

## *Chapter Five*

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After Greek tradition, the virtue ethics had subsequently been developed by Hume in a different way. Hume classifies virtue in two ways, viz. artificial virtues and natural virtues. For Hume unlike artificial virtue, natural virtue is primary and basic. Natural virtues are basic or primary in the sense that they will help to bring out the problems. We are yet to define what does Hume mean by natural virtues? Natural virtues, according to Hume, are undoubted maxim according to which “no action can be virtues, or morally good, unless there be in human nature some motive to produce it, distinct from a sense of its morality.”<sup>55</sup> Natural virtues, Hume contends, are the character traits at the basic of actions we morally approve of and this approval is fully natural. It is natural in the sense that it is no longer based on any human convention. Hume applies this method in order to identify virtues. He then looks for common principles using these traits. In this regard he places special reliance on *introspection* as he holds that the universality of human nature will ensure a certain convergence of views on these matters. Hume admits four primary sources of moral approval. According to Hume personal merit consists altogether in the possession of mental qualities, useful or agreeable to the person himself or to others. That means virtuous character traits benefit either oneself or to others whether this good is either intrinsic, or a means towards some other good.

According to Hume there are some moral approvals which are useful to society, such as, fidelity, justice, veracity, integrity together with the ‘social virtues’ of ‘meekness beneficence, charity, generosity, clemency, moderation, equity.’<sup>56</sup> Besides all these traits, social utility is also the source of a considerable part of the merit ascribed to

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<sup>55</sup> Hume, David. *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge and P.H. Nidditch, Oxford University Press, 1975, p.479.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* p.204.

humanity, benevolence, friendship, public spirit, and other social virtues of that stamp. Hume also specifies some moral virtues which are useful to the agent, such as, prudence, temperance, frugality, industry, assiduity, enterprise, dexterity, generosity and humanity.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, there are some virtues which are intrinsically pleasing to those who encounter or consider them, such as, wit, eloquence, ingenuity, decency and decorum and finally there are some virtuous traits which are intrinsically pleasing to the agent himself, such as, cheering, serenity and contentment.

It is important to point out at this juncture that Hume's own development of this catalogue of virtues actually stands against two main opponents, namely, Hobbes and Mandeville. We however do not enter into this debate just now. Amongst four natural sources of virtue, social utility, says Hume, is most important and even in his 2nd Enquiry Hume places *benevolence* at the head of social virtues. According to *Treatise* benevolence as an indirect passion is associated with love, and consisting in a desire for the well-being of those whom one loved. Hume says, ".....no qualities are more in titled to the general good-will and approbation of mankind than benevolence and humanity, friendship and gratitude, natural affection and public spirit, or whatever proceeds from a tender sympathy with others, and a generous concern for our kind and species. These wherever they appear seem to transfuse themselves, in a manner, into each beholder, and to call forth, in their own behalf, the same favourable and affectionate sentiments, which they exert on all round."<sup>58</sup> Benevolence, Hume opines, is infectious as it generates corresponding feelings in others, sympathetically setting off a dynamic of mutual reinforcement. All who come into contact with benevolence will be benefited. Hume says, "The merit of benevolence, arising from its utility, and its tendency to promote the good of mankind

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<sup>57</sup> Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A.Selby-Bigge and P.H.Nidditch, Oxford: Clarendon, 1987, p. 587.

<sup>58</sup> Hume, David. *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, op. cit. p.178.

has been already explained, and is, no doubt, the source of a considerable part of that esteem, which is so universally paid to it. But it will also be allowed, that the very softness and tenderness of the sentiment, its engaging endearments, its fond expressions, its delicate attentions, and all that flow of mutual confidence and regard, which enters into a warm attachment of love and friendship: it will be allowed, I say, that these feelings, being delightful in themselves, are necessarily communicated to the spectators, and melt them into the same fondness and delicacy.”<sup>59</sup>

Although both Bentham and Mill were influenced by Hume to a great extent but they differ significantly in their philosophical outlook. In fact both Bentham and Mill were predominantly concerned with a criterion of right action. For them an action is just in case it gives rise to the overall amount of happiness in society in comparative to other available option. They hold that an action is morally good if it is conducive to happiness. On the contrary, Hume’s primary objective is to discover the structure of human nature and thereby determine the human traits underlying actions we approve of. Moreover, Hume’s catalogues of virtues reflect that any such criterion that could be derived from this catalogue would not be equivalent to the utilitarian principle of greatest happiness. It can at best resemble to it. Unlike Bentham and Mill, Hume also seems to have conceived that the lion’s share of the foundations of moral approval goes to socially useful character traits. In fact Hume was completely against of egoism who generally argues that all actions are ultimately grounded in self-love and therefore all common distinctions between egoism and altruism, selfish and disinterested action are mere illusion. Hume says, “...all benevolence is mere hypocrisy, friendship a cheat, public spirit a farce, fidelity a snare to procure trust and confidence; and that while all of us, at bottom, pursue only our private interest, we

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid. p.257.

wear these fair disguises, in order to put others off their guard, and expose them the more to our wiles and machinations.”<sup>60</sup>

It reflects from the above remarks that Hume clearly stands against egoism as he feels that egoists have denied the reality of moral distinctions which shows that Hume himself as attempting to put morality on solid foundations, in contrast to the moral skeptic he is often accused of being. According to Hume the moral theory as adopted by the egoists fails to fit the empirical facts and therefore anyone accepting egoism must either possess the most **depraved** disposition or be a superficial reasoner who has carelessly generalized from the fact that many actions involve deliberate deceit to the conclusion that all behaviour is like this. According to the egoists all moral distinctions arise from education and were at first invented and afterwards encouraged by the art of politicians. But Hume thinks the other way round as he says that the entire natural basis of our approval of the ‘social virtue’ lies in their public utility. Although Hume anticipates that education plays a significant part in the acquisition of moral distinctions, but the ultimate basis of moral distinctions lies in our natural tendencies for the well being of both ourselves and family. Without the natural capacity to make moral distinctions, Hume opines, methods of education will be ineffective. Hume says, “The social virtues must, therefore, be allowed to have a natural beauty and amiableness, which, at first, antecedent to all precept or education, recommends them to the esteem of uninstructed mankind, and engages their affections.”<sup>61</sup>

However, Hume elsewhere gives a more abstract and theoretical argument in favour of egoism. He says that sometime self-interest and the common good are seen to converge in such a way so that actions done from one motive would be virtually co-extensive with those performed from the other. Even many philosophers would like

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid. p.295.

<sup>61</sup> Hume, David. *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, op. cit. p.214.

to say that all egoistic sentiments are modification of self-love. In fact many would like to say that egoism is a simpler theory than Hume's. In responding to this view Hume says that if egoism is designated as a simpler theory, then this would be just one dimension of simplicity. Hume then considers another form of egoism that whatever affection one may feel, or imagine he feels for others, no passion is, or can be, disinterested; that the most generous friendship, however, sincere, is a modification of self-love, and that, even unknown to ourselves, we seek only our own gratification, while we appear to be the most deeply engaged in schemes for the liberty and happiness of mankind. This sort of egoism differs from the basic egoistic stance as unlike the basic one, it is a modification or transformation of some original egoism and it is ultimately grounded in self-love. Even granting the premise of this modified egoism, it can still be said that there underlies a subtle distinction between selfish and altruistic motives which ultimately transform one man virtuous and humane and another vicious and meanly interested. The problem with egoism is that egoism cannot account or approve of some character trait that is useful to its bearer, whether or not it benefits me. On the contrary, a virtuous being sympathetically feel pleasure, leading to attitudes of liking and approval towards him. We value our own riches, we esteem another's riches as well because of the pleasure they bring to the owner, and in which we then sympathetically participate.

### **Natural and artificial virtue:**

Hume classifies virtues both naturally and artificially. According to Hume justice is an artificial value and a mental process or character trait is natural if we possess it purely by being a normally functioning human being. Hume further contends that an activity or practice is natural if it is fully explicable from these natural processes and traits. Accordingly, a character trait is a natural virtue when our approval of it is equally explicable from this basis. We do approve of these natural traits as they are useful or intrinsically pleasing either to the agent itself or to the society at large. An

artificial virtue, on the contrary, requires the intervention of artifice in order to emerge and to be approved of. According to Hume something is artificial if it is the product of convention of human rules or institutions. In this sense, it can be said that an artificial virtue is a purely descriptive term without any pejorative connotations. The fundamental distinction between natural and artificial virtue is that a natural virtue always produces good and is always approved of. A natural virtue is devoid of all contexts. According to Hume every natural virtuous act is a discrete event, complete and self-contained, and can be understood as such purely from knowledge of human nature. In fact, the unconditional value we confer on the natural virtues is a direct result of this naturalness. Natural virtues are emergence from permanent facets of human nature. On the other hand, the very existence of artificial virtues rests on various contingencies of the human condition. We may not approve an artificial virtue as it need not directly benefit anyone involved.

Hume's most insightful observation regarding virtue ethics is that an action derives its virtue from being a sign of, and an effect of, a virtuous motive and this in turn emerges from a stable character trait. This shows that no action can be virtuous without **there being already some motive to do it other** than because of its virtue. What makes a motive a virtuous one? Is it not a threatened paradox to say that one recognizes the virtue of some course of action and thereby motivated to act on this discovery? Hume, however, rules out the possibility of this threatened paradox as he rejects the assumption that morality is a self-standing phenomenon, lacking any non-moral foundation. **For Hume morality is founded upon our natural desires** and affective responses. Morality is an undoubted maxim. **Hume says, "No action can be virtuous, or morally good, unless there be in human nature some motive to produce it, distinct from a sense of morality."**<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, op. cit. p.479.

By conceiving morality as 'undoubted maxim', Hume desires to say that every virtuous action requires a motivation separate from a sense of morality. For example, suppose I borrow money, promising to repay it. But what actually would motivate me to keep my promise? He has argued that an act is honest if it is done through an honest motive. But what constitutes the honesty of a motive? Would it not be circular to say that an honest motive consists in the intention to perform actions per se? We should obey the promise if it is a promise consciously made by me just as we should obey the laws because it is the law. The sense of duty actually derives from these laws and therefore the question of explaining them simply does not arise.

Like all moral obligations, justice is impersonal as it requires us to act towards those for whom we have no naturally benevolent impulses. In this sense justice seems to threaten Hume's undoubted moral maxim as no natural motives seem to be available from which to explain this original motivation for, and approval of, just acts. In short, any attempt to explain the origin of our approval of justice that is restricted to natural motives will be either circular or blatantly false. Hume takes these results to show that justice cannot be a natural virtue and that the rules of justice are artificial in being human contrivances. However, whatever the position of Hume might be, it was revealed that Plato himself considered justice as one of the quality of cardinal virtue. Hume says that the sense of justice and injustice is not derived from nature, but only arises artificially. However, artificiality does not necessarily mean that the rules associated with justice are totally arbitrary; they can even be said to be natural. In this sense, the rules of justice can be considered as "Laws of Nature". In *Treatise* Hume offers more arguments in favour of the artificiality of justice. According to Hume all natural properties, including natural virtues, admits variations of degree, whereas matters of justice do not. Hume gives many examples to make this point clear. In the case of natural justice there is a process of gradation, whereas in the case of artificial justice there is no process of gradation as artificial justice, unlike a



natural one, can be obtained instantly. For example, although a court case to ascertain property rights may be long and drawn out, but the victory immediately acquires full property rights once a decision is made. That is why, Hume rightly points out that changes in rights happen instantly, such as through transfer of possession, but natural processes occur gradually. Hume further contends that a naturally based decision would only consider the particulars of the case at hand, but a general practice of such partial and particular judgments would lead to chaos. Therefore, we would recognize the need for more inflexible rules, to be applied even in cases where the outcome seems to satisfy no one. In a nutshell it can be said following Hume that the rules of justice are inflexible, whereas natural virtues are the outcome of decision procedure.

**Justice, its origin and properties:**

In *Treatise*, section 3/2/2, Hume explains how rules of justice are established and how we come to approve of them. According to Hume the moral approval of justice derives from the social utility of the practice as a whole. He says, "Self interest is the original motive to the establishment of justice: but sympathy with public interest is the source of the moral approbation which attends that virtue."<sup>63</sup> Hume comprehends justice in terms of his theory of human nature. We are motivated to form large social groups for fulfilling our basic needs. Nature put man in an unfortunate position due to the numberless wants and necessities with which she has loaded him. However, society provides a remedy for three specific kinds of problem, relating to force, ability and security by means of which society becomes advantageous. Hume further contends that society constitutes a network of persons engaged in cooperative acts. Humans are naturally social and even before societies were formed; no one was born as a solitary individual, but emerged into a form of social setting. Within the social setting natural virtues are practiced. Family life gives us societal relations and

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<sup>63</sup> Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, op.cit. p.499.

also provides the conditions under which we can conceive of wider social ties. For example, having a partner provides a model for cooperation and a division of labour and parent-child relationship gives you an example of obedience to authority and the idea of hierarchy.

However, it is important to note that Hume does not admit any specific hierarchy adopted within the pre-societal proto-families. His point is merely that families provide crude analogues of rule governed life which helps us to extrapolate these relations onto wider groups. Hume contends that these original families differ from those within society in that the latter are the result of the convention of marriage. The maintenance of this institution results in the creation of the artificial virtues of chastity and modesty. These are principally 'family virtues' where the maternity unlike the paternity cannot be doubted. According to Hume the length and feebleness of human infancy requires a child to be raised by both a man and a woman, but no man could be expected to make the sacrifices involved unless he was certain that the child was his. Hume professes that the only justification for the inculcation of these 'virtues' lies in their role in providing a stable environment for the raising of children. The solution of our pre-societal problems involves the typical Humean division of labour between reason and passion in which passion supplies the goal of the action, and reason directs it by suggesting means for the satisfaction of desires. The only difference in this case is that the process is intrinsically interpersonal rather than individualistic due to the involvement of a social convention. Reason tells us that it is our social long-term selfish interest to cooperate with others on condition that they reciprocate.

Hume elsewhere maintains that just acts are different from naturally virtuous acts in the sense that the merit of the virtuous acts is intrinsic to the acts themselves. By contrast the virtue of just acts may not reveal itself intrinsically. In the case of just acts there is a direct, non-derivative connection between the action itself, whereas in

the case of virtuous acts individual acts are always beneficial in an indirect way. Hume says, "A single act of interest is **frequently contrary to public interest; and where it is to stand alone, without** being followed by other acts, may in itself, be very prejudicial to society..... Nor is every single act of justice, considered apart, more conducive to private interest than to public.... But... 'it's certain, that the whole plan of scheme is highly conducive, or indeed absolutely requisite, both to the support of society, and the well-being of the every individual.'" <sup>64</sup>

One of the arguments Hume uses to show that justice must be 'artificial' appeals explicitly to the fact that in its domain clear and sharp distinction are required. In his *Treatise*, Hume says, "All natural qualities run insensibly into each other, and are, on many occasions, indistinguishable."<sup>65</sup> This in fact is true in all kind of vice and virtue as well. Therefore, if we adhere to the view that justice has this preciseness, Hume opines, then we must agree that it is artificial, not natural. Following Grotian tradition, Hume further contends just as perfect duties are those which are indispensable for the existence of society, likewise artificial virtues are the ones required if society is to exist, that of justice, concerning itself with property, being the most important of all. Hume's natural virtues plainly map the imperfect duties. However, both sorts of virtue, like both sorts of duty, produce good result. However, Hume takes the distinction by saying that the good arising from the natural virtues is normally brought about in every case of their exercise, while the good arising from the artificial virtues comes about only as a result of the existence of a general practice of exercising them and therefore may not appear in each particular case.

Hume's distinction of kinds of virtue has often been taken as showing that he anticipated the distinction between act and rule utilitarianism and opted for the latter. From a historical perspective, it is more accurate to describe it as Hume's attempt to

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<sup>64</sup> Hume, David. *Ibid.* p.497.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* p.525.

show how perfect as well as imperfect rights and duties can be explained by a non-teleological virtue-centred theory. His larger aim in doing this is to free our understanding of morality throughout from any need of appeal to supernatural origins. Natural law theory tended to invoke divine wisdom to explain the fit between moral laws and human good and divine sanctions to explain the nature of obligation. Hume argues that a narrative of natural development will explain both of these features and the key to his narrative is the adequacy of human nature to evolve its own directives and controls. Home's point is that morality need not be imposed upon us from without. Morality, Hume says, is our own creation, though not, to be sure, our conscious doing. Hume argues that there are at least no natural motives to respect property, to obey the laws. Justice originates when individuals become aware that stability of possession would be beneficial to each of them individually. Self-interest, redirected by the realization that one's own interest cannot be forwarded unless one controls one's activity for possession when others do so as well, becomes the motive out of which we initially act when we act justly. The practice called 'justice' arises without any activity of the moral sentiment. Its name acquires positive moral connotations, Hume opines, when agents reflect on their common behaviour and through sympathy with the benefits others enjoy are moved to approve of the disposition in each agent from which such good consequences flow. The man, Hume says, who lacks this socialized sense of his own interests may notice the lack and hate himself for lacking that. When he does so, he will be able to show respect for the possessions of others out of a hatred for himself for lacking the normal motive and in that case he will be acting from a sense of duty. The standard case is that where there is some definite principle 'capable of producing the action and whose moral beauty renders the action meritorious' then in such a case the socialized self interest on which we eventually bestow moral approval.

If we carefully read Hume, it appears to us that Hume proposes a kind of virtue ethics which is clearly a deviation from the traditional theory of virtue ethics. We have seen that Aristotelian form of virtue ethics was predominantly agent-focused, But Humean form of virtue ethics is act-focused. This would be made clear if we explain his idea of artificial virtue. According to Hume justices is an artificial virtue which is enforced by law. This is obvious when we notice that his view is chiefly concerned with the 'interested commerce of mankind.'<sup>66</sup> One of the arguments Hume uses to justify his own point is that unlike artificial virtues, all natural qualities or virtues run insensibly into each other and are on many occasions indistinguishable. Since artificial virtues are enforced by laws, they are not indistinguishable into each other. Secondly, natural virtues may persist without the existence of society, whereas this would not be the case in artificial virtues as artificial virtues, for Hume, are the ones required if society is to exist. This leads us top say that artificial virtues, for Hume, comes about only as a result of the existence of a general practice of exercising them.

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<sup>66</sup> Hume, David. *Treatise*, t.522.