

Virtue, Religion, and the End of Life

Introduction

Two recurring criticisms of markets, trade, and the kind of commercial society that Hume advocated are, first, that they focus only on material gain, and, second, that they treat all preferences and desires as equally good, equally important, and thus equally deserving of respect. As critics point out, some preferences and desires are not, in fact, good; some are downright bad. Increasing wealth may enable people to satisfy more of their preferences and desires, but if some of those preferences and desires are themselves bad—especially those that focus only on material goods, to the exclusion of other, higher goods—why should we consider it a good thing to enable people to satisfy ever more of them? Does the Humean commercial society require us to treat all preferences and desires as equally good? Does it require us to believe that satisfying all preferences and desires should be our goal?

Hume did not believe that all preferences and desires are good. In fact, he drew clear distinctions between virtues, on the one hand, and vices, on the other. He went so far as to claim that people “who have denied the reality of moral distinctions”—that is, people who claim a moral equality among all preferences and desires, thereby eliminating any moral distinction among them—“may be ranked among the disingenuous disputants,” because, he claimed, no one “could ever seriously believe, that all characters and actions were alike entitled to the affection and regard of everyone” (E2 1.133: 169–70). The question for Hume, then, was not whether there are moral virtues and moral vices, but,

instead, how we discern them and what their origin is—and what institutions support and encourage them.

Hume discussed the origin and nature of virtues that he put under the heading of “benevolence,” which include “affections” that are “*sociable, good-natured, humane, merciful, grateful, friendly, generous, beneficent*, or their equivalents” (E2 2.1.139: 176). He also discussed the virtue of justice, which, as we saw in chapter 3, he connected to the ideas of property and right, and which he believed arise because of the necessary role they play in the creation, order, and maintenance of civil society: “Hence the ideas of property become necessary in all civil society: Hence justice derives its usefulness to the public: And hence alone arises its merit and moral obligation” (E2 3.1.149: 188).

According to Hume, the basis of the virtue of justice, as well as the primary basis for the rest of the virtues, is utility: they count as virtues insofar as they are useful and promote our interests. But could Hume avoid the criticism that it amounts to treating all preferences and desires as equally valuable? If utility is the only thing that matters, and if the satisfaction of any (or all) preferences and desires increases utility, then it would seem to follow that the goal is to satisfy any and all preferences and desires, whatever their nature. If a main argument for commercial society is the increasing resources it generates to satisfy people’s preferences and desires, perhaps, then, so much the worse for the case for commercial society.

Hume thought his argument is not susceptible to this criticism. In this chapter, we look at how his argument could, at least according to him, avoid the criticism. Doing so will give us occasion to consider some of Hume’s claims about religion and the ultimate goals or ends of human life.

What makes virtues virtues?

For all the virtues Hume classed under the heading of “benevolence”—which include “beneficence and humanity, friendship and gratitude, natural affection and public spirit” (E2 2.1.140: 178)—he argues that utility “forms, at least, a *part* of their merit, and is one source of that approbation and regard so universally paid to them” (E2 2.2.141: 179). Many in Hume’s time, as today, believed that ascribing a utilitarian element to the virtues debased them. On the contrary, Hume argued, “what praise is implied in the simple epithet *useful*!” (E2 2.2.142:

179). Creating benefit to oneself or others, or to one's society or country, are, after all, good things—hence “useful”—and it would be a mistake to discount them because they are beneficial or useful. The benevolent virtues of charity, generosity, humanity, and so on all conduce to the “happiness of mankind, the order of society, the harmony of families, [and] the mutual support of friends” (E2 2.2.144: 181–2), all of which are useful and hence good things.

If utility is only a part of the reason we approve of these virtues, however, what is the rest of the reason? Hume does not explicitly say. The remainder of his discussion of what makes virtues virtues relates to their utility and to why utility pleases us and leads to our approbation. Justice, for example, is praised and approved of solely because of its “beneficial consequences” (E2 3.1.145: 183), that is, because of its utility. The virtues of keeping one's word, of honoring one's contracts, of fidelity in a marriage, of respecting others' privacy, of fulfilling one's obligations (to one's friends, one's family, one's children, and so on), were all defended by Hume ultimately on utilitarian grounds.¹³

In his discussion of “Why Utility Pleases,”¹⁴ Hume argued that as a matter of logic, for something to be useful it must be in “somebody's interest” (E2 5.1.177: 218). Most of the virtues of which we approve relate either directly to some benefit to ourselves (like prudence, temperance, and perseverance, for example¹⁵), or to others (like justice, generosity, or bravery in war). Sometimes, however, we approve of “virtuous actions, performed in very distant ages and remote countries; where the utmost subtilty of imagination would not discover any appearance of self-interest, or find any connexion of our present happiness and security with events so widely separated from us” (E2 5.1.175: 215–16). In such cases, Hume argued that we approve of the distant virtuous actions because they serve “the interest of those, who are served by the character or action approved of” (E2 5.1.177: 218). That meant, for Hume, that we have a concern for others' interests, even those with whom we ourselves have no connection, from which he concludes “that everything, which contributes to the happiness of society, recommends itself directly to our approbation and good-will” (E2 5.2.178: 219). He elaborated: “We surely take into consideration the happiness and misery of others, in weighing the several motives of action”

13 See section 4 of the second *Enquiry* (E2: 205–211).

14 See section 5 of the second *Enquiry* (E2: 212–32).

15 See E2 6.1.199: 242–43 for a longer list.

(E2 5.2.183: 226), and we do so, Hume maintained, by a natural “sympathy” we have for our fellow creatures (E2 5.2.186: 229).

Adam Smith would develop the idea of a natural sympathy to a much greater extent in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*,¹⁶ but Hume’s idea seemed to be that it is one of the fixed features of human psychology that we can be moved by sympathy, or empathy, for others. Thus, when an action or behaviour positively affects others, our sympathy explains why we are “pleased” by the utility of the action or the behaviour’s effects on others, and thus explains why we approve of the action or behaviour. Once again, Hume returned to the central importance of utility: “It appears to be a matter of fact, that the circumstance of *utility*, in all subjects is a source of praise and approbation” (E2 5.2.188: 231). But Hume’s “utility” is of quite wide scope: it can pertain directly to ourselves, directly to others, directly or indirectly to society, or directly or indirectly to all of humanity.

In response, then, to the question of whether a Humean argument for markets, trade, and commercial society pertained only to material commodities, and whether it allowed any scope for a conception of moral virtue, we can now give an answer. What commercial society, and the liberal government that underpins it, allows, according to Hume, is the opportunity for each individual to pursue activities, collaborations, and partnerships with others that lead to mutual benefit. He thus endorsed a utilitarian argument to support the case for a commercial society. That did not mean, however, that Hume could not distinguish between virtues and vices, or between what we might think of as higher and lower ends, goals, or purposes. Whether an action or behaviour is conducive to utility—one’s own, that of others, or even that of all humanity—is, ultimately, an empirical question, and thus a question of fact. So, Hume’s argument was that virtues pertain to actual utility, to actual benefit along all these margins or at all these levels; whether something actually benefits a person or society or humanity can be ascertained empirically, and to the extent that it does, it will be actual utility that underlies it.

To take one of Hume’s examples, sobriety is a virtue (E2 6.1.199: 243). We can know it is a virtue not because we need a metaphysical argument or because we consulted God’s will, however, but because lack of sobriety is

16 For discussion, see Otteson, 2018, ch. 2.

destructive of utility, either of the individual or of others or both. For Hume, then, utility anchors and provides objective standards for virtue, and because it underlies moral values, it cannot be separated from morality. And neither can the argument for commercial society: for Hume, its utilitarian benefits included moral benefits as well.

Religion

During his lifetime, Hume was taken to be a skeptic, which was believed to be tantamount to being an atheist. There were several reasons he was viewed this way. First and most obviously, he called himself a skeptic. Second, his discussion of the powers of human knowledge limited our ability to know about matters of fact and existence to only those things we could observe—which would seem to preclude us from knowing anything about God. Third, in 1757 he published an extended essay called *The Natural History of Religion*, which, while initially claiming that “no rational enquirer can” deny that the “whole frame of nature bespeaks an Intelligent Author,” goes on to suggest that the particulars of people’s religious beliefs vary depending largely on historical and contingent circumstances, not on the apprehension of any universal reality.

In the last few years of his life, Hume also worked on an extended essay he had first composed in the 1750s called *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. He did not publish it during his lifetime, however; it first appeared the year after his death, in 1777. The reasons he chose not to publish it while he was alive probably relate to the outcry he knew it would cause. For in the *Dialogues*, one of the characters, Philo, systematically dismantles one of the main arguments widely held then, and today, to support belief in the existence of God, namely, the Design Argument. Hume put the Design Argument in the words of another of the main characters of the *Dialogues*, Cleanthes:

Look round the world: Contemplate the whole and every part of it: You will find it to be nothing but one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines, which again admit of subdivisions to a degree beyond what human senses and faculties can trace and explain. All these various machines, and even their most minute parts, are adjusted to each other with an accuracy which ravishes into 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 productions of human contrivance; of human design, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. Since therefore the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble, and that the Author of Nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man, though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work which he has executed. 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. (D pt. 2: 15)

This argument purports to provide empirical evidence for the existence of God. If we went to a remote island, and found a watch on the beach, we would infer that a human being had been there, since watches do not spontaneously occur in nature; the design of the watch implies a watchmaker with rationality, that is, a human being. Similarly, the design evident in the world implies a Worldmaker with rationality, that is, God.

The character Philo in the *Dialogues*, however, has a very different take on the Design Argument:

If we survey a ship, what an exalted idea we must form of the ingenuity of the carpenter who framed so complicated, useful, and beautiful a machine? And what surprise must we feel when we find him a stupid mechanic who imitated others, and copied an art which, through a long succession of ages, after multiplied trials, mistakes, corrections, deliberations, and controversies, had been gradually improving? Many worlds might have been botched and bungled, throughout an eternity, ere this system was struck out; much labor lost; many fruitless trials made; and a slow but continued improvement carried on during infinite ages in the art of world-making. (D pt. 5: 36)

Philo's argument, in other words, is that looking at the design of the world can lead us to very different conclusions than a belief in an omniscient and omnipotent God. Thus, the Design Argument cannot take us very far, and certainly not

to any confidence in the existence of the Christian God in particular. A person looking at the world, Hume argued, “is able, perhaps, to assert or conjecture that the universe sometime arose from something like design: But beyond that position he cannot ascertain one single circumstance, and is left afterwards to fix every point of his theology by the utmost license of fancy and hypothesis” (D pt. 5: 37).

Subsequent generations of philosophers have taken Philo’s argument to be a decisive refutation of Cleanthes’s; they thus conclude that the character Philo must represent Hume’s own views, from which they conclude that Hume did not believe there were any *a posteriori* arguments or empirical evidence that proved God’s existence—and none proving the existence of the Christian God in particular.

That does not prove that Hume was an atheist, however. He had his doubts about the Design Argument’s ability to prove God’s existence, and he also had many criticisms to register about the corruption and malfeasance of organized religions, the Roman Catholic Church chief among them.¹⁷ But he also repeatedly expressed his own belief in God. He wrote, for example, that “*superstition* and *enthusiasm*” were the chief “corruptions of true religion” (EMPL: 73); but that implies he believes there *is* a true religion. He also wrote: “There surely is a being who presides over the universe; and who, with infinite wisdom and power, has reduced the jarring elements into just order and proportion” (EMPL: 154). He even went so far as to endorse, in his essay “The Platonist” (published in 1742), his own version of the Design Argument: “Can we then be so blind as not to discover an intelligence and a design in the exquisite and most stupendous contrivance of the universe? Can we be so stupid as not to feel the warmest raptures of worship and adoration, upon the contemplation of that intelligent Being, so infinitely good and wise?” (EMPL: 158). The proper contemplation of this Being, Hume suggests, “can never be finished in time” but instead “will be the business of an eternity” (EMPL: 158).

Now, “The Platonist” was written about a decade before the first draft of the *Dialogues* and was published 35 years before the *Dialogues* were published, so perhaps Hume changed his mind in the interval. It is impossible to know for certain. In any case, Hume’s relationship to theism and Christianity

¹⁷ See, for example, EMPL: 75–6.

is more complex than simply “yes” or “no.” But it is clear that Hume was not an enthusiast of religion the way many or most of his contemporaries were, and he was willing to raise some perhaps uncomfortable (for the time) questions about the sources of our religious beliefs and about how much confidence we could reasonably have in them. Questions like those perhaps befit a philosopher of a skeptical bent, if not an evangelical or proselytizing theist. But that is emblematic of Hume’s entire personality: as a skeptical philosopher, he wanted to pursue “our sifting humour” and keep asking the rational basis of our beliefs until we reached the limits of our meager capacities (E1 4.1.28: 32). And yet he allowed that “Abstruse thought and profound researches” nature would “severely punish, by the pensive melancholy which they introduce, by the endless uncertainty in which they involve you, and by the cold reception which your pretended discoveries shall meet with, when communicated” (E1 1.4: 9). In light of that, Hume counseled, “Be a philosopher; but, amidst all your philosophy, be still a man” (E1 1.4: 9).

According to Hume, then, there are virtues and there are vices, but their nature is based on contingent, empirical utility. Whether the virtues that humanity discovers and constructs also comport with God’s will, Hume seemed to believe our limited rational capacities are not given to know. That seems to suggest that if we are to be religious, we must simply have faith, and not look to empirical observations for evidence or proof. Perhaps Hume’s “true religion,” then, is fideism, or mere faith. As Hume concluded in the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*: “A person, seasoned with a just sense of the imperfections of natural reason, will fly to revealed truth with the greatest avidity”; indeed, “To be a philosophical skeptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing *Christian*” (D pt. 12: 89).