Humes theory of knowledge and his moral philosophy essay

Experience, Human Nature

Give an account of Hume's theory of knowledge and his moral philosophy. Discuss aspects of his theory of knowledge and/or his moral philosophy, e. g., his view of personal identity (the ' I'), his view of the external world, his view of causality, his skepticism in general, or his view that feelings are the basis of ethics. You may also bring in Kant's criticism of Hume's ethics.

We live in a world of experiences and inventions, we live a world, where we inherited the ideas of inventions, knowledge and experiences from the knowledge gained and founded by the special figures and persons like David Humes in centuries ago, but the 1600s was a fascinating time, with an enormous amount of changes in the fields of social science, medicine, mathematics and philosophical matters has been achieved and it was historic period in Europe and in the whole world.

Those who were behind the rolling and moving revolutions were person who had no background of educations but everything they found through research and experiments. And with this term paper I will try to submit to the best of my education and background experience I gained during studying this course. And the person I am using his themes is David Hume. Though David Humes has theory has wide range but I will only emphasis his theory of knowledge and moral philosophy, with this introduction part I will shed light his personal and background information.

David Hume was born the 26th of April 1711, the old style, at Edinburg. However his family was poor and his father died when he was an infant, and leaving him with an elder brother and a sister under the care of his mother.

In 1734, he went to Bristol, with some recommendations to several eminent merchants and found after few months that scene not suitable to him.

He composed his Treatise of Human Nature during his retreat in France.

In 1742, he printed at Edinburgh the first part of his Essays, and he continued to live with his mother and brother in the country, and in that period he recovered the knowledge of the Greek language, which he said that he had too much neglected in his early youth. And with this term paper I will focus only his term of knowledge and moral philosophy where we can understand more during the reading the his concepts of knowledge

Hume's theory of knowledge and moral philosophy

What is good for mankind, it relate to the nature and its fulfilling of the others surrounded to him, manhood has to be able to learnt that the nature, and living well, happiness is our ultimate end and We understood that David Hume identify with the ' knowledge' to be a term with two quite distinct meanings. And if I take Hume quite seriously about when he illustrate himself as a mitigated sceptic; he identifies many factual beliefs derived from factual inferences as cases of empirical knowledge. Hume's scepticism about our ability to provide justifying reasons for factual inferences is an important element of his analysis of empirical knowledge, positioning Hume with recent " externalist" accounts of knowledge and distancing him from typical " internalist" accounts.

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Moral Philosophy

The cautious attitude Hume recommends is noticeably absent in moral philosophy, where “ systems and hypotheses” have also “ perverted our natural understanding,” the most prominent being the views of the moral rationalists – Samuel Clarke, Locke, and William Wollaston, the theories of “ the selfish schools” – Hobbes and Mandeville – and the pernicious theological ethics of “ the schools,” whose promotion of the dismal “ monkish virtues” frame a catalogue of virtues diametrically opposed to Hume’s. Although he offers arguments against the “ systems” he opposes, Hume thinks the strongest case against them is to be made descriptively: all these theories offer accounts of human nature that experience and observation prove false.

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Against the moral rationalists – the intellectualists of moral philosophy – who hold that moral judgments are based on reason, Hume maintains that it is difficult even to make their hypotheses intelligible (T, 455-470; EPM, Appendix I). Reason, Hume argues, judges either of matters of fact or of relations. Morality never consists in any single matter of fact that could be immediately perceived, intuited, or grasped by reason alone; morality for rationalists must therefore involve the perception of relations. But inanimate objects and animals can bear the same relations to one another that humans can, though we don’t draw the same moral conclusions from determining that objects or animals are in a given relation as we do when humans are in that same relation. Distinguishing these cases requires more than reason

alone can provide. Even if we could determine an appropriate subject-matter for the moral rationalist, it would still be the case that, after determining that a matter of fact or a relation obtains, the understanding has no more room to operate, so the praise or blame that follows can't be the work of reason.

Reason, Hume maintains, can at most inform us of the tendencies of actions. It can recommend means for attaining a given end, but it can't recommend ultimate ends. Reason can provide no motive to action, for reason alone is insufficient to produce moral blame or approbation. We need sentiment to give a preference to the useful tendencies of actions.

Finally, the moral rationalists' account of justice fares no better. Justice can't be determined by examining a single case, since the advantage to society of a rule of justice depends on how it works in general under the circumstances in which it is introduced.

Thus the views of the moral rationalists on the role of reason in ethics, even if they can be made coherent, are false.

Hume then turns to the claims of " the selfish schools," that morality is either altogether illusory (Mandeville) or can be reduced to considerations of self-interest (Hobbes). He argues that an accurate description of the social virtues, benevolence and justice, will show that their views are false.

There has been much discussion over the differences between Hume's presentation of these arguments in the Treatise and the second Enquiry. " Sympathy" is the key term in the Treatise, while " benevolence" does the

work in the Enquiry. But this need not reflect any substantial shift in doctrine. If we look closely, we see that benevolence plays much the same functional role in the Enquiry that sympathy plays in the Treatise. Hume sometimes describes benevolence as a manifestation of our “ natural” or “ social sympathy.” In both texts, Hume’s central point is that we experience this “ feeling for humanity” in ourselves and observe it in others, so “ the selfish hypothesis” is “ contrary both to common feeling and to our most unprejudiced notions” (EPM, 298).

Borrowing from Butler and Hutcheson, Hume argues that, however prominent considerations of self-interest may be, we do find cases where, when self-interest is not at stake, we respond with benevolence, not indifference. We approve of benevolence in others, even when their benevolence is not, and never will be, directed toward us. We even observe benevolence in animals. Haggling over how much benevolence is found in human nature is pointless; that there is any benevolence at all refutes the selfish hypothesis.

Against Hobbes, Hume argues that our benevolent sentiments can’t be reduced to self-interest. It is true that, when we desire the happiness of others, and try to make them happy, we may enjoy doing so. But benevolence is necessary for our self-enjoyment, and although we may act from the combined motives of benevolence and enjoyment, our benevolent sentiments aren’t identical with our self-enjoyment.

We approve of benevolence in large part because it is useful. Benevolent acts tend to promote social welfare, and those who are benevolent are motivated to cultivate the other social virtue, justice. But while benevolence is an original principle in human nature, justice is not. Our need for rules of justice isn't universal; it arises only under conditions of relative scarcity, where property must be regulated to preserve order in society.

The need for rules of justice is also a function of a society's size. In very small societies, where the members are more of an extended family, there may be no need for rules of justice, because there is no need for regulating property – no need, indeed, for our notion of property at all. Only when society becomes extensive enough that it is impossible for everyone in it to be part of one's " narrow circle" does the need for rules of justice arise.

The rules of justice in a given society are " the product of artifice and contrivance." They are constructed by the society to solve the problem of how to regulate property; other rules might do just as well. The real need is for some set of " general inflexible rules…adopted as best to serve public utility" (EPM, 305).

Hobbesians try to reduce justice to self-interest, because everyone recognizes that it is in their interest that there be rules regulating property. But even here, the benefits for each individual result from the whole scheme or system being in place, not from the fact that each just act benefits each individual directly. As with benevolence, Hume argues that we approve of the system itself even where our self-interest isn't at stake. We can see this

not only from cases in our own society, but also when we consider societies distant in space and time.

Hume’s social virtues are related. Sentiments of benevolence draw us to society, allow us to perceive its advantages, provide a source of approval for just acts, and motivate us to do just acts ourselves. We approve of both virtues because we recognize their role in promoting the happiness and prosperity of society. Their functional roles are, nonetheless, distinct. Hume compares the benefits of benevolence to “ a wall, built by many hands, which still rises by every stone that is heaped upon it, and receives increase proportional to the diligence and care of each workman,” while the happiness justice produces is like the results of building “ a vault, where each individual stone would, of itself, fall to the ground” (EPM, 305).

“ Daily observation” confirms that we recognize and approve of the utility of acts of benevolence and justice. While much of the agreeableness of the utility we find in these acts may be due to the fact that they promote our self-interest, it is also true that, in approving of useful acts, we don’t restrict ourselves to those that serve our particular interests. Similarly, our private interests often differ from the public interest, but, despite our sentiments in favor of our self-interest, we often also retain our sentiment in favor of the public interest. Where these interests concur, we observe a sensible increase of the sentiment, so it must be the case that the interests of society are not entirely indifferent to us.

With that final nail in Hobbes' coffin, Hume turns to develop his account of the sources of morality. Though we often approve or disapprove of the actions of those remote from us in space and time, it is nonetheless true that, in considering the acts of (say) an Athenian statesman, the good he produced " affects us with a less lively sympathy," even though we judge their " merit to be equally great" as the similar acts of our contemporaries. In such cases our judgment " corrects the inequalities of our internal emotions and perceptions; in like manner, as it preserves us from error, in the several variations of images, presented to our external senses" (EPM, 227). Adjustment and correction is necessary in both cases if we are to think and talk consistently and coherently.

" The intercourse of sentiments" that conversation produces is the vehicle for these adjustments, for it takes us out of our own peculiar positions. We begin to employ general language which, since it is formed for general use, " must be moulded on some general views … ." In so doing, we take up a " general" or " common point of view," detached from our self-interested perspectives, to form " some general unalterable standard, by which we may approve or disapprove of characters and manners." We begin to " speak another language" – the language of morals, which " implies some sentiment common to all mankind, which recommends the same object to general approbation, and makes every man, or most men, agree in the same opinion or decision concerning it. It also implies some sentiment, so universal and comprehensive as to extend to all mankind, and render the actions and conduct, even of the persons the most remote, an object of applause or

censure, according as they agree or disagree with that rule of right which is established. These two requisite circumstances belong alone to the sentiment of humanity here insisted on" (EPM, 272). It is theextended or extensive sentiment of humanity – benevolence or sympathy – that for Hume is ultimately " the foundation of morals."

But even if the social virtues move us from a perspective of self-interest to one more universal and extensive, it might appear that the individual virtues do not. But since these virtues also receive our approbation because of their usefulness, and since " these advantages are enjoyed by the person possessed of the character, it can never be self-love which renders the prospect of them agreeable to us, the spectators, and prompts our esteem and approbation" (EPM, 234).

Just as we make judgments about others, we are aware, from infancy, that others make judgments about us. We desire their approval and modify our behavior in response to their judgments. This love of fame gives rise to the habit of reflectively evaluating our own actions and character traits. We first see ourselves as others see us, but eventually we develop our own standards of evaluation, keeping " alive all the sentiments of right and wrong," which " begats, in noble natures, a certain reverence" for ourselves as well as others, " which is the surest guardian of every virtue" (EPM, 276). The general character of moral language, produced and promoted by our social sympathies, permits us to judge ourselves and others from the general point of view, the proper perspective of morality. For Hume, that is "…the most perfect morality with which we are acquainted" (EPM, 276).

Hume summarizes his account in this definition of virtue, or Personal Merit: " every quality of the mind, which is useful or agreeable to the person himself or to others, communicates a pleasure to the spectator, engages his esteem, and is admitted under the honorable denomination of virtue or merit" (EPM, 277). That is, as observers – of ourselves as well as others – to the extent that we regard certain acts as manifestations of certain character traits, we consider the usual tendencies of acts done from those traits, and find them useful or agreeable, to the agent or to others, and approve or disapprove of them accordingly. A striking feature of this definition is its precise parallel to the two definitions of cause that Hume gave as the conclusion of his central argument in the first Enquiry. Both definitions pick out features of events, and both record a spectator's reaction or response to those events.

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Conclusion