

## 7 Morality and Society

Hume's ethics is a twofold psychological enquiry into human nature. He is concerned to ask in what way we make the moral discriminations that abound in our discussions of human affairs, and he is concerned to uncover the ways in which these discriminations influence our actions. These enquiries are not the same as those which philosophers undertake in what are now often called Normative Ethics and Meta-Ethics, even though many of Hume's arguments have been put into the service of each of these enterprises, and can often be adapted to them without much change. Reforming or defending our moral opinions, and analysing the meaning of moral terms or the relationship moral statements have to other statements, are not part of Hume's programme, even though he may commit himself incidentally on such questions as he goes about the pursuit of his own objectives. He would of course have insisted that, in so far as these philosophical tasks were known to him through the works of his contemporaries, they could not profitably be pursued except in subordination to the science of man. But it is one thing to relate our concerns to his, and quite another to translate his claims into the language of ours.

The distinction I have drawn between the two aspects of Hume's ethical theory is itself somewhat misleading, since it suggests that moral behaviour is the result of our applying the distinctions that we make use of in our evaluations. Hume does not hold this, but to a large extent maintains just the opposite. He does, however, spend the greater part of Book III of the *Treatise* on those cases where moral behaviour does have this source, because these cases seem to him to raise special problems. He does, that is to say, recognise the existence of a specifically moral motive, or sense of obligation, but

examines the mode of its operation partly because he does not think that morally praiseworthy conduct is in the first instance produced by it.

### *Moral Evaluations and Reason*

Book II of the *Treatise* prepares Hume's readers to find him saying in Book III that moral action is action that we are moved to perform by certain passions, not by reason. It does not so obviously prepare them to find him saying that moral *distinctions* are not derived from reason, but are in their turn derived from the passions. It might, after all, be maintained that although we are unable to pursue what we judge to be good or obligatory, or to shun what we judge to be evil or wrong, it is reason that discovers these to us. But Hume insists that it is the passionate side of our nature that is at work when we make our moral discriminations. The judgements that express these discriminations are prompted by impressions of reflection, not impressions of sensation.

This thesis requires for its support arguments that do more than establish reason's impotence in the sphere of action. But although Hume does offer some, his case is bolstered by the repetition of those which he used to establish the earlier contention. It is clear that for him the two theses are closely connected. He makes the connection himself in this way in Section I of Part I: 'Since morals, therefore, have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows that they cannot be derived from reason; and that because reason alone, as we have already proved, can never have any such influence. Morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions. Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular. The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason' (III 167/457). And again, even more simply: 'Reason is wholly inactive, and can never be the source of so active a principle as conscience, or a sense of morals.' (III 168/458) It is difficult to be impressed by this argument, even if we are prepared to gloss over the fact that our moral judgements frequently fail to generate actions. For Hume's theory of the passions requires him to say that many passions do not lead to action of themselves, but only lead to it indirectly by stimulating desire or aversion; and he also appears to hold that although reason never generates actions, it can prompt passions that do generate it (as he seems to admit even here when he says that reason '*of itself*' is impotent). If one admits these two things, then the fact that reason does not lead to action directly, or of itself, is not a