" method: to collect together all those mental qualities that make up "what, in common life, we call *Personal Merit*," by which he means those character traits we find praiseworthy or blameworthy (*ECPM* 1.1-2, 10).

The methodological starting point is "common life" and "common language". [The survey of mental qualities leads, in Section 9, to the **definition of virtue** as any mental quality that is useful or agreeable to the moral agent herself or to others.]

Hume specifically appeals to the elements of reasoning in the formation of moral sentiments. (See *ECPM* 1. 9; App.1.2)

Section II [The Useful Traits or Qualities]

(1) Qualities that come under the general label of **benevolence** pass the test of being considered moral (e.g., humane, merciful, generous, etc.)

Why so? We approve of benevolence as a virtue lies in its usefulness both for the possessor and for society.

Ergo, usefulness/**utility**, is a source of moral merit, and earn our moral admiration.

(2) **Justice** is a second kind of socially useful virtue.

Appendix 2

Further focus is on the genuineness of our benevolent dispositions and affections.

Is selfishness universal? Is all benevolence hypocrisy? Are all generous actions done out of self-love? What is the difference between particular or limited (primary) benevolence and universal (secondary) benevolence?

Appendix 3

Further discussion of the differences between "benevolence" and "justice"

Section III

Tries to show that utility is the sole origin of justice, and hence "the sole foundation of its merit," and the admiration we feel for it (ECPM3.1). Argument is based on showing that the human condition is a medium between the extremes of material abundance and absolute scarcity, as well as between extremes of temperament.

Section IV

Extends the explication of justice, showing that utility is also the source of the merit of other virtues, associated with good government and citizenship.

Section V (Heart of ECPM. Read closely)

After appealing to utility as a source of moral merit, Hume is keen to show that we do not approve of it only when it benefits ourselves. We approve of benevolence and a range of other useful virtues from "a more public affection," that is, one more socially oriented than self-interest (ECPM 5.17). This is made possible by the principle of sympathy

Unpacks "moral sentiments" [moral approbation and disapprobation] in stages:

(1) Sympathy accepted as a brute fact.

(2) Shows the importance of sympathy for our preference for utility. Deeper examination of why qualities useful to the agent or to others and said to be virtues are a source of merit or value. Answer: Sympathy.

(2) Shows how sympathy serves as the foundation of the moral sentiments by detailing the pervasive influence of sympathy in human life.

(3) Makes connection between sympathy and the moral sentiments. Links general benevolence to sympathy. Because sympathy is a principle of communication.

(4) Argues that sympathy exerts as strong a force in our lives as, and independent of, self-interest.

(5) The means of establishing common standards of virtue (ECPM 5.42, n.25), also see (ECPM 9.6, 8). We learn to affix praise or blame to actions and characters in conformity to these shared moral sentiments. Shared reflection on general preferences leads to a shared moral discourse, grounded in our common humanity, and renders us "intelligible to each other" (ECPM 5.42).

(6) The need and place for the virtues of good evaluation as a supplement to reason.
(ECPM 5.39)

Section VI

Part I

How the same principle of sympathy produces approval of self-regarding qualities, such as industry or prudence, useful primarily for the person who possesses them.

On the variable of history and culture on merit (ECPM 6.20)

Part II

But sympathy being a principle of the imagination, we typically first form an idea of another's emotion.

Talents and Virtues

Do the generalizations we form on the basis of social categories inform our recognition and ascription of character traits? Is it possible to locate purely ethical forms of praise and blame that are independent from our everyday discourse of respect or contempt.

Section VII & Section VIII [The Agreeable Traits or Qualities]

We also approve of some traits of character simply because they are "agreeable" to the person possessing them or to others, even though they may not have any tendency to the good of the Individual or society. E.g., Cheerfulness.

Section VIII

SECTION IX [DEFINITION OF VIRTUE & VICE]

Part 1:

Claims about the relation between language and moral sentiment.

The language of morals is distinct from the language of private interests.

Moral language is something in which we must acquire competence.

Virtues are mental qualities that are useful or agreeable to oneself or to others.

[**Vices** mental qualities that are harmful or disagreeable to oneself or others.]

Some character traits meet more than one of the criteria for virtue.

Some virtues, are essential for successful cooperative living.

Some virtues enhance our quality of life.

Part II:

Why cultivation of virtue is in our interest

Summary:

(1) Neither our social motives nor the moral sentiments reduce to self-interest.

(2) Moral evaluation explicitly requires good reasoning, reflection on experience,

and conversation with others.

(3) Hume is aware of historical and cultural change.

A DIALOGUE

On the cultural and historical variability in the qualities, actions, and practices that we find praiseworthy or blameworthy.

Questions of moral relativism:

According to the narrator, the same moral sentiments of praise for what is useful or agreeable, and blame for the contrary comprise universally the foundation of morals. This argument admits, however, of two important qualifications.

(1) The significance of the fact that the different circumstances (customs and laws, for example) of different societies may mean that the conception of character traits, and an understanding of how they are manifested in virtuous behavior, will vary.

(2) The difficulty for both societies and individuals to reconcile or achieve all the good ends of life.

(3) The natural effects of different customs is a preference for certain virtues over others.

(4) Role of chance in what opportunities are available to people, since we have no choice about the society into which we are born.

(But see D.51)

Does a common moral discourse render us mutually intelligible to one another? (See D.2)