Religion and Secularism

Edited by Patrick Murray and Ronald A. Simkins

4. Hume as Secularizer

An Assessment of Hume's Secular Moral Philosophy

Kirstin Carlson McPherson, Independent Scholar

Abstract

This paper explores Hume's attempt to provide a secular account of ethics that does not depend upon any particular answer to larger metaphysical questions. I show that Hume is motivated to provide such an ethic, in part, in order to reduce the harms he thought to accompany religious morality. I argue, however, that Hume's moral philosophy cannot have the independence from metaphysics that it purports to have and that there are also certain dangers for flourishing that attend his version of secular ethics, which must be taken into account if we are to seek to avoid them.

Keywords: religion, secularism, Hume, ethics, metaphysics

Introduction

"The Church is my Aversion" (NL #10, letter to Henry Home, end of June, 1747).[1]

"The worst speculative Sceptic ever I knew, was a much better Man than the best superstitious Devotee and Bigot" (LDH #72, letter to Gilbert Elliot of Minto, March 10, 1751).

"I believe I shall write no more History; but proceed directly to attack the Lord's Prayer & the ten Commandments & the single Cat[echism]; and to recommend Suicide & Adultery: And so persist, till it shall please the Lord to take me to himself" (NL #25, letter to Captain James Edmonstoune of Newton, Sept. 29, 1757).

David Hume, arguably the first to develop a thorough account of ethics that does not appeal to or depend upon a transcendent moral source,[2] is a key figure in any account of secularization in the West, and his secular, non-teleological account of virtue is still importantly influential in contemporary moral philosophy. It is well-known that Hume sought to develop a moral philosophy that did not rely upon our answers to larger metaphysical questions for *epistemological* reasons: he thought that seeking to answer these questions requires us to venture far beyond the limits of human experience and reason. But he also was *practically* motivated to provide a secular account of morality that could help curb what he thought to be the dangers inherent to an ethic informed by revealed religion (and his main target was Christian morality).[3]

---

[1] I will use the following abbreviations for Hume's primary texts:

T = *A Treatise of Human Nature* (also referred to as the *Treatise*) (2000)
EHU = *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (also referred to as the *First Enquiry*) (1975)
EPM = *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (also referred to as the *Second Enquiry*) (1975)
NHR = *The Natural History of Religion* (1993)
D = *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1993)
ESY = *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literaryi* (1985)
LDH = *The Letters of David Hume* (1983)
NL = *New Letters of David Hume* (1954)

[2] One could argue that Hobbes, and later Mandeville, were the first to develop thoroughly secular moral philosophies. Both, however, saw morality as mere artifice, i.e., as social convention that developed out of enlightened self-interest in order to facilitate common life. These "atheist" accounts were, therefore, at bottom, versions of moral skepticism and were thus seen by many of Hume's contemporaries as proof that atheism was a threat to the possibility of positive moral vision. Hume, thus, was arguably the first to offer a fully secular yet positive moral philosophy (see Norton 1982: 150-51, for a discussion of Hume's desire to combat the moral skepticism of Hobbes; see also Russel: 239-63).

[3] Hume saw "revealed" religion (i.e., religion that depends upon divine revelation) rather than "natural" religion (i.e., religious conclusions attained by rational argument) to be especially damaging in its influence on morality. Yandell argues that according to Hume the religious motives and duties that religious morality will add to ethics are "inherently negative" (29). This generally does seem to be Hume's attitude to revealed religion, as I will later show. He does, however, occasionally mention some beneficial consequences of religion. For example, he says "The proper Office of Religion is to reform Men's Lives, to purify their Hearts, to inforce all moral Duties, & to secure Obedience to the Laws & civil Magistrate" (quoted in Mossner 1980: 306). Mossner notes, however, that this is a pragmatic, secular conception of the function of religion in the commonwealth, not a conception that many religious believers would hold (1978: 658). This general idea is also expressed by Cleanthes (a proponent of natural religion) in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (XII: 122) – though to this the skeptic Philo (often regarded by scholars as representing Hume's perspective) replies: 1) that religion as it is commonly found (i.e., vulgar religion) prompts much immoral action (D XII: 123-26) and 2) that religion is relatively superfluous for those philosophers who "stand less in need of such [religious] motives to keep them under the restraint of

Hume thought that religious morality was pernicious, first, in its tendency to create social faction. The religious wars that devastated Europe after the Reformation and the religious conflict that continued for centuries afterwards (including in his homeland of Scotland) made him concerned to provide a form of moral discourse that could cut across religious divides (Herdt: 11, 14) and could turn our attention away from what he regarded as abstruse theological disputes by leading us to focus instead on our shared sources of pleasure and pain that spring from our common human nature.[4] Hume also thought that religious morality could hamper human life insofar as it is overly suspicious and condemning of ordinary human desire. Indeed, Hume's Calvinist upbringing, with its dark and arguably denigrating portrait of human nature, made him keen to offer a more worldly vision of the moral life.[5] His secularization of morality and politics was arguably, in part, then, an attempt to mitigate the harms that he thought to accompany religious morality (see Herdt; Seibert; Russell; cf. Beam; Norton 1991: 41-47).

In this article I will outline how Hume's moral philosophy tries to do this, and while I think there is a good deal to appreciate about Hume's efforts, I argue that the attempt to turn away from our deepest metaphysical commitments in our public moral discourse is not only philosophically problematic, but it carries its own serious threats to human life. It is my view that any form of morality, religious or secular, will have certain strengths and weaknesses that may attend it as it takes shape in human society. Thus, for those who think that Hume offers us the best sort of solution that can be found given our epistemological limitations or also that it is the best sort of practical solution for coping with pluralism, it is nevertheless important

---

morals" (D XII: 123-24). Because Hume prudentially does not always express his religious views straightforwardly, it is difficult to know whether and, if so, to what extent Hume would have thought religion to be morally helpful. It is nevertheless clear that he does not think that religion (whether revealed or natural) is needed in order to account for or to motivate morality, and it is also clear that he saw revealed religion to be morally corrupting. In any case, Hume sought to undermine natural as well as revealed religion, arguably because many adherents of revealed religion used the philosophical arguments of natural religion to lend rational support to their acceptance of revelation. I often will refer to revealed religion simply as religion, since religious forms as we commonly find them almost always contain elements of revealed religion.

[4] Hume argues that (monotheistic) religions tend to produce factions in NHR IX: 161; see also NHR XVI. Moreover, Hume's *The History of England* catalogues a range of intolerance, violence, and persecution that Christians have used religion to justify (see Herdt: 188-206; Siebert: 62-135). Hume thought that all religious disputes were entirely unnecessary, since they have no real practical bearing on our common life (ESY: 60). For the centrality of Hume's concern for social peace and the threat of religion, see Seibert: 62-135, as well as the opening paragraph of Hume's moral philosophy as given in the *Treatise* (T 3.1.1.1: 293).

[5] We know from a conversation that Hume had with James Boswell that when he was a boy he had read Richard Allestree's *The Whole Duty of Man*, a treatise on spiritual formation that was popular in eighteenth-century Scotland (see Alblas for an account of why and how this spiritual treatise, though arising out of the Anglican tradition, became popular among Calvinists). The *Whole Duty* focuses upon human sinfulness and encourages us to regard ourselves as "worms of the earth . . . polluted and defiled, wallowing in all kinds of sins, and uncleanness" (II.1.1: 34). Boswell reports that Hume said "that he made an abstract from the Catalogue of vices at the end of it, and examined himself by this, leaving out Murder and Theft and such vices as he had no chance of committing, having no inclination to commit them. This, he said, was strange work; for instance, to try if, notwithstanding his excelling his schoolfellows, he had no pride or vanity" (1931: 227-28). We can see the seeds of some of Hume's later objections to what he regarded as the anti-natural and harmfully stringent elements religious morality from this window into his early grappling with the form of religion in which he was raised.

to recognize the dangers inherent to it if we are to seek to minimize them. This, I will conclude, is better done by more fully engaging in larger metaphysical discussions in our public discourse, not, as Hume would have it, by sidelining them.

Hume's Secular Moral Philosophy

In this section I want to show how Hume's secular account of morality enables him to promote a moral vision that he thinks is better able to facilitate human flourishing on both the social and individual level than is religious (particularly Christian) morality. To this end, I will summarize Hume's moral philosophy and show how it means to correct what he saw as the destructive tendencies of religious morality.

It is important to appreciate from the outset just how unique Hume's secularization of ethics was in his time. Traditional accounts of morality given by philosophers prior to Hume tended to rest upon certain metaphysical understandings of the cosmos and our place within it and appealed to larger metaphysical claims to make sense of moral motivation, to ground our sense of the noble and of moral obligation, and to articulate what counts as a life well-lived. Even among Hume's predecessors who tended to de-emphasize metaphysics in their moral philosophy, with the possible exception of Hobbes and Mandeville, they invariably sought to ground some aspect of their account of ethics by making larger metaphysical appeals (see Herdt: 17-38; Schneewind).

In contrast to these approaches, Hume argues that answers to our larger metaphysical questions take us beyond the bounds of reason and human experience and thus cannot serve as a legitimate basis for morality and politics. Instead, and in accord with his empirical project of pursuing a "science of man," Hume develops his naturalistic account of morality by attending to common life and describing the kinds of character traits that we find praiseworthy or blameable (see T III and EPM). Thus, rather than seeking to provide ultimate grounding or justification for the moral life, Hume takes our sense of morality as a given in human experience and seeks to give an empirical account of it.

Upon observing what we do praise and blame, Hume concludes that a person experiences a "pleasing sentiment of approbation" when viewing qualities of character that are "useful or agreeable to the person himself or to others" (EPM: 268, 289, see also T 3.3.1.30: 377). Such qualities we regard as virtues, and those which are disagreeable or run counter to utility we regard as vices (EPM: 268, 289). Hume argues, for example, that because benevolence and justice are *useful to others*, discretion and industry are *useful to ourselves*, wit and good manners are *agreeable to others*, and cheerfulness and serenity are *agreeable to the person him or herself*, we regard these traits as virtues (see EPM II-III, VI-VIII and T 3.3.2-5 for Hume's account of a range of specific virtues). Hume's moral philosophy thereby recognizes that because well-being is a central concern for us, we naturally approve of that which promotes human flourishing.

Hume observes, however, that it is not merely the feeling of approval that we take to be sufficient for moral evaluation; indeed, we commonly distinguish between moral approval and approval of those things which merely gratify our narrow self-interest (T 3.1.2.4: 303-4). Moral approval, he notes, is a "calm" rather than "violent" passion (see T 2.3.3.8–2.3.4: 267-71), and an impartial rather than a prejudiced one. Moral praise and blame, then, on Hume's account,

arise once we have entered into the disinterested perspective of what in the *Treatise* he calls the "general view or survey" (see T 3.1.2.4: 303-4).[6]

Hume trusts that when we overlook self-interest and assess matters from this general view, our moral sentiments of praise and blame will be more or less universal. Hume's confidence that there will be widespread agreement in our moral responses is built, in part, upon his descriptive argument in Book II of the *Treatise* that we observe there to be a consistent manner in which the passions arise among human beings; i.e., the same sorts of things that give one person pleasure or pain, will give others pleasure or pain as well. It is also built upon his contention that moral evaluation is rooted in the natural sentiment of sympathy (see T 3.3.6: 393-95),[7] which he thinks experience shows to exist in all human beings (T 3.3.6.1: 393-94) and which is made possible only because we take a general pleasure or pain in the same sorts of things.

Sympathy becomes crucial to Hume's account of morality because it is sympathy that allows us take up at the general point of view, from which we are able to make moral judgments in the first place (see T 3.3.1.6-10: 368-69). Sympathy enables us to enter into the general view because it allows us to acquire multiple vantage points from which to survey actions and character traits. In this way we become aware of the pleasures, pains, hopes, and desires of others as well as our own. We also gain new perspective with which to view ourselves as we experience others respond to our characteristics and behaviors. Through building up sympathetic experiences over time, we learn that there is a steady core of traits and actions that we approve of in others and that others approve of in us and, by extension, that are morally laudable in general. Thus, ultimately it is our capacity for sympathy that makes it possible for us to distinguish between private, self-interested preference and the disinterested moral evaluation that is taken from the general view.[8]

---

[6] Baier, I think rightly, argues that Hume should not be understood to mean that our judgments issuing from the general view necessarily express our actual occurrent sentiments; rather that they express what we judge we *would* feel if we make the appropriate corrections to our sentiments. Although the term "general view" drops out in the *Second Enquiry*, impartiality (i.e., the same phenomenon to which the general view refers) is still required for moral evaluation in the latter work (179).

[7] In the *Second Enquiry*, Hume maintains that the "sentiment of humanity" (i.e., "fellow-feeling") is the source of moral distinctions, and the language of sympathy largely drops out (EPM: 219-20, n. 1; 272-73). Although Hume occasionally suggests that sympathy and humanity are basically interchangeable (see, e.g., EPM: 298), there are differences between his use of "humanity" in the *Second Enquiry* and his initial account of sympathy given in Book II of the *Treatise*. In Hume's Book II description of sympathy, our sympathetic tendencies are limited and biased towards one's family and friends; sympathy, as he there describes it, helps to account for group bias and social faction more readily than it can account for impartial understanding. Hence, in Book III of the *Treatise*, where Hume speaks of sympathy as the basis for the "general view," he shifts to a more extensive, corrected conception of sympathy. The sentiment of humanity connotes this wider, more extensive sympathy, and perhaps was used in the *Second Enquiry* to avoid confusion with natural, limited sympathy (see Herdt: 60-81).

[8] Baier stresses that the general view is not a "view from nowhere" (to use Thomas Nagel's phrase) but rather is a common *human* viewpoint. As she says, "it aims not at detachment from human concerns but at impartiality, and interpersonal agreement" (182; see also Russell: 253; Gill: 252-54; Herdt: 71-72).

Although Hume offers a descriptive rather than a metaphysical account of morality, he thinks that no deeper metaphysical account could be given, nor does he think it is needed.[9] In Hume's view, nothing is more epistemologically secure than common human experience; hence, appealing to dubitable ontology in order to explain further what is clearly evident in experience is unnecessary.

What, then, might Hume think to be the practical advantages of his metaphysically silent account of morality for fostering human flourishing over and against religious morality? First, as previously mentioned, Hume thought his secular moral philosophy could better promote peace in society. It emphasizes what is common among all people and leaves out precisely what can lead to the most intractable sorts of disagreements – namely, disputes about our ultimate origins. Moreover, it directs our attention to what we regard to be good *as humans* (not just as groups with particular identities). It also recognizes that we do in fact share a common moral language and seeks to make this more explicit. Furthermore, by depending upon sympathy for entering into the general view, it encourages us to take up the standpoint of others, even those with whom we may be embattled. Finally, Hume was concerned with the role of zeal in flaming religious factions (see NHR IX: 160-63), and his moral philosophy, if practiced, could calm the more "violent passions," that are so often aroused and mistakenly seen as justified in religious disputes. Indeed, the very act of weighing various points of view, of considering a moral matter impartially, has the effect of quieting the sorts of passions that fuel the most destructive conflicts in human life.

Second, Hume thought that his secular moral vision could lessen the damage that he believed religious morality to have brought upon its members and society at large. The primary detriment of religious morality, Hume maintained, was that it promoted a "frivolous species of merit" whereby inconsequential and even vicious acts are regarded *as good* and sometimes even *morally required*, and certain morally unproblematic and even good acts are prohibited.[10] That is, Hume thought that religious morality distorted the very content of morality itself. In Hume's famous critique of the "monkish virtues" in the *Second Enquiry*, he maintains that a host of Christian practices such as celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, and solitude are merely sham virtues (see also NHR X: 163). About them he asks, "are they everywhere rejected by men of sense, but because they serve no manner of purpose; neither advance a man's fortune in the world, nor render him a more valuable member of society; neither qualify him for the entertainment of company; nor increase his power of self-enjoyment?" (EPM: 270). Not only does Hume regard these practices as

---

[9] For example, in an important footnote in the *Second Enquiry*, he says, "It is needless to push our researches so far as to ask, why we have humanity or a fellow-feeling with others. It is sufficient that this is experienced to be a principle in human nature. We must stop somewhere in our examination of causes; and there are, in every science, some general principles, beyond which we cannot hope to find any principle more general" (EPM: 219-20, n. 1).

[10] In the *Dialogues*, Philo says of religious morality, ". . . the very diverting of the attention, the raising up a new and frivolous species of merit, the preposterous distribution which it makes of praise and blame, must have the most pernicious consequences, and weaken extremely men's attachment to the natural motives of justice and humanity" (D XII: 124). Philo's discussion of religious morality certainly comports with Hume's discussion of the "monkish virtues" and "artificial lives." See Gaskin: 335 for a discussion of ways religious perspectives might be seen to distort the content of morality by inventing crimes.

frivolous, but he thinks that their very self-depriving, dismal focus "sours the temper" and "hardens the heart" (EPM: 270), thus making them positively harmful. They are neither useful nor agreeable to oneself nor to others, and they, in fact, dampen our capacity for sympathy, from which moral distinctions arise in the first place. Therefore, Hume says that we are right to "transfer them to the opposite column, and place them in the catalogue of vices" (EPM: 270).

Hume, moreover, thought that the frivolous species of merit has the further effect of disrupting the normal operation of the passions in more strenuous religious believers, causing psychological disturbance and self-deception. This comes to the fore in Hume's discussion of what he calls "artificial lives" – i.e., of lives made false by seeking to impose on one's life a worldview that is out of touch with human nature and which requires our passions to run contrary to their natural direction. For instance, he portrays Pascal – his example of a life made artificial by religion – as aiming always to keep present to mind his failings, as seeking self-abasing humility, as depriving himself the most innocent pleasures, and as striving to be indifferent to his friends while working to love his enemies (EPM: 342-43). Hume thought, however, that the natural direction of our passions can never be wholly disrupted by a worldview, and hence, the falseness of attempting to live in an anti-natural way manifests itself in a *life* that is artificial.

Hume's moral philosophy seeks to correct what he regards to be these psychologically unhealthy aspects of religious morality in two ways. First, it gives an account of human flourishing purely on the basis of common human experience while specifically rejecting religious appeals that often are bound up with otherworldly/anti-natural and detrimental moral demands and ideals. Second, Hume's moral vision is itself more this-worldly. It takes away what he believes to be an inordinate strain in the moral life that you find in religious morality and makes it closer to ordinary human behavior.[11] It regards natural humans desire for wealth, bodily enjoyment, and fame (which are implicitly endorsed in Book II of the *Treatise*) as not warranting the basic mistrust that was prevalent in his Scottish Calvinist upbringing with its emphasis on the disorder of unredeemed human passion. Rather, true morality, as Hume sees it, "talks not of useless austerities and rigours, suffering and self-denial. She declares that her sole purpose is to make her votaries and all mankind, during every instant of their existence, if possible, cheerful and happy" (EPM: 279).[12]

---

[11] As Baier puts it, Hume insists that "the qualities picked out as virtues be ones that human nature regularly does turn up" (187).

[12] It is beyond the scope of this paper to assess the extent to which Hume's critiques are fair and to identify which theological traditions lend themselves more or less to these dangers. Hume paints with too broad a brush in his religious critiques, but he nevertheless touches upon important concerns as he does so. Although I cannot go into adequate detail here, I do think that Hume's critiques best target what Charles Taylor calls the "hyper-Augustinian" strand of Western Christianity (1989: 246-47; 2007: 227-28). Hyper-Augustinian forms of Christianity emphasize the totalizing effects of the Fall on human nature, in contrast to, for example, theologians like Aquinas, who think that despite the effects of the Fall, humans have a natural desire for God (expressed in a natural orientation toward truth, goodness, and beauty). Hyper-Augustinians, thus, tend to see human passions as profoundly disordered (and, hence, true Christian virtue looks wholly different in kind than [what it regards as ultimately selfish] natural human love and secular conceptions of virtue); they tend to see reason as fundamentally incapable of identifying moral and spiritual truth (and, hence, we must wholly rely on divine Revelation); and

Metaphysics and Moral Sentiments

I have shown how Hume saw his secular moral philosophy as offering a moral perspective that would lessen the dangers that he thought to accompany religious belief. In the next section, I will argue that the attempt to divorce ethics from larger metaphysical commitments (particularly religious or even minimally teleological ones) carries with it its own dangers for human flourishing. In this section, however, I want to highlight a key theoretical problem of Hume's moral philosophy that is relevant to these dangers: namely, Hume does not give adequate attention to the way in which our concepts (and, hence, our larger metaphysical views) shape our sentiments.

I want to build up to showing that this is so by beginning with the following prima facie problem: Hume assumes a great deal of agreement of sentiment in his moral philosophy and yet there would seem to be significant disagreement of sentiment between individuals and cultures. In Book II of the *Treatise*, Hume claims that

> if we cast our eye upon human nature, and consider that in all nations and ages, the same objects still give rise to pride and humility [and as he will later show in T 2.2.2, this is also true of the corresponding passions of love and hatred, of which moral approbation and disapprobation is a species]; and that upon the view even of a stranger, we can know pretty nearly, what will either increase or diminish his passions of this kind. If there be any variation in this particular, it proceeds from nothing but a difference in the tempers and complexions of men; and is besides very inconsiderable. (T 2.1.3.4: 184)

Elsewhere Hume does acknowledge a greater variation of evaluative judgments and has a correspondingly richer account for why such differences occur. "Of the Standard of Taste" looks at the role of cultivation in good evaluative judgments, "A Dialogue" and *The Natural History of Religion* suggest the role of religious superstition in disrupting the normal operation of the passions (as we saw in Hume's discussion of "artificial lives"), sections of Book II of the *Treatise* offer an account of how certain emotions can compete with sympathy (T 2.2.9-20: 245-50), causing our evaluations to be skewed, and Hume's moral philosophy as a whole is able to account for a range of cultural differences owing to differing material conditions (see especially "A Dialogue"). It thus turns out that Hume does admit to a greater degree of value differences than the above passage suggests, but he sees this variation, nevertheless, against a

---

they tend to see human effort as competing with grace (either we try to be good by our own efforts and so entrench ourselves more fully in pride, or divine grace breaks in upon us and transforms us). By contrast, in the other dominant theological strand represented, for example, by Aquinas, we have natural human desires for the good of natural human flourishing, which reason can recognize, and which have continuity with our supernatural good. Moreover, in this strand, human effort can work cooperatively with grace. The Protestant Reformers (including Calvin who shaped the religious culture of Hume's birth) were in the hyper-Augustinian strand, as generally were the French Jansenist philosophers (Pierre Nicole and Blaise Pascal) whom Hume would have likely read in the library of the Jesuit college of La Flèche when he was writing *The Treatise of Human Nature* (Mossner 1980: 102; Herdt: 182). Hume consistently and understandably seems to critique those forms of Christianity with which he was most familiar insofar as he represents faith as opposed to reason (EHU X) and religious morality (the graced realm) as wholly other than the usual course of human passions (as he does in his critiques of the monkish virtues and artificial lives). He fails, however, to engage with other, arguably better versions of Christian morality.

backdrop of widespread agreement that he expects will be relatively stable. The "natural and usual force of the passions" (T 3.3.2.18: 311) operates the way it does because of its origin in human nature, and this ensures that what genuinely contributes to a human happiness will generally be met with approbation (when viewed impartially from the general survey), unless the passions have been inappropriately cultivated or corrupted.

Hume is right, I think, to see a broad agreement of sentiment among humans. If this were not so, we would not respond in intelligibly patterned ways to certain phenomena, and sympathy with others would be severely curtailed, if not impossible. Nevertheless, we can identify at least three key areas of affective disagreement that are by no means inconsequential, particularly for a moral philosophy that depends upon a general concurrence of sentiment when taking up the impartial perspective of the general view. First, our moral sentiments can significantly diverge with respect to our sense of the noble, the intrinsically valuable, or what we might call the sacred. We can think, for example, of those who see the natural world as an object to be used for human benefit versus others who regard it as a great good worthy of protection and honor for its own sake. We might also think of those who regard all human life to be sacred simply by being human, versus those who see human life to be reverence-worthy based on a certain attribute such as rationality, the capacity for self-determination, or our ability to experience psychologically complex pleasure and pain. These differing affective responses are connected, for example, to whether a person regards a human embryo as deserving fundamental protection and care or as a candidate for research for some desirable end, whether the life itself of a suffering elderly person is more valuable and overriding of his or her choice to live or whether the capacity to choose life or death is what primarily gives humans dignity and allowing them to make that choice is the appropriate way to treat them with dignity, and so on.

Indeed, a key area of moral dispute – even if these discussions rarely employ such terms – is what should be seen as sacred or reverence-worthy and what should be desacralized or disenchanted. Peter Singer, for instance, seeks to disenchant the notion of special human dignity. He maintains that

> The traditional ethic is still defended by bishops and conservative bioethicists who speak in reverent tones about the intrinsic value of all human life, irrespective of its nature or quality. But, like the new clothes worn by the emperor, these solemn phrases seem true and substantial only while we are intimidated into uncritically accepting that all human life has some special dignity or worth. Once challenged, the traditional ethic crumples (4).

In a similar spirit, Hume seeks to disenchant the moral and spiritual gravity traditionally ascribed to suicide. He writes, for example, that "the life of man is of no greater importance to the universe than that of an oyster" (ESY: 583), and he draws an analogy between suicide and any other alteration of the course of nature, maintaining that "It would be no crime in me to divert the *Nile* or *Danube* from its course, were I able to effect such purposes. Where then is the crime of turning a few ounces of blood from their natural channels" (ESY: 583). A key question, then, that is not clearly settled by appealing to sentiments that are issued from the general view, especially when larger metaphysical commitments are set aside, is how far should disenchantment in the moral life go?

Notice that both Singer and Hume make metaphysical claims in order to attempt to modify our sentiments of moral approbation. Singer suggests that we have no good reason to believe that human beings have intrinsic dignity as such; therefore, we should not feel strong moral disapprobation for infanticide of severally handicapped newborns or other such positions that he endorses. Hume suggests that there is nothing particularly special about human life when viewed cosmically and nothing especially different about the cause and effect of taking one's life from human intervention in other sorts of natural causes; therefore, we should not feel moral disapprobation for suicide. This reveals, though, that moral sentiment is not independent of metaphysical considerations – rather, it is, in part, informed by them.

Second, our moral sentiments often diverge with respect to what constitutes the *content* of various virtues. In other words, Hume rightly points out that we generally agree that benevolence, justice, temperance, and so on *are virtues*, but we do not always have the same judgments with respect to what *counts as* that virtue. For instance, we can think of the traditional Christian teaching on sexual abstinence until marriage and lifelong fidelity to one's spouse versus the view that consent between adults (including the consent of the spouse if there is to be extra-marital relations) is the morally salient feature of sexual ethics. What each group from these divergent perspectives would regard as displaying the virtue of temperance with regard to sex will be different; likewise, they will have different judgments regarding what counts as licentious or prudish, as liberating or stultifying of our humanity. In Hume's moral philosophy, few would quibble that what he includes in his list of virtues are in fact virtues. His account of what those virtues consist in, however, does not in all cases enjoy the relatively easy agreement that he suggests would occur among those who earnestly attempt to view the matter from the general view.

A third way in which we may have crucial differences among our morally relevant sentiments is with respect to, as Augustine puts the issue, how to order our loves – i.e., which goods are the most valuable and are worthy of our highest allegiance. For instance, many would hold that there is something of value in human embryos and in autonomous choice, but some see the former as a higher good and therefore as trumping the latter, whereas others think the value relation holds the other way around.

There may be many reasons for these sorts of differences among our morally relevant sentiments and the moral judgments they inform. Some might stem from different degrees of moral maturity itself, some from different interpretations of the facts of the relevant situation, and so on. Often, however, larger metaphysical pictures, either that we explicitly accept or have imbibed through our cultural history and social environment, play a crucial role in shaping our sense of the sacred or reverence-worthy, the content of virtues, and our sense of proper ordering of those goods. Obviously, any religious tradition has its particular articulation of these, as do various atheist pictures (be they nihilist, Nietzschean, secular humanist, social Darwinist, etc.) and various agnostic or non-traditionally spiritual perspectives. Our metaphysical concepts cannot but shape our sentiments, as we saw with Singer's and Hume's call for disenchanting the sacred in particular domains. Certainly, some of our sentiments may be resistant to being formed as our metaphysical commitments imply they ought to be, and then we might either live with the inconsistency (perhaps most often by failing to detect it), or adopt a different metaphysical framework that better comports with our moral intuitions, or

again we may seek to modify the framework, insofar as it is possible, to accommodate our sense of things.

Hume does acknowledge that larger metaphysical commitments (i.e., religious ones) can shape one's moral experience, but he tends only to discuss ways in which these commitments can *distort* one's moral judgments.[13] His view is that humans by nature have a generally stable set of moral sentimental responses and that it is only by adopting metaphysical pictures that are incongruent with human nature that there will be serious discrepancies in our moral judgments. Hume seems to have an underlying assumption, though, that if we do away with revealed religion and its corrupting influences, human nature will supply us with enough agreement of sentiment to bring clarity to our conception of virtue and virtuous actions. Hume is overly optimistic, however, to think that such agreement could be had were revealed religion to fade and cease to influence sentiment.[14] Within non-religious perspectives, for example, there are secular moral perspectives that want to affirm equal human dignity, Nietzschean ones that affirm strong and excellent persons over and against the weak, nihilistic ones that deny any real basis for value, and so on. Since Hume seeks to sideline metaphysics, however, it is unclear how his moral philosophy could adjudicate between these sorts of disagreements of sentiments.

I think, then, that our larger metaphysical views play a role in forming our sentiments, and they do so more than Hume seems to acknowledge. Hume, however, not only avoids making larger metaphysical appeals in his moral philosophy; he positively eschews this sort of appeal and pursuit unless it is minimalist and naturalistic (see EHU: 16, 165; T 1.4.7.7-15: 176-78; Russell: 204-22). The implication here is that in Hume's proposal, an important source of the underlying differences in sentiment ought not be articulated in public discourse, nor reasoned about together. This move is particularly striking when we appreciate Charles Taylor's point that we all inevitably operate with some sort of "cosmic imaginary" in the background of our conscious life (2007: 232). Taylor defines a cosmic imaginary as our way of making sense of

> how the surrounding world figures in our lives . . . , including explicit cosmological
> doctrines; . . . the stories we tell about other lands and other ages; . . . the place
> of "nature" in our moral and/or aesthetic sensibility; and . . . our attempts to
> develop a "scientific" cosmology, if any (2007: 232).

Thus, even if we do not explicitly raise ultimate questions, nor have definitive metaphysical commitments (perhaps we are agnostic), we still have some background picture of the nature of the cosmos that structures our life narratives. These cosmic imaginaries impact, then, not only our sentiments and our sense of the reverence-worthy, they also provide the sort of reasons we are able to give to make sense of the world and ourselves. Hume's moral theory

---

[13] It is strange that Hume neglects to explore how various metaphysical pictures differently shape sentiment beyond religious distortions of them, since he maintains that "passions, desires, and emotions . . . arise mostly from ideas"; they are "impressions of reflection" (T 1.1.2.1: 11) precisely because they require a concept or act of understanding to arise.

[14] Hume explicitly expresses his hope that his philosophy will help cause "the downfall of some of the prevailing systems of superstition" (quoted in Russell: 300) in his deathbed conversation with Adam Smith.

requires that we bracket out the world-pictures that we unavoidably hold (whether they are well-reasoned or assumed, whether they are adopted with conviction or held tenuously) and which inevitably shape our moral perspective. However, this wrongly assumes, I think, that we can get to some metaphysically uncontaminated moral sentiments upon which we can seek for the consensus of the general view.

Some Dangers of Hume's Secular Moral Philosophy

I began by claiming that Hume sought to provide a secular moral philosophy in part in order to counter what he thought to be harmful aspects of religious morality (particularly Christian morality). As previously discussed, he chiefly thought it needlessly fueled social factions and that it could produce a gloomy, guilt-ridden existence insofar as it too strongly condemned natural human passions and put forward ideals that were destructive to pursue. Hume should be commended for offering important critiques of religious morality that highlight the dangerous directions religious morality can be taken and for putting forward a positive vision that could curb these tendencies. In this section, however, I want to suggest some ways in which Hume's proposed secular solution also carries its own threats for flourishing.

First, although Hume's secular morality tries to reduce unnecessary conflict, it has its own propensity to exacerbate conflict. I argued above that our cosmic imaginaries shape moral sentiment. Yet Hume attempts to offer an ethic that is independent of our answers to larger metaphysical questions, and, indeed, he shuns the pursuit of such questions, since he thinks they are bound to be fruitless and highly uncertain. What tends to happen, then, when a secular morality such as Hume's serves as a basis for our common life, is that our larger metaphysical convictions recede from our public discourse. Hume's moral philosophy calls for an adjustment in our language and in the reasons to which we can appeal when articulating our moral positions. (Moreover, for those who do have religious commitments, it calls for a compartmentalization and a privatization of those.) Because of this, people are not always able to give their real or their deepest reasons for holding a particular moral conviction, neither do they benefit from having their deepest reasons directly challenged by others. As a result, the most thorough sort of moral discussions are curtailed. When our larger metaphysical commitments get sidelined and go unarticulated (or, because of the breakdown of discourse, are articulated poorly), the positions of those with opposing moral views can easily become opaque to one another and can thus seem not to issue from reasonable difference but from vice, stupidity, and bigotry.[15]

One might think that Hume's emphasis on sympathy as the basis of moral evaluation could encourage the practice of viewing the issue in question from the perspective of others. Obscuring the metaphysical sources that help shape and articulate a moral perspective, however, threatens to undermine rather than facilitate sympathy. We see this in Hume's own treatment of revealed religion. To give one example, in his polemical critique of the "monkish virtues," he fails to acknowledge that all of the so-called monkish virtues (with the exception

---

[15] That is, of course, not to say that moral judgments never issue from character defects, for character often does shape our sentiments and judgments, but it is destructive to our common life when people are maligned quickly and simply for holding opposing views.

of humility) are actually practices, which, according to the Christian tradition, are not to be pursued for their own sake but for the sake of those virtues that are especially difficult to acquire and should ultimately facilitate the highest Christian virtue of charity. Hume, however, writes as if these are essentially opposed to utility and pleasure (EPM: 270), as part of the "dismal dress . . . with which many divines, and some philosophers, have covered [genuine virtue]" (EPM: 279, which may be accepted by "a gloomy, hair-brained [religious] enthusiast" but are "everywhere rejected by men of sense" (EPM: 270).[16] He gives no indication of charitably seeking to understand these practices and the ends they are meant to help us attain when properly pursued; instead, he too quickly dismisses them as both ridiculous and harmful, without indicating that there are complex issues to be worked out with regard to the ascetic tradition.[17]

Hume himself writes about how we naturally tend to have limited sympathy with those who are different from us. In Book II of the *Treatise*, Hume observes that the degree, depth, and intensity with which we spontaneously sympathize with others depends upon their resemblance (e.g., shared language, culture, personality) and contiguity (spatial proximity) to us (T 2.1.11.5-6: 207). Sympathy with those who are different or remote requires the more active, intentional practice of what he calls "extensive sympathy." When the larger metaphysical views that inform one's positions are set aside, however, it becomes harder to practice this extensive sympathy, since the resources for understanding another's views and emotional formation are less available. (We see this problem in American public discourse – a point Michael Sandel has made particularly well.)

The breakdown of discourse and the diminishing ability to enter into other points of view, which can occur when we fail to articulate what is driving our moral outlook, quite obviously leads to social faction. This is especially so given that we are, as Hume observes, naturally disposed to attribute bad motives to our opponents (T 2.2.3.2: 225). This tendency can only be exacerbated, however, when the sources for making another's view more fully intelligible are removed from discourse. Moreover, when ill-founded or biased passions become transferred in a group through natural sympathy and the group collectively cannot find their opponent's position intelligible, it is particularly difficult to perceive and uproot the evaluative error.

Furthermore, a failure to discuss and to gain a deeper understanding of the larger metaphysical commitments of others removes some of the resources we have for calming those violent passions that interfere with our ability to make sound judgments and live well with others. Hume was rightly sensitive to the ways in which (revealed) religion can ignite the

---

[16] Hume often referred to ardent Christians, particularly Protestants, as "enthusiasts" (see esp. ESY: 73-79).

[17] For a defense of ascetic practices, see Fr. Zosima's discussion of the monk in *The Brothers Karamazov* (313-14). Dostoyevsky contrasts Zosima, who has attained a rare capacity for compassion through his life as a monk, with Fr. Ferapont, who was considered "so great an ascetic" (334) but who used his intense asceticism not to grow in the love of God and others but, rather, to feed his sense of spiritual superiority (see Ferapont's spiteful reaction to Zosima's death, 333-36). Through this contrast Dostoyevsky depicts how spiritual discipline, if rightly pursued, can hasten moral growth, and, if wrongly pursued, can deepen vice and be deadly to the moral and spiritual life. Hume's portrayal of the "monkish virtues" calls to mind and provides an apt critique of a character like Fr. Ferapont; Hume, however, does not engage with the best versions of what he means to condemn.

violent passions, but he was perhaps not as attuned to the extent to which secular replacements for religion can be equally dangerous. When one's significance becomes bound up with being identified with a particular group or in helping to bring about a particular political ideology, hatred or contempt for others can ensue, and great harm can be done out of that violent passion of hatred under the guise of the good, as we saw most pointedly in the Marxist and Nazi regimes of the twentieth century.

I now wish to address a second danger implicit in Hume's secular moral philosophy, insofar as it seeks to avoid metaphysics. Although Hume worries that high-aspiring religious moralities put inordinate strain on human nature, his secular attempt to provide a lower-aspiring ethic that fits more closely with our natural tendencies threatens not to remain at the mid-range of human moral achievement, but to sink quite low, since it removes the moral sources that help to nourish, sustain, and make sense of our deepest moral intuitions. While his account of the virtues rests fairly easily with the natural operation of the passions, the judgments issuing from the general view leave a gap between our passions as we find them (biased and untutored) and our passions as the general view judges that they should be. Without some sort of transcendent moral source against which to seek to align our lives and instruct our will or to establish a stable sense of the reverence-worthy that can resist thoroughgoing disenchantment, our practice of taking up the general view is quite susceptible to endorsing rather than challenging the biases of our time. It is not uncommon for us to be ruled by our biased passions and even fail to perceive their bias. Moreover, owing to our social nature, we are disposed to take the status quo as a kind of standard and so to succumb to whatever moral blindness, shallowness, and disorder of value is culturally embedded. Furthermore, because we often seek to justify our moral outlook and way of life, a status quo morality likely will further decline as vice becomes increasingly normalized and garners a wider approval.[18]

A third danger in Hume's attempt to keep metaphysical speculation from intruding into ethics is that he would deprive ethics of the irreplaceably rich contributions that religious traditions can offer for human flourishing and even for shaping human sentiments in ways that Hume would endorse (e.g., by encouraging benevolence, justice, and other virtues that Hume affirms). For example, certain religious language and imagery may be better suited to illuminating and attuning us to particular moral truths than secular language and imagery. We

---

[18] We see an example of how disordered values in one's social world can cloud one's moral clarity and motivate the formation of vice in the young Augustine's confession that among his friends he "was ashamed not to be equally guilty of shameful behaviour when [he] heard them boasting of their sexual exploits" (II.iii.7: 27). Thus, "[he] went deeper into vice to avoid being despised, and when there was no act by admitting to which [he] could rival [his] depraved companions, [he] used to pretend [he] had done things [he] had not done at all, so that [his] innocence should not lead [his] companions to scorn [his] lack of courage, and lest [his] chastity be taken as a mark of inferiority" (II.iii.7: 27). Whether or not one agrees with the mature Augustine's conception of sexual morality, his experience in this matter illustrates the general phenomenon of how approval of vice among one's peers often negatively influences one's own moral sense. Importantly, in Augustine's case, God – a transcendent moral source – was crucial to gaining independence from the glorification of lust and the self-interested pursuit of worldly success that were characteristic pursuits in his social world. (It is worth mentioning, however, that while a danger with Hume's secular ethic is that it can devolve over time, a danger with religious morality is that it can explicitly sacralize vice [e.g., biblical appeals used to justify slavery, etc.]. In the latter's case, it is crucial that that religious tradition bear the resources within itself for self-critique.)

can think, for example, of the Christian doctrine of the *imago dei* and the teaching that what one does to the least of these, one does to Christ (Matthew 25:40), or we can think of the Jewish notion of *tikkun olam*, our task of repairing what is broken, and so on. It is not clear that Hume's secular ethic can offer such resonant imagery, however, or that such imagery, without a metaphysical framework, can fully maintain its morally empowering potential.

To give one example, in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, the main character, a pastor, writes to his son of "an important thing" that he seeks to live by. He says:

> When you encounter another person, when you have dealings with anyone at all, it is as if a question is being put to you. So you must think, What is the Lord asking of me in this moment, in this situation? If you confront insult or antagonism, your first impulse will be to respond in kind. But if you think, . . . This is an emissary sent from the Lord, and some benefit is intended for me, first of all, the occasion to demonstrate my faithfulness, the chance to show that I do in some small degree participate in the grace that saved me . . . You are freed at the same time of the impulse to hate or resent that person (124).

Many can find something morally improving in this sort of reflection; even if coming from a metaphysical perspective that cannot support this outlook, many may perhaps to seek to re-articulate the moral insights here in language that better comports with their larger metaphysical views, insofar as they are able. Hume's secular ethic, and his particular conclusion that we should avoid claims that go beyond the sphere of (a naturalized) "common life," lacks the resources for arriving at a reflection of this kind, however. It is, moreover, not easy to imagine, for instance, that Mother Teresa could have done her work among India's poorest, or that Martin Luther King, Jr., could have articulated and motivated the civil rights movement as he did without a Christian moral vision. Indeed, we can think of any number of spiritual insights from various religious traditions that can illuminate our moral understanding and motivate a depth of moral formation, the loss of which would be an impoverishment (see Gaita: 17-20). Hume's secular ethic seeks to avoid the harms of religion by screening it out of our moral and political lives, but then the ways that a religious moral imagination can positively shape sentiments, character, and action also is removed, and not without detrimental consequences.

Conclusion

I have discussed some ways in which Hume thought his secular ethic could mitigate certain destructive tendencies found in religious moralities. I have argued, however, that Hume's specifically secular perspective carries with it tendencies that also pose dangers to human flourishing. I, therefore, think we need a richer dialogue between religious and secular moral traditions and the mutually corrective tensions they provide for each other in order for us best to flourish as the kinds of beings that we are. Such dialogue, however, is not possible if, as Hume proposes, we sideline larger metaphysical questions or preclude bringing our answers to these questions to bear on our moral and political discussions. Our metaphysical frameworks shape how we understand the moral life, and when we bracket off such questions we fail to understand the moral conceptions of others in a way that undermines rather than facilitates sympathy. Where sympathy is lacking, we fail to communicate effectively our critiques of other perspectives, and we also to make ourselves capable of learning from the

weaknesses they see in us, thus, making it more likely that degraded forms both of religious morality and of Hume's secular moral vision will arise.

Bibliography

Alblas, Jacques B. H.

    1991   "Richard Allestree's *"The Whole Duty of Man"* (1658) in Holland: The Denominational and Generic Transformations of an Anglican Classic." *Dutch Review of Church History* 71: 92-104.

[Allestree, Richard]

    1658   *The Practice of Christian Graces or the Whole Duty of Man.* London: D. Maxwell for T. Garthwait.

Augustine, St.

    1991   *Confessions.* Translated by Henry Chadwick. New York: Oxford University Press.

Baier, Annette

    1991   *The Progress of Sentiments: Reflections of Hume's "Treatise."* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Beam, Craig

    1996   "Hume and Nietzsche: Naturalists, Ethicists, Anti-Christians." *Hume Studies* 12, 2: 299-324.

Boswell, James

    1931   *Private Papers of James Boswell.* Volume 12. Edited by Geoffrey Scott and Frederick A. Pottle. Mount Vernon: W. E. Rudge.

Dostoyevsky, Fyodor

    1992   *The Brothers Karamazov.* Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Gaita, Raymond

    1998   *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice.* London: Routledge.

Gaskin, J. C. A.

    1979   "Hume, Atheism, and the 'Interested Obligation' of Morality." In *McGill Hume Studies.* Edited by David Fate Norton, Nicholas Capaldi, and Wade L. Robison. San Diego: Austin Hill.

Gill, Michael B.

    2006   *The British Moralists on Human Nature and the Birth of Secular Ethics.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Herdt, Jennifer A.

    1997   *Religion and Faction in Hume's Moral Philosophy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Hume, David

    1954   *New Letters of David Hume*. Edited by Raymond Klibansky and E. C. Mossner. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

    1975   *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*. Third edition. Edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

    1983   *The Letters of David Hume*. Volume 1. Edited by J. Y. T. Greig. New York: Garland.

    1985   *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*. Revised edition. Edited by Eugene F. Miller. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.

    1993   *Principle Writings of Religion* including *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* and *The Natural History of Religion*. Edited by J. C. A. Gaskin. New York: Oxford University Press.

    2000   *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Edited by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mossner, Ernest Campbell

    1978   "The Religion of David Hume." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 39, 4: 653-63.

    1980   *The Life of David Hume*. Second edition. New York: Oxford University Press.

Norton, David Fate

    1982   *David Hume: Common Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

    1991   "Hume, Atheism, and the Autonomy of Morals." *Taula: Quaderns de Pensament* 16: 29-58.

Robinson, Marilynne

    2004   *Gilead*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Russell, Paul

    2008   *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise: Skepticism, Naturalism, and Irreligion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sandel, Michael

    1998   *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of Public Philosophy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Schneewind, J. B.

    1998   *The Invention of Autonomy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Siebert, Donald T.

    1990   *The Moral Animus of David Hume*. Newark: University of Delaware Press.

Singer, Peter

    1994   *Rethinking Life and Death*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin.

Taylor, Charles

    1989   *Sources of the Self*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

    2007   *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Yandell, Keith E.

    1990   *Hume's "Inexplicable Mystery": His Views on Religion*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.