

A Defense of the Importance of Emotions, Sentiment, and Feelings in Moral Reasoning

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THE source of ethical imperatives is a philosophical question which does not have a single and obvious answer. One perspective is that they originate in the human psyche as feelings or sentiments and can thus be molded and advanced or restrained in whatever way best serves humanity. This stance was adopted by David Hume in his work entitled *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. An opposing view maintains that ethical imperatives are objective, external truths which humans struggle to come to know. This line of thinking has its origin in the Platonic Forms and strongly influenced such later theorists as Thomas Aquinas and Immanuel Kant.

Although the Humean outlook on ethics has been criticized by succeeding philosophers such as Kant, Hume nevertheless addresses an important question fundamental to philosophy: is a system of ethics that is based on sentiment as valid as one based on reason? Emotions play a vital role in most humans' lives, and by barring them from ethical paradigms, have theorists been uncritical about the nature of human beings? This essay will attempt to argue that emotions are at least relevant, if not crucial, to the debate surrounding moral reasoning. By examining two outstanding paradigms of the philosophical inquiry regarding the debate, those of Aristotle and Hume, we will begin to understand the status that human emotions can and should possess in ethics.

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Aristotle's Position

That having a desire to be virtuous is more important than the relative merits of having knowledge in the realization of true virtue is the stance argued by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle approaches the philosophical question of morality by arguing that character—a composition of emotional states and dispositions—forms the heart of ethics, not in contrast to but as a part of rationality. He begins his discussion of virtue by first defining the different parts of the soul. He breaks down the soul into three primary components: nutritive, appetitive, and rational. The nutritive, nonrational part of the soul includes a body's ability to grow, reproduce, and metabolize; it is the principle of life in a thing. Since humans share this capacity of the soul with "everything that is nourished, . . . by nature it has no share in human virtue" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1102b1–14; all Aristotelian references hereafter are from the *Nicomachean Ethics*). In other words, the nutritive component of the human body does not contribute to our overall conception of moral action.

The appetitive part of the soul, which is also nonrational, pertains to the human quality of possessing desires. Additionally, this part of the soul includes feelings and actions. The appetitive part is intriguing because even though it is nonrational, it also "appears . . . to share in reason" (1102b26–27). In other words, Aristotle argues that appetitions can be controlled by reason, a theory which seems to conform easily to human experience. Take, for example, two adults who are angry with one another. If they become tempted to hit each other over their dispute, both are usually able to control the appetite for physical violence by reasoning that it is childish, immature, and unnecessary to hurt one another. This type of thinking (that is, the type whereby reasonable arguments are in conflict with the appetites) provides substantial evidence that a completely rational, nonemotive part of the soul exists. Appropriately called the rational part, the third component of the soul has nothing to do with nutrition or appetites. As one might easily surmise, the rational part includes reason, intelligence, and wisdom.

In accordance with his division of the soul, Aristotle also divides the virtues into categories. He argues that "some virtues are called virtues of thought, other virtues of character" (1103a5–6). The virtues of thought involve pure reasoning, so humans are able to learn them

through rational thought. For example, intellect is a virtue of thought because intelligence is gained through reasoning and learning. Virtues of character, on the other hand, entail using reason to control an appetite or feeling, as opposed to using reason alone. Character virtues, in other words, have both rational and appetitive components. Consequently, virtues of character cannot be acquired through the sole application of reason. Aristotle argues that the only way to acquire virtues of character (for example, generosity and temperance) is through conditioning and habituation.

Aristotle writes that “a state [of character] arises from [the repetition of] similar activities. . . . It is not unimportant, then, to acquire one sort of habit or another, right from our youth; rather, it is very important, indeed all important” (1103b21–25). In other words, Aristotle argues that a truly virtuous or ethical person must be a product of habituation, or conditioning. To grasp the importance that he places on this point is imperative. Just as we learn to play sports, build things, and create things, so it is with the virtues of character. We must practice and do virtuous things time and again, not simply learn them in theory; we must engage in action in order to acquire the virtues of character. When humans first begin to act temperately they are driven by external compulsions such as their parents or older people in society that they admire. By imitating elders repeatedly and through practice, the virtues will eventually become second nature to humans—they will be driven by a person’s own character. In other words, when we begin our moral education as children, our behavior is driven mainly by our parents: virtuous behavior therefore is not natural to us, we must initially learn it. However, as we get older, virtuous action will eventually seem natural to us, and our old behavior patterns will feel wrong to us. People must develop a state, or a constant disposition, that will naturally incline them to be virtuous.

What type of state, then, should our habituation and conditioning specifically lead us to? Aristotle writes that the state “is a mean between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency; and that it is a mean because it aims at the intermediate condition in feelings and actions” (1109a21–23). Virtuous character is a state, not a feeling. A state refers to how humans are disposed to their feelings. Aristotle indicates in the above passage that people are virtuous only when they acquire a state that continually tries to find the mean, or intermediate, in any given

situation. For example, “in feelings of fear and confidence the mean is bravery” (1107b1–2). Of course, the mean will vary from person to person, depending upon each situation. In the Aristotelian sense, humans are characterized as virtuous when they steadily seek the mean.

Understanding why the mean takes on such a vital role in Aristotle’s moral philosophy is crucial. For Aristotle, virtuous actions must be performed from a firm, unchanging state because the character of a person is a much more reliable foundation of morality than mere knowledge of it (1115b10–20). For instance, presumably one knows that cheating and lying are not moral actions. However, in situations in which cheating and lying are ultimately beneficial, one may be very tempted to cheat or lie, despite having knowledge of how wrong it is to engage in such acts. Aristotle would agree. This is precisely why one needs a moral character to be virtuous and why mere knowledge of the virtues is insufficient. Knowledge, in other words, might ultimately end in confusion or inconsistency, while the strength of a virtuous character is relatively unwavering.

The crux of the Aristotelian conception of virtue relies on character development. Simply put, humans must possess a virtuous character in order to behave morally. Additionally, we need an inclination or desire to behave ethically because knowledge alone is not sufficient to motivate us towards virtuous action. Morality therefore results from a disposition or character which is inclined towards ethics. In this sense, our emotions and feelings are an absolutely necessary component of ethical conduct because without the desire to find the mean in a given situation, our knowledge of morality is superfluous. Aristotle sees moral education as a process of conditioning our desires and passions. The virtuous person is not simply one who understands the nature of virtue, but rather is one who *desires* to act virtuously.

However, it is also extremely important to note that Aristotle’s emphasis on conditioning does not exclude the significance that reason and intelligence have in the moral agent. Rather, he maintains that reason is indispensable to morality. As was indicated earlier, virtues of character, such as temperance and generosity, are not the only types. Aristotle additionally claims that humans can also possess virtues of thought, such as wisdom and intelligence. Intellect is cultivated by a good character (and vice versa); moreover, it is absolutely necessary in order to determine the means of acquiring an end (1144b32). Character

virtues, in other words, determine the correct end, or goal (that is, the mean), while intelligence determines how to achieve that goal. For example, if one's character determines that one should become more generous, reason may instruct the individual to donate money to charity. Aristotle writes that "if someone acquires understanding, he improves in his actions; and the state he now has, though still similar [to the natural one], will be virtue to the full extent" (1144b13–14). Moreover, intelligence is choice-worthy in itself (because it is a virtue of the soul), so humans should strive for it, irrespective of its relative importance to character.

Hume's Position

Having thus explained why character (and hence desire and emotion) takes on such an important role and how reason too is critical to understanding Aristotle's ethics, it will be interesting to compare his ideas with Hume's arguments in *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* and *A Treatise on Human Nature*. Hume ultimately maintains that morality is based solely on sentiment, not character, thereby arguing that emotions are paramount, taking on an even more important role in the moral agent than Aristotle argues they do. Like Aristotle, though, Hume ultimately concludes that reason and sentiment both are essential to virtue, but each contributes uniquely to morality.

Hume comments that a fundamental concern in philosophy has been about the "combat of passion and reason" (*Treatise* 413). And in philosophy it is typical "to give the preference to reason, and to assert that men are only so far virtuous as they conform themselves to its dictates" (413). Hume also states that throughout the history of philosophy, most thinkers involved in the study of ethics have been arguing that given the two potential bases of morality (namely, passion or reason), ethics must be based on reason and not sentiment. In order for him to prove that morality is indeed based on sentiment, Hume must argue first that moral distinctions cannot be derived from reason, and second that ethics must therefore be grounded in sentiment.

His arguments supporting his position that reason does not provide us with a foundation for ethics are engaging. In order to understand the premise of his arguments, one must first understand how he defines

reason. He writes in the *Treatise* that reason “comprehends . . . the relation of cause and effect. Here then reasoning takes place to discover this relation” (414). Reason thus intuits universal and necessary connections between two subjects. For example, it is an act of reason when we draw inferences from mathematical axioms. In this sense, reason is confined wholly to matters of fact.

That we cannot find the morality (or lack thereof) within an action is an argument that Hume makes throughout the *Treatise*. No action, in other words, has in itself an inherent moral quality. The supposed vices or virtues of an act cannot be intuited by reason, because they are not matters of fact (*Treatise* 468). Reason consists of the knowledge of specific facts and relationships, but it does not involve making moral distinctions. For precisely this fact, morality must ultimately be based on sentiment. Hume sums up this point in the *Enquiry* by stating that “*reason* instructs us in the several tendencies of actions, and *humanity* [human sympathy] makes a distinction in favour to those which are useful and beneficial [those which are moral]” (83). Hume argues that there is no characteristic of morality or immorality in an action. When humans say that an action is immoral, they actually are speaking about the emotional response that the action evokes. The action itself does not have an immoral characteristic that reason detects.

Analyzing a specific example may help to illustrate Hume’s argument. Take, for instance, the act of murder. Reason deciphers all the facts of the action, but it will not discern whether the action is immoral. No reasonable aspect of the action will reveal its morality, so when we judge the act immoral, we are actually referring to our emotional response to the deed. Hume writes in the *Enquiry* that “the vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflection into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action” (122).

In a separate argument, Hume explains why humans often value moral behavior in others. Because Hume bases his moral standards on their usefulness to the moral agent or their public utility, humans, he argues, tend to value what promotes the good of others. As he states in the *Enquiry*, “every thing, which contributes to the happiness of society, recommends itself directly to our approbation and good-will” (43). Humans take an interest in the good of others because we all have interest in the good of society. The existence of such feelings of goodwill

toward others provides supportive evidence that our morality can at least potentially be based on sentiment and not reason.

Hume argues that we all have a kind of natural propensity to the good of humanity. The human sympathy that we feel toward others is a natural state. Charities provide an excellent illustration of human sentiment. Some of us feel sensitive to the needs of others who are less fortunate and consequently help provide food and shelter to the poor. As Hume states:

In some cases, [everyone] must unavoidably feel *some* propensity to the good of mankind, and make it an object of choice, if everything else be equal. Would any man, who is walking along, tread as willingly on another's gouty toes, whom he has no quarrel with, as on the hard flint and pavement? . . . We surely take into consideration the happiness and misery of others. (*Enquiry* 45)

To sum up, Hume contends that humans are inherently sympathetic to others in society. The amount of sympathy may vary from person to person (and it clearly does vary), but nevertheless it exists in each of us. Sympathy is something of which human beings are capable—sometimes we act for the welfare of others without regard to the advantage we might gain. There may thus be a very direct connection between sympathetic tendencies and many of our morally commendable, unselfish actions.

Furthermore, it is argued that human beings necessarily must have feelings of natural sympathy in order for there to be such a thing as kindness. In "The Ethical Importance of Sympathy," H. B. Acton suggests that although "purely rational" beings (as opposed to merely sentient creatures) could be instructed as to how to improve the conditions of sentient beings, they would not thereby be *helping* them, since they would be unable to understand why it was that the sentient beings needed help. He states that the attitude that purely rational people would exhibit "toward other people's hunger and thirst, for example, would be more like that of a mechanic towards an engine that was running out of fuel than [that] of a man towards another man in trouble" (62). Without sympathetic motivation to help others, such a person would need a reason for helping them. No evident reason for helping others occurs in situations when other people do not actually *need* help, but in which help would be valuable. The "unfeeling rational

being," Acton points out, "could only be a parasite helper" (63). Thus not only are human beings motivated by sympathy, but also no authentically kind acts could exist if humans were not naturally sympathetic toward one another.

Hume, like Aristotle, also concludes that reason plays an essential part in ethics because it is needed to tell us that "certain types of character or conduct tend to produce happiness or misery in the agent or in other men" (Broad 106–07). When situations are complex and the consequences are mixed, reason is needed to analyze the situation and to estimate the balance of happiness or misery which is likely to result. Reason then may not be sufficient to account for moral reasoning, but it is vital to the Humean conception of moral behavior. In order to know which course of action will ultimately be beneficial to oneself or society, reason is often employed. So, while Hume and Aristotle both argue that reason is essential to morality, they disagree about its function. The former argues that reason is needed to direct our actions to those which produce the most happiness; the latter maintains that reason is necessary to determine the means of acquiring an end.

Criticism

Disagreement also exists in reference to the relative success of each philosopher's arguments. Hume's arguments, in particular, have met with much criticism. As noted earlier, Kant disagrees with both Aristotle and Hume. He argues in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* that morality must be grounded solely in reason and that character and human sentiment have nothing at all to do with truly moral behavior. Kant maintains that morality cannot be based on character and sympathy because these are not in full control of the agent; they fluctuate and are relative (93). Furthermore, feelings such as sentiment and sympathy are totally subjective and can be easily overcome. Some people feel an abundance of sympathy, while some feel hardly any at all. Moreover, when morality is based on feelings, it becomes impossible to make morality obligatory to the individual. For example, criminals are people who supposedly feel less sympathetic toward others, but no one can make them feel more sympathy than they naturally have. It is absurd to argue that we can teach others how to have feelings or try to make others feel something that by nature they do not.

Kant raises an interesting issue here, and Anne Thomson also speaks to it in her article entitled "Emotional Origins of Morality—A Sketch." The point is that sympathy is not impartial. Thomson observes that "we tend to have a greater concern for the welfare of those we love than for the welfare of those with whom we have a less close relationship" (Thomson 203). Therefore, she writes, we will turn to our senses of justice when conflicts arise, rather than depend on our feelings of sentiment. Hume himself admits in the *Enquiry* that according to his theory of moral reasoning, it is indeed possible that "a sensible knave . . . may think, that an act of iniquity or infidelity will make a considerable addition to his fortune, without causing any considerable breach in the social union" (*Enquiry* 81). However, while Kant and Thomson agree that this strong objection may provide good evidence of the limits of Hume's moral system, Hume maintains that no one can carry on this type of behavior for long, because eventually all of the trickery will "catch up" with the individual. Inevitably, a person will feel the importance of "inward peace of mind, consciousness of integrity, [and] a satisfactory review of [his] own conduct" that arises only from moral behavior (*Enquiry* 82). On this point, most would agree that at best Hume provides only a thoroughly weak defense of his position.

Another compelling counterargument to Hume that Thomson explores begins with the observation that "sympathy does not embody value judgments about the enterprises of those with whom we sympathize" (Thomson 203). In other words, she criticizes Hume's position which takes for granted that human sentiment and sympathy will always be directed toward the promotion of private or public utility. One could, however, easily sympathize with someone's vengeful feelings, but the decision "as to whether one should help the person to seek vengeance would require more than the emotion of sympathy" (Thomson 203). Clearly, then, it is possible to imagine having misdirected feelings of sympathy, but feelings of sympathy nonetheless. In this case, could Hume deny that sentiment itself may not always be sufficient foundation for moral reasoning?

Conclusions

Sympathy, as Hume argues, probably could not be the medium of all moral judgment (for the reasons stated above), but it can be viewed

for good reason as a necessary characteristic of beings who make critical moral judgments. One way to reconcile the apparent problems of incorporating sentiment into an ethical theory may be to bring in the notion of "practical sympathy," which can be seen as an essential characteristic of the moral being. Practical sympathy is a feeling that is guided by humans' faculty of reason. Humans should, in other words, act according to feelings of sympathy when they are reasonably appropriate (for example, acting on feelings of sympathy toward a person seeking out vengeance would not be appropriate). Another example that Thomson calls upon points out that "it seems inconceivable that beings could exist who reacted critically towards the perpetrators of harm and yet remained insensitive to the distress of victims of harm" (Thomson 204). Feelings are essential to morality as such; unless we act out of desire or feeling, we cannot be acting morally. When rationalists argue that mere recognition of ethical characteristics by reason is sufficient to account for moral feeling and moral action, they are wrong, and Hume's and Aristotle's arguments show why they are wrong. Emotions must be incorporated into an ethical theory.

Perhaps, then, the best ethical theory must argue for the type of intermediate perspective that Aristotle puts forth. This view recognizes that although emotion is unavoidable, it can inordinately influence reason. Thus, while emotion can provide us with an intuitive perception of actions that seem morally repugnant (as with Hume's feelings of sympathy), we should nevertheless aim at conditioning other types of emotion that will work against the (sometimes) quite subtle feelings of sentiment. Aristotle also gives adequate importance to reason because while he maintains that emotion is vital to ethics, reason is just as crucial to the formation of the moral agent. Humans need to be able to justify and mitigate ethics with rational and coherent arguments in order to find common ground. Employing rational thinking in conversations about ethics is absolutely critical to developing laws and standards among individuals because reason is exponentially less subjective than sentiment.

As Robert Solomon writes, imagining

aesthetics without enthusiasm for art or philosophy of religion without faith or feeling can be the most pointless of subjects. But it is ethics and social philosophy that provide us with our most

embarrassing examples; how could these subjects of human behavior . . . have turned out to be so uninvolved in human behavior? (Soloman 45)

Aristotle's theory of morality works well precisely because it acknowledges that emotions are a fundamental part of the human experience and that trying to exclude them from ethics is unnecessary and indeed uncritical. It is indeed a rather futile exercise to totally exclude emotions from the moral agent. We should attempt to condition our emotions and use them to promote the good life. Countless have demonstrated that a place for emotions in ethics exists, and we have for too long tried to do without them.

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