

# Hume: morality is based on sentiment

Experience, Human Nature



Hume: Morality is Based on Sentiment This paper will attempt to give a detailed breakdown of David Hume's take on morality, and how some of the other philosophers would critique his stance. I will first speak about why Hume believes reason and passion don't contradict each other. Then I will give Aristotle's and Aquinas' view on this conclusion of his. Next, I will speak on how Hume argues that moral judgments aren't grounded in reason. Afterwards, I will discuss what he considers that moral judgments are founded on. Finally, I will give a critique of Hume's theory from Hobbes' perspective.

Hume's take on human morality is a very interesting one indeed to contemplate. His main argument on the topic is that the morality of humans is totally derived from sentiment, and in no way has anything to do with reason. He first defines sentiment and reason. He says that the former refers to passions such as emotions, feelings, appetites and desires. Then he also goes on to categorize the passions as being either calm or violent. And according to him, it is our passions that lead us to action. He also states that passions can neither be true nor false, they're "original existences" (Hume 42 column 2 paragraph 3).

Then he defines reason as, what we can say, are ruminations of the mind, which includes beliefs, thoughts, conclusions of arguments, etc, and declares that these can be true or false. It is with these definitions in mind that Hume goes on to make the statement that passion and reason cannot oppose each other. Because passions are original existences, they are neither reasonable nor unreasonable though they are the dominators of our actions. Reason,

however, can be put to true/false evaluations and are actually derived from our passions.

Reason cannot contradict passion because this would be an internal disagreement of ideas, which are considered as copies of the object which they represent, i. e. the particular passion. He states though that a passion can be called unreasonable if it is founded upon a false supposition or chooses insufficient means for the required end (Hume 43 column 2 paragraph 2), but when one perceives that the supposition is false or the means are insufficient, then the passion yields to reason without any opposition whatsoever (Hume 43 column 2 paragraph 2).

This is because willing an action follows upon the supposition that the action brings about a proposed effect, but as soon as it's found that this supposition is not true there is no more desire to will that action. He also says that reason can have an indirect impact on passion. For example, when one considers jealousy, it can be seen that it's a passion that's based in human belief. Aristotle's view is based on a system of virtues of which, if they're done well, would cause one to lead a happy life. He also states that there are actually two categories of virtues: those that are intellectual and those which are moral.

Intellectual virtues refer to those characteristics that lead one to think or reason well, and demands experience and time. Moral virtues, on the other hand, are those characteristics that perfect our character and are acquired through habit (Aristotle 54 column 1 paragraph 4). These habits are the basis of actions, thus determining what one does in particular situations. Taking a look at how Hume's actions derived from sentiment can be compared with <https://assignbuster.com/hume-morality-is-based-on-sentiment/>

Aristotle's moral virtues that come through habit, the parallels in the theories can be immediately seen.

The same can be said about Aristotle's intellectual virtues bettering one's thinking when compared with Hume's reason being composed of ideas, beliefs and the like. Hume's definitions of sentiment and reason can be seen as analogous to Aristotle's virtues. Seeing that these two classes of virtues too function in wholly different ways to Aristotle, being that they target different aspects of the human, he would agree with Hume's view that passion cannot oppose reason.

The same can be said for Aquinas as was said for Aristotle. Aquinas' statement " Whatever a human being seeks, it seeks under the aspect of the good and if it does not seek it as its perfect good, which is its ultimate end, it must seek it as tending to that perfect good, since any beginning is ordered to its culmination" (McInerny 200 paragraph 3) can be interpreted to mean that all the things attracting the human will are perceived as being good.

He then goes on to say that there is a distinction between the thing sought, which would be the trigger of Hume's passion, and the reason for seeking it, which would be the available facts leading to the belief that the object is worth being sought. Here is where he can be compared to Hume who says that passions are original existences that cannot conflict with reason, which is based in facts as known by the human.

Aquinas also states that humans can be mistaken about the good in a particular instance of action, but if a person is enlightened that " not-A rather than A" contributes to their happiness, they " have the same reason for doing

not-A" that they thought they had for doing " A" (McInerny 201 paragraph 4). He is saying here that whenever the human discovers that something sought for happiness (and thus is thought to be morally good) doesn't fulfill the requirement, the human then has the same reason now for not seeking that thing anymore, whether it be a particular action or object.

This supplements Hume's theory of the only situations where he thinks passions can be thought of as " unreasonable", though said passions would immediately yield to reason when the supposition is perceived to be false (Hume 43 column 2 paragraph 2). Aquinas clarifies this thinking even further when he says an act is not called rational because it's an act of reason, but because it (the action) can be influenced by reason (McInerny 203 paragraph 1).

Unlike many other philosophers, especially the classic ones, Hume disputes the claim that morality is founded on reason. He proposes this isn't possible since " reason is the discovery of truth or falsehood", which is related to ideas and matters of fact (Hume 44 column 1 paragraph 1). Since passions, volitions and actions are original facts and realities which are complete in themselves, and thus cannot reference each other, " it is impossible [for them to] be either contrary or conformable to reason".

Since our actions, which can be evaluated as being morally laudable or blamable, cannot be produced or prevented by reason, moral judgments cannot be derived from reason. To determine what Hume believes morality is derived from, there is a need to define facts and values, and to see how these fit into the spectrum of his conclusion. Facts are things known and can

be described. However, values are subjective feelings about the facts. So there is a huge difference between what each of them refers to.

Using these definitions, Hume argues that there are no facts about good/evil and right/wrong. No matter how you may examine a morally wrong action, at no time can you ever find a matter of fact which you call vice. As long as you consider the object itself, you will never find that which is called vice. It is only when you reflect within that you find a “ sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action”. That thing which arises in you is a fact, but it is an object of feeling, not reason (Hume 44 column 1 paragraph 3).

Basically, Hume is saying that there is no way to say that an action willed by someone can be called factual, since there is nothing true or false about it, but it is the way someone feels about that action within themselves that gives the action moral value. So it can be seen how Hume concludes moral right/wrong is not deducted from reason, but how one feels about things. And human nature comes equipped with the basic sentiments of sympathy or benevolence toward humankind in general, and this is what leads us in making moral judgments.

Hobbes would completely disagree with Hume on his theory that morality is based in sentiment. Just looking at the title of his work tells us that he believes morality is completely based on reason. He believes that humans are inherently selfish creatures and wouldn't be much more than the lower animals if there was no society. He reasons that humans typically have a natural right to everything, even other humans, if they discern it that thing a means of advancing their own survival.

<https://assignbuster.com/hume-morality-is-based-on-sentiment/>

He sees humans as existing in a state of nature where there is only a “ war of everyone against everyone” (Hobbes 5 column 1 paragraph 1) arising from competition, fear and vanity. He posits that in this war, the concepts of right or wrong, justice or injustice, etc. have no place (Hobbes 4 column 1 paragraph 4), and hence there is no morality. However, they need to make peace with each other in an attempt to preserve their own lives. So humans force themselves to make covenants with each other to give up their fundamental right to all things for this security.

Justice is derived from these covenants, and one is said to be unjust when they fail to “ perform their covenants made” (Hobbes 5 column 2 paragraph 3). But there is also no trust among humans, since there is no way to be certain that the others will adhere to their agreement, so a further step is taken to establish what is called a commonwealth, in order to provide a “ coercive power” that will “ compel men equally to the performance of their covenants” through the fear of punishment worse than any benefit they get by breaking the covenant.

It is through this sequence of occurrences that Hobbes arrives at his natural laws which are summed as “ doing to others, as we would be done to you” (Hobbes 6 column 2 paragraph 3) which can be seen as morality. Thus, Hobbes would say instead that morality comes from the formation of covenants and commonwealth, and not sentiment as Hume says. Works Cited Aristotle. “ Nicomachean Ethics” John Arthur and Steven Scalet. *Morality and Moral Controversies: Readings in Moral, Social and Political Philosophy*.

Hobbes, Thomas. "Leviathan: Morality as Rational Advantage." John Arthur and Steven Scalet. *Morality and Moral Controversies: Readings in Moral, Social and Political Philosophy*. Hume, David. "Morality is Based on Sentiment." John Arthur and Steven Scalet. *Morality and Moral Controversies: Readings in Moral, Social and Political Philosophy*. McInerney, Ralph. "Ethics." *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*. pages 200-206.