

Assessing Hume's Response to the Variability of Sympathy and its Moral Value

1) Hume says that our sympathy is “very variable”. Yet he also says that sympathy is the source of our moral approval and disapproval. In what sense does the former claim constitute a problem for the latter, and how does Hume try to solve that problem? Does he succeed?

Though Hume regards sympathy as the most remarkable of human traits, his views of sympathy create issues with his views of morality. Hume claims that sympathy is very variable in the results that it produces, as it is capable of having different results based on different circumstances of our situations. Sympathy it is also the source of moral approval and disapproval. However, if sympathy is very variable, then it might be that our judgements of moral approval and disapproval would vary a lot. But it's clear that we do have established moral practices from our moral judgements we hold invariably, so it appears as though the variability of sympathy causes a problem for it as a source of moral approval/disapproval. In addition, if one were to establish natural virtues, then those virtues might vary between people. Hume attempts to solve these problems by explaining how we make statements from general points of view, even with our capacities for sympathy. These general points-of-view allow one our judgements to be impartial and interpersonal and account for our natural virtues. Hume succeeds in addressing these issues, but one might still object with certain questions of how one may be held responsible for sympathy in the moral judgement.

When one sympathizes with another person, there are qualities of that sympathy that create sources of variability. The contiguity and resemblance of sympathy make sympathy variable to different factors. By contiguity, Hume asserts that it is more difficult to sympathize with someone far away than with someone close to oneself in either space or time. By

resemblance of sympathy, it is easier to sympathize with those people whom we see as like ourselves. In addition, we have habits of the mind that guide our sympathy. When we have experienced multiple similarly associations between ideas, then we would expect that those associations to hold in such a way in the future. This becomes a “habit” of the mind. For example, Hume claims that the idea of a mother of “great spirit” would cause someone to sympathize with his or her mother even if the “great spirit” is not true. Finally, the more “specific” ideas are, the easier it is for us to sympathize with them. When we personally witness specific examples of racism, it is easier to sympathize with those affected by racism rather than studying racism as a general problem. These factors make sympathy very variable. However, they do not interfere with our ability to use sympathy as a source of moral approval.

Though sympathy is very variable, we attempt to take a general point-of-view when making judgements. This general perspective must be impartial in the sense it is not affecting by the variability of our own sympathy. When we make a judgement, it is not from our own individual point-of-view, but, rather, from “some common point-of-view [sic], from which they might survey their object, and which might cause it to appear the same to all of them” (*III. 3.1.30*). This common point-of-view allows one to assess the variability of the factors involved in the sympathy in order to determine whether or not those factors are involved in judgement. There might be instances in which we should prevent the variability of certain personal factors (such as resemblance and contiguity) from affecting our judgements of moral approval or disapproval. For example, if an American college student doesn't believe we have a moral duty to help Syrian refugees, it might be because he/she doesn't experience sympathy for the plight of the Syrian refugee out of a lack of contiguity. He/she may be able to take a impartial judgement

of his own feelings and think about the reasons why he doesn't have sympathy for people in such a situation. He/she possibly conclude that this lack of sympathy is a result of the lack of contiguity between him/herself and the Syrian refugees. One might say the Syrian refugees are very “far” from ourselves because an American student doesn't have direct contact with them, so it would be difficult for him/her to sympathize with them. In this way, one can assess his/her own judgements to determine the variability of sympathy and account for it in his/her judgements.

In addition to being impartial, the general point-of-view must comprise an interpersonal judgement that would allow us to be well-suited for social interaction with others. According to Hume's criteria of moral virtue, for something to have moral value is for that thing to make someone “well-suited” for social interaction with others such that the person and others in the interaction are not left wanting more on account of that value. In order to determine whether or not the criteria of value are satisfied, one must be sympathetic to the wants and feelings of different people in these interactions. Though one must use sympathy (with its variability) in order to determine the thoughts of others, sympathy makes us suited for our social interactions. If one has a friend whose mother passed away recently, his/her sympathy would allow him/her to understand how and why the friend feels that way, and determine the appropriate moral response (e.g., showing condolences, providing emotional support).

Though the variability of sympathy causes problems for our idea of natural virtues, the general point-of-view allows us to account for this variability when we are creating natural virtues. In the *Treatise* III.3.1, Hume says no one can doubt that “many of the natural virtues have this tendency to good for society” that arise from our “natural sentiment of approbation and blame.” However, if our sentiments of sympathy is the source of these natural virtues, then these

natural virtues would vary a lot and it would be hard to see how they can have a tendency to do good (similar to our judgements of moral approval). The general point-of-view allows us account for sympathy's variability in deciding these natural virtues, as well. In the same section, Hume says “we esteem [a person] virtuous” for characters with natural tendencies that are beneficial to society “even tho' particular accidents prevent its operation, and incapacitate him from being serviceable to his friends and country.” This might include regarding a poor man as virtuous for being charitable even if his charity is not as useful as a rich man's charity. The “common” point-of-view helps us realize this because we can see things from the poor man's point-of-view. When we are sympathetic to the fact that the poor man cannot achieve his ends, then, as Hume puts it, it is only an “imperfect means,” and we can still regard it the poor man as having natural virtue.

One might object that, if we can view these natural virtues through the lens of a general point-of-view (that accounts for factors such as psychological and social situation), then there would be no distinction between natural and artificial virtues, the latter of which depend upon our established social structures. This would make it difficult to determine whether our moral judgements depend on individual instincts or on societal circumstances. It might appear as though, if a general point-of-view taking into account societal circumstances, then all virtues would be “artificial,” not natural. When a poor man is charitable, he is artificially poor (by society's structure), but we regard his charitable virtue as natural. However, we can look more closely at Hume's distinction between natural and artificial virtues to understand this difference. In III.2.1, Hume says, of artificial virtues, “there are some virtues, that produce pleasure and approbation by means of an artifice or contrivance, which arise from the circumstances and necessity of mankind.” Our artificial virtues come from what we deem as “necessary,” and, in this sense,

what we “need” in order to determine a judgement about someone. And, in III.1.2, Hume says “Mankind is an inventive species; and where an invention is obvious and absolutely necessary, it may as properly said to be natural as any thing that proceeds immediately from original principles, without the intervention of thought or reflexion.” If we make a judgement that is “obvious and absolutely necessary,” then we can regard it as occurring “naturally,” just as any judgement of natural virtue. For the judgement of a poor man as charitable, his situation is obvious and necessary for us to determine a judgement about his virtue. In this way, the artificial virtue would actually be natural, and we can determine how our moral judgements follow from distinct types of virtues.

The amount of control affects the variability of sympathy, as well. One might object that sympathy varies on factors that one doesn't control, and, therefore, our moral approval would be out of our control. However, the factors that influence sympathy are not completely out of our control. We do have some power over who to be close with or who to become friends with. And, this way, we have the power to prevent some of this variability. One may choose to become friends with people who one can make deliberate, accurate moral judgements with. However, one might further object that, if one does not will his or her own sympathy, then one might not be able to take control that sympathy. And, as illustrated through the examples we have discussed, sympathy forms the foundation upon which we make judgements, so, no matter how little control we have over sympathy, the moral judgements themselves remain in our control. This issue would heighten the issue of sympathy's variability in moral judgements.

Hume responds to the apparent issue of the reliability of sympathy as a source of moral approval by explaining the impartial point-of-view we take when making judgements. He is

mostly successful, but a further issue that still needs to be addressed is the role of will in sympathy and moral judgements.