

## Lecture Nine: Ethics and God

### 1. Recap

We've been exploring Hume's science of man – begin philosophical investigations by looking at how human beings actually work. Remember how this combines **naturalism** with **empiricism** and generates a **mitigated scepticism**.

Let's continue extending our understanding of this project by looking at how Hume tackles two areas of general and philosophical interest: ethics and philosophy of religion.

### 2. Morality and the Passions

Hume uses his conclusions about how the human mind works to generate some interesting results about ethics. This idea that philosophy of mind can be relevant to the study of ethics is another of Hume's great contributions (you can see this as part of Hume's naturalism).

Hume uses Book 2 to summarise his philosophy of mind – all mental states are **impressions** or **ideas**. There are different types of impression – impressions of sensations are **original impressions**. We also have **secondary impressions** of reflection – impressions prompted by the original impressions. Think of a desire to move away from a flame prompted by the original impression of flame.

Hume calls secondary impression **passions**. They include motives, emotions and feelings prompted by original impressions. We can further distinguish between **cool** and **violent** passions: violent are strongly felt, cool not so strongly. The cool passions include moral sense, aesthetic sense, benevolence. Violent passions are things like love, hate, grief, joy, embarrassment.

Just because the violent passions are more strongly felt doesn't mean they are always attacked on – our cool, calm desire for goodness in general can (when things are going well) trump our more violent desires.

**Fellow-feeling** (sympathy) is a mechanism by which we can catch other people's passions. We see the effects of a passion in someone's behaviour and this prompts an **idea** of that passion in us. We then come to associate that idea of the passion with ourselves, and it grows in feeling until it rises to the level of an **impression** – we end of feeling another's passion. This is a natural faculty that's useful for human beings to have (vital for acting well).

### 3. Moral Rationalism vs. Sentimentalism

According to **rationalism**, moral principles (and distinctions between good and bad) can be derived from *reason*. This is supposed to explain the **categorical** nature of moral demands (e.g. Kant, Samuel Clarke, William Wollaston, Richard Price). On this view we are obligated by moral principles by our **rational nature**.

**Sentimentalism**, in contrast, starts with the thought that human beings are capable of feeling benevolent. We also have **sentiments** in favour of this feeling. We aren't just reasoning beings.

This is the foundation of morality (Earl of Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson, Adam Smith, Hume).

In Hume's terms: sentimentalists claim we distinguish between good and bad by means of our **impressions**. What makes something good or bad is that we respond to it with a certain impression of reflection (**passion**).

#### 4. Arguments against Rationalism

**Argument from Motivation:** moral judgements necessarily motivate us to act (**moral judgement internalism**): 'men are often govern'd by their duties, and deter'd by some actions by the opinion of injustice, and impell'd to others by that of obligation (3.1.1).'

However, reason alone cannot motivate us – it can only provide information about what sort of situation we are in, not what we should do about it. Motivation only comes on the scene when we want something (have a certain passion): "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them (T 2.3.3)."

Therefore: "Since morals, therefore, have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows that they cannot be deriv'd from reason; and that because reason alone, as we have already prov'd, 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 reason (3.1.1)."

The way to resist this argument would be to either have a more expansive view of what reason is capable of (e.g. Kant). Or resist **moral judgement internalism** (some modern realists – Brink, Railton).

**Argument from Truth and Falsehood:** passions are impressions, and thus not copies of anything. They are not capable of being true or false. Thus moral judgements aren't either.

To put things in modern terms: moral judgements express desires. Desires have a world-to-mind **direction of fit** unlike beliefs, which have a mind-to-world **direction of fit**. Desires (passions) don't represent anything, so they can't be true or false.

Hume concludes from this that passions cannot be reasonable or unreasonable: "Where a passion is neither founded on false supposition, nor chuses means insufficient for the end, the understanding can neither justify nor condemn it. 'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger."

#### **Ought vs Is**

Hume observes that rationalists, in their moral arguments, move from statements about what is the case to statements about what ought to be (e.g. God *is* superior to us; therefore we *ought* to worship them). This, Hume argues, is logically invalid: "For as this ought... expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it shou'd be observ'd and explain'd; and at the same time that a reason should be given; for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it (3.1.1)."

## 5. Hume's Sentimentalism

If morality is not based on reason, Hume concludes, it must be based on passions. Distinctions between good and bad are made by felt sentiments.

Moral sentiments are particular pains and pleasures of reflection – we have a particular type of agreeable secondary impression (passion) when we observe something good. But can anything which excites pleasure count as morally good, then?

No – moral approbation (approval) is a distinctive type of pleasure we get when we take a disinterested, sympathetic view of things:

[It] is impossible we could ever converse together on reasonable terms, were each of us to consider characters and persons, only as they appear from his peculiar point of view. In order, therefore, to prevent these continual contradictions, and arrive at a more stable judgment of things, we fix on some steady and general points of view; and always in our thoughts place ourselves in them, whatever may be our present situation (T 3.3.1).

What allows us to engage in this general evaluation of the character of others is the faculty of sympathy I talked through earlier.

What if we encountered a sensible knave? We would not be able to reason them out of their bad habits, but we can hope to train people to be unknaveish.

## 6. Philosophy of Religion

At Hume's time it was common to distinguish between: **natural religion** - where we attempt to justify religious beliefs using arguments, and; **revealed religion** – which consists of particular religious beliefs justified through testimony transmitted via scripture.

Hume wants to argue that natural religion fails – we cannot give convincing arguments to believe in God. And, in addition, it's a bad idea to rely on revelation.

## 7. The Natural History of Religion

This is an historical, empirical explanation of how monotheistic religion developed. We begin in polytheism and idol worship as a way of coping with our hopes and fears –we desire happiness and fear death, so we institute more powerful beings that have some concern for us.

This polytheism converts into monotheism through a process of abstraction – we take the most important of our gods, and start to ignore any negative features we attribute to them, ending up with an all-powerful God.

Hume's description of how we come to believe in a God does not by itself undermine religious belief – but it does give us pause. If this is truly how we came to believe in God, then we might worry that that belief is **unjustified**. The process Hume describes doesn't seem likely to be reliable.

## 8. "Of Miracles"

Why would revelation constitute evidence of God? In scripture we see reports of *miracles* – violations of the laws of nature. This is evidence for God intervening in nature to make the miracle happen (e.g. raising the dead, walking on water). Is it sensible to rely on this reported testimony?

Some read Hume as arguing that violations of the laws of nature (**miracles**) are metaphysically impossible. But this would be a strange thing for him to do – for Hume only the incoherent/inconceivable is impossible.

Instead, he is saying that if your only evidence for a miracle occurring is testimony, it would be foolish to believe in the miracle. You've had lots of evidence that law operates according to laws, and what's more likely: God suspends these laws, or someone made a mistake/hallucinated/lie?

We know that people make mistakes all the time, it's not unexpected. You would need pretty strong testimony to overcome your belief in the laws of nature, and it looks like the testimony we have is not strong enough to do that ("A wise man proportions his belief to the evidence.").

## 9. The Dialogues

Here we see a dialogue between Philo (a religious sceptic); Demea (defends *a priori* arguments for God); Cleanthes (defends *a posteriori* arguments for God).

**Demea** argues in two ways: **ontological argument** and a **first cause** argument. The first Hume dispenses with quickly by noting that:

Nothing is demonstrable, unless the contrary implies a contradiction. Nothing, that is distinctly conceivable, implies a contradiction. Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent. There is no being, therefore, whose non-existence implies a contradiction. Consequently, there is no being, whose existence is demonstrable.

The second argument goes like this: everything that exists has a cause, so either there is an infinite chain of causes, or there must be some necessarily existent first cause. The idea of an infinite chain of causes is absurd, for we can still ask why we have that chain of causes.

Hume has already taken this argument down in Treatise 1.3.3: Why think that everything has a cause? Answer: because if something didn't have a cause it would cause itself, or be caused by nothing, and this is absurd.

Hume's reply: this is stupid. If something is uncaused that doesn't mean it caused itself, it's just uncaused. So we have no reason on the table yet to believe that everything is caused.

In the *Dialogues* Philo assumes that everything has a cause, and argues against Demea in a different way – why not think that the whole universe is the necessary existent?

**Cleanthes** offers us an argument from design: Contemplate the whole and every part of it. You will find it to be one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines... All

these various machines are adjusted to each other with an accuracy, which ravishes with admiration all men, who have ever contemplated them. The curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the production of human contrivance... Since therefore the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble; that the Author of Nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man. ... By this argument a posteriori, and by this argument alone, do we prove at once the existence of a Deity and his similarity to human mind and intelligence?

Hume has a lot of fun ripping into this argument (really, it's quite funny and well worth reading). The basic idea is that inferences from causes to effects are based on past experience. But we only have experience of one universe, so how can we infer anything about the nature of its cause?

Furthermore: why not posit a team of designers (that makes more sense of the world we are in); why say the universe is like a machine that requires designing – isn't it more like a plant that grows by itself?

Finally, the world contains a great deal of suffering. If we can infer to the nature of the designer from the design, then we know that whatever designed this world is hardly worth worshipping.

#### 10. What did Hume Believe?

At the end of the *Dialogues* Philo (representing Hume) seems to take all of it back:

“A purpose, an intention, a design, strikes every where the most careless, the most stupid thinker; and no man can be so hardened, as at all times to reject it... Thus all the science almost lead us insensibly to acknowledge a first intelligent Author.”

Why does Hume do this? What's the best interpretation of why he says this?

First interpretation: Hume is scared of the consequences for him of expressing atheism. But he has the *Dialogues* published posthumously.

Second interpretation: Hume's taking the mickey. He is often sarcastic or ironical (see, for example, his letter to Adam Smith reporting on the success of Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*).

Third interpretation: Hume actually has no concern with proving the existence or non-existence of a deity. He doubts reason can do either such thing. Instead he's concerned with what practical consequences follow from that conclusion – he is sceptical about *that*.

People have taken the existence of a God to be consoling of life's sufferings, to offer instructions for how to behave, etc. But if all we conclude from philosophical argument that there is some creator, then none of this actually follows.

While we argue from the course of nature, and infer a particular intelligent cause, which first bestowed, and still preserves order in the universe, we embrace a principle, which is both uncertain and useless. It is uncertain; because the subject lies entirely beyond the reach of human experience. It is useless; because our knowledge of this cause being derived entirely from the course of nature, we can never, according to the rules of just reasoning, return

back from the cause with any new inference, or making additions to the common and experienced course of nature, establish any new principles of conduct and behaviour.

Religion acts as a loudspeaker, amplifying our pre-existing concerns. And sometimes this can get very nasty:

Factions, civil wars, persecutions, subversions of government, oppression, slavery; these are the dismal consequences which always attend its prevalency over the minds of men. If the religious spirit be ever mentioned in any historical narration, we are sure to meet afterwards with a detail of the miseries which attend it. And no period of time can be happier or more prosperous, than those in which it is never regarded or heard of.

With blind superstition comes obedience to priests that goes against ordinary and natural morality.

What Hume is most concerned to do is undermine the thought that anything about how we should act follows from the existence/non-existence of God.

He is of course a realist about how effective his arguments will be on this score.

## 11. Summary

We've done some tough work getting to grips with what the British empiricists were trying to do. They are investigating the world in a new spirit, inspired by the new experimental sciences, turning away from old dogmas.

This reaches its heights in Hume's project of the science of man. We may disagree with (some of) his substantive philosophical conclusions, but the idea of turning our attention to how humans reason and act is a good one.

We've seen the sometimes radical conclusions that Hume draws from this – naturalism plus empiricism is a potent mix. You now have a good grounding to understand how Kant wants to complete this 'Copernican revolution'.

Over Christmas, it would be a good idea to look over the texts we've covered. Come and see me next term if you have problems to work through.

To prep for next term, Johannes recommends:

Visit the HMP II 2016 course material website.

(a) Get a copy of the *Critique of Pure Reason*

(b) read the Preface to the Second Edition (esp. B xiv – B xxxi) and the Introduction to the Second Edition (B 1 – B 30)

(c) Also look G.Dicker, *Kant's Theory of Knowledge* ch 1 (available on the webpage under week 1).

For now, thanks, and have a good holiday.