Summary of 3.2.1

I. Actions and motives

When we morally evaluate people, strictly speaking, we don't evaluate their external actions. What we evaluate is the motives behind their actions. To be sure, we look at their actions to try to figure out what their motives are. But the actions themselves don't matter. They're just good indicators of the person's motives, and the motives are what make the action right or wrong.

For example, when we praise somebody for doing something, we look at their actions to figure out what their motives are, and then we praise their motives as good, virtuous motives. Or, for example, when we blame somebody for not doing something we think they should have done, we look at their inaction and conclude that they must be lacking in the motive department, and so we blame them for not having the right motives. Of course, we might find out later that they really did have the right motives and something else kept them from performing the action, and then we take back the blame.

So Hume is probably a funny kind of virtue theorist. You don't look at the action itself like a pure deontologist would. And you don't look at the consequences of the action like an act-consequentialist would. You look at the motives behind the action: "certain principles in the mind and temper". It's not misleading to say that Hume thinks that, in morally evaluating people, what we look at is the person's *character* or *personality*.

II. Doing the right thing

There are two ways of doing the right thing. Here's the first way: you might do the right thing because it's the right thing to do. You might think to yourself, "I'm going to do this, not necessarily because I want to, or because it fits my character, or because that's just the kind of person I am, but because it's just the right thing to do". This is a very self-consciously moral motive. You're doing the action under a moral description, a description like "the right thing to do". So that's one way of doing the right thing. Here's the second way: you might do something that is the right thing to do, but not because it's the right thing to do, but instead because you want to, or because it fits your character, or because that's just the kind of person you are. This is a different kind of motive: it comes straight from your personality, it doesn't come directly from your views about morality. It's not so self-conscious and concerned with moral descriptions. You're just doing what comes natural, and because you're a good person, you end up doing the right thing.

There's a notorious disagreement about all this. Some people defend the first way of doing the right thing, and other people defend the second way of doing the right thing. Kant, for example, says that if you do the right thing just because you're a friendly or sympathetic person, without paying any attention to morality, then your action has no moral worth (though he admits we should praise and encourage this kind of friendliness). So Kant defends the first way, where it really matters that you do the right thing because it's the right thing. But consider this example. Suppose a friend comes and visits you in the hospital when you're sick, and you're really happy to see him. But the more you talk to him, the more you realize that he's not visiting you because he wants to. He doesn't really have a heartfelt concern to comfort his friend. The only reason he's visiting you is because he's convinced that it's the right thing to do! How would you feel about your so-called friend? A lot of people look at examples like this and end up defending the second way of doing the right thing: you don't comfort your friends or show affection to your wife or play with your kids because it's the right thing to do, you do it because you're a person with a healthy psychology who naturally wants to do these things.

III. The Circle

Let's put these issues together. Suppose I do the right thing, not because it comes natural or whatever, but because I think it's the right thing to do. Fine. Now Hume says my action itself doesn't matter, it's my motive that matters. So, in other words, whether the action is right depends on whether my motive is a good one. So let's examine my motive and see if it's a good motive. Well, what's my motive? I'm doing this action because (I think) it's the right thing to do. And is that a good motive? Well, yes, it is, *if* this action really is the right thing to do. But that depends on whether my motive is good. And that in turn depends on whether the action is right. So we're stuck in a circle.

M → A

Is A good?
-depends on-
Is M good?
-depends on-
Is A good?
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Another attempt: An action has to already be right before we can do it because it is right. So the motive of doing an action because it is right presupposes that the action is already right. And hence that motive can't be what makes the action right in the first place.

Another attempt: I do something because I think it's the right thing to do. So I must think there's some good motive behind it. But what good motive? Doing it because it's the right thing to do? I'll only think that's a good motive if I already think it's the right thing to do, which means I'll already think there's some good motive behind it.

What conclusion does Hume draw from this puzzle? Well, here's what he seems to say. He says that, for any action that's the right thing to do, there has to be some naturally good motive backing it up, that makes it right. A naturally good motive: that means a motive different from just 'because it's the right thing to do'. It has to be something like love for your children, or a benevolent concern for other people. It has to be one of those natural emotions found in human psychology. It can't be a motive like 'it's the right thing to do', because that would get us stuck in that circle and our moral evaluations wouldn't make any sense. Here's the way Hume puts it: "no action can be virtuous, or morally good, unless there be in human nature some motive to produce it, distinct from the sense of its morality."

Here's a quick sidenote: Hume admits that sometimes people do the right thing simply because it's right thing to do. But he says this only works because there's already these natural emotions around doing all the real work. So I might

find myself lacking in some good natural motive and feel bad about myself and try to do the right thing, so that maybe I'll end up cultivating that good natural motive. But this is all secondary. The reason the actions count as right in the first place is because of the good natural motives.

IV. Justice

Now let's apply all this to justice. Take Hume's case: returning a loan to somebody. What motive might lead someone to return the loan? Well, what did we just learn? Whatever the motive is, it can't be 'because it's the right thing to do' or 'because it's the honest thing to do'. (At least not yet; maybe these motives will make sense once we've got special social institutions up and running). So we need to find some natural motive that might lead people to return their loans, and be honest, and respect each other's property, and be just with one another. That's the task at hand. There had better be some natural motive at work, otherwise the whole thing makes no sense.

Well, there's a problem. When we look at all the possible natural motives, none of them seem to work. There's doesn't seem to be a single emotion or motive in human psychology that would naturally lead people to return their loans and be honest and be just. Hume goes through three possible options:

1. *Self-interest/Reputation*. Fat chance with this. Self-interest is what leads people to cheat each other, and reputation only goes so far.

2. *Public benevolence*. There are several problems here. But here's a big one: we don't care that much about the public at large; we only care about our inner circle of relations and acquaintances. At best we can have compassion for strangers and even animals, but that's just sympathy at work, it's not some grand concern for the entire public.

3. *Private benevolence*. Sure, sometimes we care about the person who loaned us money. But sometimes we don't! Sometimes the guy's an asshole! Sometimes he just hoards up the money uselessly. Sometimes he's spends it on things that end up hurting him. And sometimes I need the money, or my family needs the money, a lot more than he does. In general, while we do care about other people, but we care a lot more about some people than others, and justice is supposed to be this really strict impartial system of rules.

So this looks like a serious problem. It's virtuous to be just to others. So that means there must be some good motive behind just actions. But that motive can't just be 'because it's right' or 'because it's just'. It has to be some natural motive. But no natural motive seems to fit the demands of justice. We've reached a serious problem.

Does Hume just give up and say that justice makes no sense? No, he tries to give a solution. His idea is that justice doesn't make any sense, not until certain social institutions develop: the rules of justice are going to turn out to be an artificial social system that emerges spontaneously from human interaction. And then once this system is up and running, then things will somehow make sense again. So Hume's going to give an account of the development of the rules of justice, and then the big question is whether his account will solve the problem that seems so serious, and somehow have everything make sense again.

Summary of 3.2.2

Background

In section 1, we saw that Hume had a problem. His version of virtue ethics puts motives, not actions, at the center of morality. So since justice is a virtue, there had better be some good motive lying behind actions that are just. But a self-consciously *moral motive*—doing something simply because it's the right thing to do—can never be what makes an action right: after all, the action would have to already be right for such a motive to be a good one. That's the famous circle. And as for more *natural motives* like self-interest, public benevolence, and private benevolence, none of these fit the strict and impartial demands of justice. So it looks like the virtue of justice simply makes no sense.

But Hume, of course, doesn't say that. The virtue of justice is just *different* from other virtues. It won't make sense until after the establishment of an artificial social convention. That's why Hume calls it an *artificial virtue*. In section 2, Hume turns to providing an account that will hopefully make sense of the virtue of justice.

Establishing justice

In this section, Hume sees himself as examining two questions. First, how does the artificial convention get established? Second, why do we care about it morally? Let's begin with the first question.

Society: roots and obstacles. First, Hume has a discussion of society. Humans, unlike other animals, are too weak to meet our natural needs alone. Society is the only way we can have these needs met. He mentions three small points here: by ourselves, we're not strong enough, we're not skilled enough, and we're not secure enough—accordingly, society provides us with extra labor force, with division of labor, and with mutual aid. But, despite these advantages, we won't enter into society unless we're *aware* of the advantages. And it's family living that raises our awareness: people have sex, they have kids, they care for their kids, and we have a little society where the kids are educated and socialized into seeing its advantages. So far, so good for society. But there are two serious obstacles. First, humans are kind of *selfish*: we're not *completely* selfish, but we only care about our little circle, and this "confin'd generosity" is quite enough to produce interpersonal conflict. Secondly, any *external goods* can be easily taken away (with one person gaining from another's loss) and in any case there's simply not enough to satisfy everyone.

Nature and artifice. And here's the real problem: the moral side of human nature (or at least 'uncultivated human nature') cannot overcome these obstacles. For our natural moral evaluations are based on *comparison*. And if you look around and see everyone else caring only about their little circle, you'll end up thinking that's the right way to be. So we'll naturally tend to think there's nothing wrong with confined generosity. That means we're going to need an *artificial convention*. In other words, it's not our uncultivated natural *affections* that overcome these obstacles. It's our "judgment and understanding": our *reason*. We see the advantages of society, we like being in society, and we see the problems of unstable external goods. So we look for a solution: a convention that says everyone is to leave everyone else's external goods alone, for the sake of social order. In this we are led by ordinary self-interest, though this does involve rising above crude short-sightedness.

Conventions and promises. Hume insists that this convention is *not a promise* (indeed, we'll see that promising is itself an artificial convention). Instead, it's a spontaneously developing social convention where we all have "a general sense of common interest" that is "mutually expressed" and known to everybody. Hume thinks this is enough to get us to cooperate on common terms—we don't need a promise. Take the rowing example. The convention develops gradually and everyone's expectations get reinforced by experience. Just like language and currency. (See 2E.App3.7-8)

Justice and its sidekicks. Hume then lectures us for a bit about how it makes no sense to talk about 'property' and 'right' and 'obligation' until after the rules of justice have been established. Here's one important consequence of this: prior to the convention, there is no such thing as private property. And that's because uncultivated human nature has a bias towards one's inner circle, which is clearly incompatible with the fixed and impartial nature of private property.

Redirecting self-interest. Well, we finally have the convention, but Hume wants to retrace his steps. What passions stood in the way of establishing society? Vanity, pity, love, envy, and revenge couldn't cause much trouble. What causes trouble is a certain sort of self-interest: "avidity" or "the love of gain". And since no other passion is strong enough to restrain this one, our only hope is to *redirect* it. This method works because, if you just think about it, the passion in question really is better served under a stable regime of justice than under the alternative. So, ironically, the passion that *threatened* society is the very same one that *established* society, and whether you want to call it good or bad is irrelevant—what matters is just how sensible we are. And this strategy of redirecting self-interest in order to establish the rules of justice, Hume thinks, isn't particularly hard to understand. That means people probably don't spend much time in a pre-social condition like the state of nature. We can just look at the state of nature as a "mere philosophical fiction", useful for examining human psychology.

The golden age. But there is another fiction Hume wants us to look at. Take *the golden age*, with a superabundance of natural resources and morally pure human beings who completely love each other. The poets say things were so great that there was no need to distinguish between 'mine' and 'thine': i.e., no need for justice. Hume seizes on this point because he thinks it shows us the origins of justice. The reason we need justice is because we're *not* in a golden age; we're in a world where human beings are kind of selfish and where natural resources are scarce and easy to snag away. Look at friends and spouses, or at air and water, and you can see these same factors at work in the real world.

Three final points. Hume wraps up his examination of the first question by returning to three points. First, the motive to justice isn't public benevolence, because if we had that, we wouldn't even need justice in the first place. Second, abstract reasoning is incapable of telling us what's just and unjust. After all, if human nature or natural resources were different enough (as in the golden age), then justice would go away—and you can't capture that fact with abstract reasoning. And it is self-interest that led us to establish the rules of justice, self-interest being a passion that doesn't come from abstract reasoning. Third, the kind of interest at stake in justice is itself artificial. Justice clearly depends on our interests: again, change things enough, and we don't even need justice. But since the *natural* pursuit of our interests leads to interpersonal conflict, the interest bound up with justice must be a funny indirect kind of interest that we'd never naturally pursue. And this is just what Hume says. The whole point of justice, we've seen, is that it promotes our interests. But notice that an *individual* act of justice can be *contrary to the public interest*, like when I return money to a member of the KKK. Likewise, an individual act can clearly be *contrary to my personal interest*, like when I return money that I sorely need. So we must forget about individual acts of justice, and look at the *whole scheme* of justice—*that* is what promotes our interests. We can see this, and therefore, even though sometimes acts of justice go against our interests, we still stick with the rules, publicly resolving to be honest, and setting an example to others. Without all this, we would never conform to these rules.

Justice and morality

Now to the second question. Why do we care about this *morally*? First recall that a concern for our interests is what led us to establish the system in the first place. But when society gets big enough, the connection between acts of injustice and social order becomes hazier. All the same, we certainly feel the threat to social order when someone is unjust to us. And we also feel it when we hear of someone being unjust to those in his inner circle, when we take up the general point of view, and sympathize with the negative feelings of his victims. And (you might recall) that's just what it is to disapprove of someone: taking up the common point of view and feeling a negative moral sentiment via sympathy with others. It's this that makes justice a *moral* matter. But why do we disapprove of *ourselves* when *we're* unjust to others? Because of our tendency to follow general rules, and because of our sympathy with how others view us. In any case, our moral concern for justice ultimately depends on sympathy with the public interest. This doesn't necessarily change us into angels who never behave unjustly, but it does influence our moral sentiments, so that we at least approve of justice and disapprove of injustice.

Then three social factors come in to reinforce and build on these sentiments. First, public leaders hammer home the importance of being just, because they have an interest in maintaining social order. Secondly, we get raised by our family to be just, and this gets the habits of justice riveted deep down in our minds. And thirdly, since we care about our reputation, we scrupulously avoid injustice so that other people don't look down on us.