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3

## Chapter Four

### The Act

No one can deny the fact that when the human person is placed in a moral dilemma, his decision can also be greatly affected by his feelings. The moral decision that man makes will definitely not be fully objective. For instance, one's decision regarding the morality of death penalty will vary if he is placed in a situation wherein his family is greatly affected by a murderous act. A person who is never a victim of any crime may view the death penalty as morally unacceptable. At the same time, a person who has a very close relative indicted for robbery may cry for forgiveness while those who do not have such may demand punishment. In this regard, a moral decision can be a product of feelings or emotions.

### Feelings and Morality

During the early part of his philosophizing, **David Hume** (1711-1776) believed virtue is in conformity to reason. Like truth, morality is discerned merely by ideas. In order to distinguish the good and the bad, we have to consider reason alone (Hume 2004, 59).

### DAVID HUME (born 1711 in Edinburg, Scotland–died 1776))

Hume was born of a lowland gentry Scottish family. His father died the year after he was born, leaving his son a small income. He was raised by his widowed mother under a strict Presbyterian regimen. He was raised by his widowed mother under a strict Presbyterian regimen. He attended three-hour morning services, went back for an hour in the afternoon, and joined in family prayers every evening (Soccio 2007, 288).

Hume was educated by his widowed mother until he left for the University of Edinburgh at the age of eleven. Because of his training, he took religion seriously and obediently followed a list of moral guidelines taken from the popular Calvinistic devotional—*The Whole Duty of Man* (Fieser).

Hume left the University of Edinburgh around the age of 15 without finishing any degree in order to devote himself to philosophy and literature. A short time later, he admitted that he had lost the faith of his childhood, writing that once he read Locke and other philosophers, he never again “entertained any belief in religion” (Soccio).

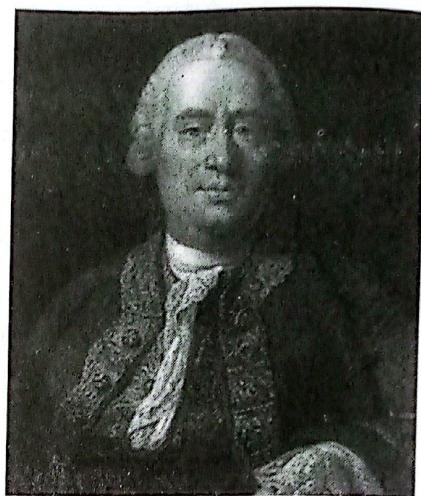
Despite his desire to pursue philosophy, he also attempted a commercial career with a sugar firm in Bristol; but four months of clerical job in Bristol led him to the realization that life in the business world was not for him. And so, he decided to live a meager life in a country side in France. From 1734-1737, he lived at La Fleche in Anjou, where Descartes had been educated at the Jesuit college. The Jesuits allowed him full access to their first-rate library and it was there where he wrote his first work, the *Treatise of Human Nature* (Kenny 2006, 99).

On returning to England, he found some difficulty in getting this work published. When it appeared, he was disappointed by its reception. Hume said: “Never Literary Attempt was more fortunate than my Treatise. It fell dead-born from the Press” (Kenny, 95). Hume found most resistance to his analysis of miracles. He agreed to remove the most offensive passages but did not destroy them. In this censored form, the two-volume *Treatise* was published anonymously in January 1739 where Hume received fifty pounds and twelve copies as his total payment. At the age of 27, he had written one of the major works of modern philosophy (Soccio, 289).

After his death, this work achieved enormous fame. The 18th-century German idealists and the 19th-century British idealists took this work of Hume as the target of their criticisms of empiricism. These idealists detested the work of Hume although admittedly, they also revered it so much so that the British empiricists in the 20th century extolled it as the greatest work of philosophy in the English language (96).

Philosophers during the time of Hume placed greater emphasis on the prominence of reason over feelings. Western philosophers were actually reacting to the position held by the church scholars who asserted that religion is a necessary foundation for morality. According to the religious apologists, moral decisions must be rooted in religious laws and doctrines. For the western thinkers, the foundation of morality is the reason. Such position was actually held even by the ancient western thinkers.

During the ancient period, Plato would argue that the function of reason is to rule the appetites and emotions. He held that the Mind or the Intellect, which is the highest level of the soul, is that immortal part of the soul that gives the man the capacity for truth and wisdom. This part of the soul, which Plato called the *vouc* (*nous*), is closely connected with the world of forms (Buenaflo, et al., 46).



David Hume [<https://www.istockphoto.com>]...

The Stoics upheld that the human person must be able to learn to control his passion with reason in order to live a moral life. The Stoics believed that each person shares a common element: reason. Because every man has a reason, everyone, therefore, has a right reason in common. This right reason is Law. Hence, moral decisions must always be rooted on the right reason as this is the thing that we have in common with the gods (Buenaflor 2011, 104).

In the modern period, René Descartes, in his desire to get away from the authority of the church, held that reason has prominence over church laws and religious doctrines. In matters of morality, reason must have the prevalence (Soccio, 300).

For Hume, the central fact about ethics is that moral judgments are formed not by reason alone but through feelings. Hume believed that, indeed, reason plays an important role in making discussions about ethical decisions. Stumpf and Fieser (2008, 251) wrote:

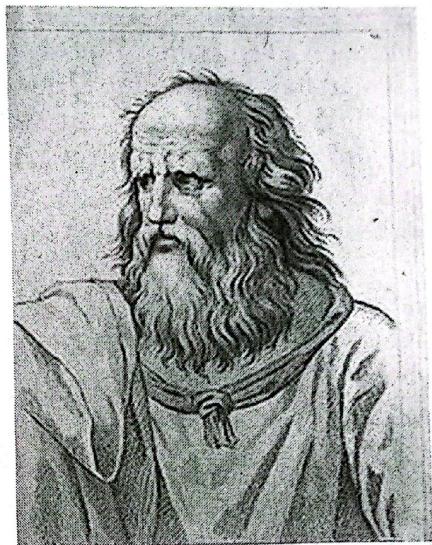
... But, Hume says, reason "is not sufficient alone to produce any moral blame or approbation." What limits the role of reason in ethics is that reason makes judgments concerning the truth of empirical "matter of fact" and analytical "relations of ideas." Moral assessments are not judgments about the truth and falsehood of anything. Instead, moral assessments are emotional reactions.

Hume held that the judgment of good and evil of an act is not a new fact discovered or deduced by reason. If this is the case, we might be ending up with saying that moral assessment is similar to mathematical judgment. Good and evil are not existing matter of fact. One's view regarding the goodness and badness of an action is based on passions, motives, volitions, and thoughts. Hence, the goodness and badness of an act lie in the person, not in the object or in the action.

Hume held that moral decisions would always involve feelings or emotions. For instance, because I will feel sympathetic pain on my friend whose brother was brutally killed by a gunman, I will surely develop a moral condemnation on the action of the killer. However, if somebody will do a charitable deed of feeding a street child, I will surely feel sympathetic pleasure for that person. Such pleasure originates from my moral approval of the good deed.

From the point of view of Hume, moral sentiments are found in all people. Everyone has an instinctive capacity to give praise and to uphold the moral actions performed by a person to the others. Hume held that whatever actions that would give the spectator a pleasing sentiment would be considered as morally acceptable, while those that would be unpleasing to the spectators would be considered morally unacceptable.

Agreeableness and usefulness can be, for Hume, a good consideration for morality. But agreeable to whom and useful for what? Hume held that the interest should not be for one's own but for somebody else's, i.e., for the interest of those who would be directly or indirectly affected by a particular action.



Plato [<https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Plato>]

If Hume's approach will be assessed, it could be said that his approach is an empirical approach to morality. According to him, basing ourselves on experience, our moral decisions are based not on judgments based on reason but on feelings. More so, our experience tells us that we have sympathetic feelings of pleasure and pain in response to a range of virtuous characteristics that people possess (Stumpf & Fieser, 252). At the same time, everyone would have an agreement on the virtuous qualities that can be considered useful or agreeable to those who are affected by one's action.

Based on the principles given above, it is clear to say that Hume believed that feelings and agreeableness can be considered as a clear criterion of moral judgment. He believed that a behavior is considered to be virtuous if it is useful or agreeable to people who are affected by the action being considered. If an action is useful or agreeable to others and to one's self, it is then considered to be morally acceptable (Stumpf & Fieser, 253).

### *Critique on Hume's Ethical Principle*

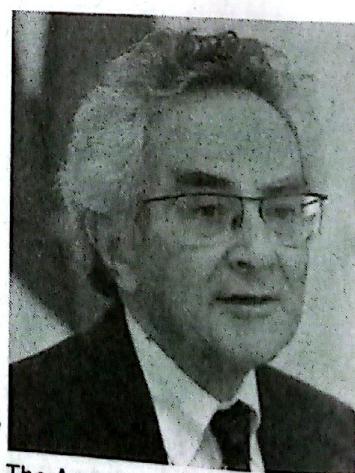
Some moralists would claim that it is quite difficult to accept the principle of David Hume on ethics. Moralists are trying to establish a universal principle on how to determine whether the action is to be considered morally acceptable or not. If we are to follow the principle of Hume that moral judgments are formed by feelings, then there will be a problem, according to the rational moralists, because morality must be absolute and universal. For it to become absolute and universal, it must be grounded on reason. If it is grounded on feelings, then it would be difficult to have a universal or absolute moral principle.

Moreover, religious moralists would find it difficult to accept Hume's moral point of view. This is because Hume did not include the role of God in determining the morality of one's action. For this reason, the religious moralists would consider Hume's moral philosophy to be weak and groundless.

Nevertheless, no one can deny the fact that the usefulness and the good effect of one's action can still be the basis in determining whether such action is considered morally acceptable or not. This principle of Hume became the basis of the ethical principle of utilitarianism developed by Jeremy Bentham. This will be discussed in the next chapter.

### **Reason and Impartiality**

If David Hume would have the claim that morality must be rooted in feelings, the American philosopher Thomas Nagel would have a different claim. He believed that morality must be rooted not in feelings or emotions because that will make morality subjective. Morality must be objective. Hence, it must be rooted on reason. Accordingly, no matter how great our feelings on a particular situation can be, such feelings will not be considered as a basis for a universal moral principle because my feelings on a particular issue may be different from the feelings of others.



The American philosopher Thomas Nagel [<http://www.balzan.org/upload/Nagel-Thomas-PremioBalzan2008.JPG>].

Our feelings may be irrational. They may be products of prejudice, selfishness, or cultural conditioning. One's moral decision may depend on the effect of one's action to the persons involved. Consider this example given in the book *The elements of moral philosophy*:

Tracy Latimer, a 12-year-old victim of cerebral palsy, was killed by her father in 1993. Tracy lived with her family on a prairie farm in Saskatchewan, Canada. One Sunday morning, while his wife and other children were at church, Robert Latimer put Tracy in the cab of his pickup truck and piped in exhaust fumes until she died. At the time of her death, Tracy weighed less than 40 pounds, and she was described as "functioning at the mental level of a 3-month-old baby." Mrs. Latimer said that she was relieved to find Tracy dead when she arrived home and added that she "didn't have the courage" to do it herself.

Robert Latimer was tried for murder, but the judge and jury did not want to treat him harshly. The jury found him guilty of only second-degree murder and recommended that the judge ignore the mandatory 10-year sentence. The judge agreed and sentenced him to one year in prison, followed by a year of confinement to his farm. But the Supreme Court of Canada stepped in and ruled that the mandatory sentence is imposed. Robert Latimer entered prison in 2001 and was paroled in 2008 (Rachel & Rachel, 7-8).

On the question as to whether Robert Latimer's action can be considered moral, our answer must not be affected by our own emotions, but rather, by our reason. As we can see, from the point of view of the family of Robert, his decision of killing Tracy would be justifiable because of the pain that they are having whenever they would see Tracy in such a pitiable condition. But if our decision will be based on the feelings of the family who is into that situation, our moral decision will become subjective and we may not be able to arrive at a moral decision that will be acceptable to everyone else. Should this be the case, we will be falling into the problem of moral relativism.

From the point of view of Thomas Nagel, the basis of morality must be on the happiness that one's action may cause to the others. If an action is going to cause harm to others, then the action is considered to be evil. Supposing that a teacher is being requested by a parent of one of his students to give him the leakage for the final exam so that his son may be able to pass the said examination and eventually be included in the graduation list. The parent's predicament is that if he will not be able to graduate, he will not be able to finish his studies because in the next school year, he has to give way to his younger sibling who is also about to enter college and the parents will not be able to afford to have the two go to college at the same time.

Indeed, the teacher may consider the request of the parent of his student as wrong. He may believe that he should not help her. However, the teacher may also believe that helping the parent in this particular request is wrong not just because it is against the law of the school but because the reason for helping the student cheat is wrong as this is unfair to the other students who are studying very hard in order to pass the examination, while this particular student of his will be able to pass just because of the predicament that he will not be able to finish his college if he will not pass this examination.

Here, it is to be noted that an action can be considered wrong not only because of the effect that it will create on the person who will be doing the cheating but because of the effects that the said cheating will entail to other people. The argument that the action is wrong is supposed to give the doer of an act enough reason not to do the said act. However, if someone does not really care about other people, what reason will the said person have in order to prevent him from cheating? The person will not be caught and he finds no reason why his act of cheating would be wrong, then, should the action not be considered wrong anymore?

Going back to the case of Robert Latimer, the act of killing Tracy would be considered morally unacceptable because each individual's life is precious and, therefore, nobody has the right to take away one's life. Reason will tell us that everyone should be treated equally. Therefore, whether the person is physically handicapped or not, he cannot still be considered as worthless when compared to the life of the normal people. A handicapped person can still become an effective member of a society if given the proper chance.

It can still be asked whether the death of Tracy could be considered a case of discrimination against the handicapped (Rachel & Rachel, 11). However, when Robert Latimer was interviewed, he held that Tracy's handicap case was not the issue. The issue, according to him, lies on the fact that if they are to allow Tracy to live, they feel that they are torturing Tracy because after undergoing major surgery on her back, hips, and legs, more major surgeries will still be placed on the pipeline if they are to totally cure Tracy. But each of these surgeries would bring Tracy to tremendous pain. Robert could not simply accept the fact that Tracy would have a feeding tube attached to her, rods in her back and the leg cut and flopping around, not to mention the case of acquiring bed sores.

Because Tracy, according to Robert, would not be able to live a happy life due to the pains and stress of undergoing several surgeries, then it would be more rational and more practical to have her life ended. This decision of Robert requires reasoning because a father's feeling for being the cause of the death of one's daughter would be emotionally unacceptable. For this reason, Robert's decision could be accepted as acceptable from the practical viewpoint and if there will be the use of emotions, then Robert would not be able to make a decision and would just be contended with seeing Tracy suffer her life.

In this situation, we may ask now: What is a moral truth? It has to be noted that discovering the truth can only be made possible if one is guided by reason. Most philosophers would consider this as the essence of morality. The morally right thing is to do the action that is supported by rational arguments.

If anybody would be giving the advice that a particular action is a right thing to do, any person would be led to look for the reasons why the said action is the right thing to do. If no good reason can be given why said action is the right thing to do, then no one would be led to do any particular action. For this reason, moral judgments must always be backed up by good reasons.

It must be noted that not every reason is good. There may still be valid reasons. However, it will be the job of the person to discern which reason is good. It is therefore important to know the facts first. At the same time, the person must take away any prejudices. There

are times when people would consider a reason as valid because it supports the biases and agrees with the preconceived conditions. For instance, there are people who do not support the idea of giving charities because they believed that they are inefficient even if they do not have enough evidence for the claim. At the same time, others also have the belief that homosexuality is morally unacceptable because of the preconceived idea that homosexual men are all pedophiles even if only a few of them are. For this reason, it is important that a person should try to look at things according to how they are and not on how they wanted them to be (Rachel & Rachel, 12).

In discerning over the facts, it is important that the decision maker must be impartial to certain issues. One should be able to consider that every moral decision is equally important to the others. In this regard, no decisions should be given more favor than the others.

Although impartiality may be a good basis for making a moral decision, Thomas Nagel, however, believed that impartiality is only a bare outline of the source of morality (Nagel 2004, 67). Nagel held that indeed, ethics [as well as political theory]

.... begin when from the impersonal standpoint we focus on the raw data provided by the individual desires, interests, projects, attachments, allegiances, and plans of life that define the personal points of view of the multitude of distinct individuals, ourselves included. What happens at that point is that we recognize some of these things to have impersonal value. Things do not simply cease to matter when viewed impersonally, and we are forced to recognize that they matter not only to particular individual or groups (Nagel 1991, 10).

Nagel wanted to point out that it is quite difficult to establish a universal moral decision because there are many disagreements among those who accept morality in general and about what in particular is right or wrong. For example, are we going to take good care of every other person as much as we do to ourselves? Will it be better to just donate to the poor the money that I should have used to buy a movie ticket?

If people would become impartial, then he would not care anymore whether he would care more about strangers than he should have with one's relatives. What degree of impartiality, then, must be taken into consideration in order to determine whether one's action is morally better than the other? Can we consider an impartial action to be more moral? Is there a way by which we can strike the balance between what one cares about personally from what matters impartially? Or will the answer to these questions vary from person to person depending on the strength of their different motives (Gensler, 68)? What then will be the minimum conception of morality?

The basis of morality, in this regard, must be the reason. In this regard,

a conscientious moral agent is someone who is concerned impartially with the interests of everyone affected by what he or she does; who carefully sifts facts and examines their implications; who accepts principles of conduct only after scrutinizing them to make sure they are justified; who is willing to 'listen to reason' even when it means revising prior convictions; and who, finally, is willing to act on the results of this deliberation (Rachels & Rachels, 13).