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The Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. 26, No. 102, Hume Bicentenary Issue. (Jan., 1976), pp. 14-23.

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HUME ON MORALITY AND THE EMOTIONS

BY STEWART R. SUTHERLAND

I

The theme of this paper is the relation between Books II and III of Hume's *Treatise*. These books were, of course, published separately and the debate about the implications which we may draw from this has been considerable. I shall touch only tangentially on this debate, in so far as it affects consideration of the central enquiry of this paper, *viz.*, the philosophical relation between Hume's views on the nature of the passions or emotions, and his views about the nature of moral approval and moral disapproval.

On the whole I shall adopt, rather than defend, the view that Hume's conception of the *Treatise* was a unified one. That is to say, I shall underline the common sub-title to Books I, II and III, "An attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into Moral Subjects" (a sub-title reaffirmed upon the separate publication of Book III), rather than the remark from his advertisement for Book III to the effect that Book III is "in some measure independent of the other two". (I should think that that is the minimum which any judicious author would add in introducing the sequel to a first volume which had been a stunning flop.) In any case this comment has to be balanced by his remarks in the opening paragraph of Book III:

I am not, however, without hopes, that the present system of philosophy will acquire new force as it advances; and that our reasonings concerning *morals* will corroborate whatever has been said concerning the *understanding* and the *passions*.

There is no doubt that Hume did see the *Treatise* as a contribution to "the science of man" or of "human nature", and that he believed that there were certain common fundamental principles governing any such enquiry or series of enquiries. Undoubtedly also, it is true that the attempt to systematize his approach led him into various errors which we can now see only as naivety. I should want to argue, however, that at times in the *Treatise* precept and practice do not always go hand in hand, and that the consequent tensions, or, if you like, inconsistencies, at times indicate philosophical acumen rather than the reverse. Without prejudice, for the time being at least, I propose to retain the term "tensions" rather than "inconsistencies".

In his book *The Moral Philosophy of David Hume*,¹ R. D. Broiles asks what he takes to be a rhetorical question: "Who even reads Book II, *On the Passions*, with the exception of the sections on "Liberty and Necessity" and "Of the Influencing Motives of the Will"?" A reply to the view implicit

¹The Hague, 1964.

here and to its earlier explicit statement in Kemp Smith² is offered by Pall Árdal in *Passion and Value in Hume's Treatise*.³ Árdal's central argument is that Book II is crucial to an understanding of Hume's views on morality. Particularly, he argues that a grasp of Hume's account of the Indirect Passions, Pride, Humility, Love and Hate, is an essential prolegomenon to a study of the doctrines of Book III. In this he has performed an invaluable task for Hume studies. He also argues, correctly I believe, that there are issues of intrinsic interest in Hume's discussion of these emotions or passions.

My intention is to reverse the force of Árdal's argument, and to claim, justifiably I think, that not only is Book II important for the understanding of Book III, as Árdal argues, but that Book III is important for the understanding of Book II, that is to say I do not regard as merely a pious hope Hume's statement quoted earlier that Book III might help corroborate Books I and II. If correct, this thesis would have relevance to the issue of the unity or otherwise of the *Treatise*, but I shall not spend time developing this. In much of what I say I shall concentrate upon Anthony Kenny's version of Hume's account of the emotions offered in *Action, Emotion and Will*.⁴ Kenny's account is accepted by many and, if correct, would certainly lend weight to the view that Book II contains little of continuing interest. That such an account may be derived from *Treatise* I and II is not a matter for dispute. It is, however, not the only account, and I propose to offer an alternative.

Kenny argues that Hume's account of the emotions leans very heavily on certain of the doctrines of Book I. Particularly he stresses that for Hume the relation between the passions and the mind or person who has them is that of perceived to perceiver. Passions fall under the general heading of impressions, which in turn is a subdivision of perceptions. Passions are indeed simple impressions; hence to learn the meaning of an emotion word is to experience the emotion for which it stands. (Kenny here appeals to a view of language explicitly stated in the *Enquiries*, but he supports it by appeal to passages in the *Treatise*, II, i, 2; II, ii, 1; and II, iii, 1, the interpretation of which is at least open to discussion.)

Hume's view of his task is "to give a causal explanation of the origin of each emotion".⁵ Hence, in this area at least, the most one can expect of Hume is an account of the generation of emotions explicable in terms of the association of ideas and impressions—at best bad empirical psychology. In so far as this is the case, for Hume as for Descartes (according to Kenny) the relation between emotions and their objects is normally causal. Kenny does point out, however, that in his discussion of the indirect passions Hume does distinguish between the *object* of pride, or love, and the *cause* of these and the other indirect passions.

²*The Philosophy of David Hume* (London, 1941).

³Edinburgh, 1966.

⁴London, 1963.

⁵*Action, Emotion and Will*, p. 27.

Hume draws the distinction in the following terms:

'Tis evident, that pride and humility, tho' directly contrary, have yet the same OBJECT. This object is self, or that succession of related ideas and impressions, of which we have an intimate memory and consciousness. . . . But tho' that connected succession of perceptions which we call *self*, be always the object of these two passions, 'tis impossible it can be their CAUSE, or be sufficient alone to excite them. For as these passions are directly contrary, and have the same object in common; were their object also their cause; it cou'd never produce any degree of the one passion, but at the same time it must excite an equal degree of the other; which opposition and contrariety must destroy both.⁶

Notwithstanding, Kenny claims that for Hume the relation between an emotion and its object is contingent. It is, in the end, because our minds happen to be made as they are, that the object of pride is self, or the object of love another person. Finally, in the light of Kenny's own views to be developed, the most damning point in Hume is what Kenny calls, in a footnote (p. 25), his explicit denial of the intensionality of the passions. In support of this he quotes the following sentences from *Treatise* II, iii, 3:

A passion is an original existence, or, if you will, modification of existence, and contains not any representative quality, which renders it a copy of any other existence or modification. When I am angry, I am actually possess'd with the passion, and in that emotion have no more a reference to any other object, than when I am thirsty, or sick, or more than five foot high.

Two or three sentences from Kenny, which will be considered in some detail, help crystallize the main points of Kenny's account of Hume's theory of the passions:

- (1) It is clear that the connection here affirmed is a contingent one. It is because our minds happen to be made as they are that the object of pride is self, not because of anything involved in the concept of *pride*; just as it is because our bodies happen to be made as they are that our ears are lower than our eyes, not because of anything involved in the concept of *ear*.
- (2) A passion can be, and be recognized as, pride before the idea of its object comes before the mind.
- (3) It always happens that we feel proud of our own achievements and not, say, of the industry of ants in stone-age Papua; but the suggestion that we might feel proud of such things is as perfectly intelligible as the suggestion that the trees might flourish in December and decay in June.⁷

There are various levels at which the adequacy of Kenny's account of Hume can be questioned. Particularly important for this paper is Kenny's suggestion that consideration of the treatment of specific emotions offered by Hume would be irrelevant to his purposes (p. 27). His mistake here is to ignore the distinction between Direct and Indirect Passions. The signifi-

⁶*Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, 1888), pp. 277-8.

⁷*Op. cit.*, p. 24.

cance of this is that the moral sentiments are, I shall argue, very closely related to the indirect passions.

A rather different way of questioning Kenny's conclusions, both general and particular to Hume, is offered by J. R. S. Wilson in *Emotion and Object*.⁸ The book is a criticism of the structure of Kenny's assumptions and arguments. Wilson queries the distinction which Kenny draws between the object of an emotion and the cause of an emotion. He argues that Kenny's concept of both "object" and "cause" are seriously deficient, and suggests that in his talk of a non-contingent or necessary relation between emotion and object Kenny has confused two different claims:

- (1) Necessarily (or non-contingently) any *A* (emotion) is related (or connected) to a *B* (object);
- (2) Any *A* has a necessary relation to a *B*.

Wilson also wishes to claim that, in the senses which he (Wilson) outlines, some thing or event may be *both* object and cause of the same emotion.

More specifically, even allowing the possibility of the distinction which Kenny uses to interpret Hume, I wish to argue that there are two further grounds for misgivings concerning Kenny's account of Hume, and it is upon these that I wish to concentrate. (a) Kenny ignores Book III of the *Treatise*; this, I shall argue, results in an unbalanced account of Hume; (b) Kenny, as I have already hinted, is mistaken, or at least over-confident, in the interpretation of a variety of passages which he quotes from Book II. The plausibility of my arguments on this second point will gain considerable strength if I can establish that in disregarding Book III Kenny did severely handicap himself, and it is to this accusation that I now turn.

II

The case for regarding Hume's treatment of moral approval and disapproval as relevant to his account of the nature of the passions lies in the closeness of the connection between the moral sentiments and the indirect passions.

As a starting-point we may remind ourselves that according to Hume moral approval and disapproval are passions, and it is this that gives force and direction to his critique of the role of reason in moral evaluation. Reason can inform us of the relations between ideas, or it can function by informing us of the existence or non-existence of something. The moral sentiments, however, belong to the class of impressions, with the origin of which reason has no dealings. Within the sub-class of impressions of reflection are included all the passions and it is within this group that the moral sentiments are to be found.

I cannot find any passage in which Hume explicitly states that the moral sentiments *are* secondary indirect passions, although there is abundant evidence as to the closeness of the association of these in Hume's thinking.

⁸Cambridge, 1972.

(1) Perhaps the least significant for my purposes is that Hume believed that the same mechanistic story could be told about the "origin" of the moral sentiments as could be told about the arousal of the secondary indirect passions: the account, whose details I shall not discuss, given under the name of "the double association of ideas and impressions".⁹

(2) Sympathy, a notion which is of considerable importance in his account of moral evaluation, is first introduced in his discussion of pride. There it is introduced to explain how a secondary cause of pride and humility—the love of fame—functions.¹⁰

(3) The causes of the sentiments of virtue and vice are the same as the causes of the secondary indirect passions:

Now since every quality in ourselves or others, which gives pleasure, always causes pride or love; as every one, that produces uneasiness, excites humility or hatred: It follows, that these two particulars are to be consider'd as equivalent, with regard to our mental qualities, *virtue* and the power of producing love or pride, *vice* and the power of producing humility or hatred. In every case, therefore, we must judge of the one by the other; and may pronounce any *quality* of the mind virtuous, which causes love or pride; and any one vicious, which causes hatred or humility (III, iii, 1, p. 575).

There are certainly a number of points left unclear by the above passage, but it is quite beyond dispute that Hume saw the causal factors which operate in the arousal of the moral sentiments operating also in the evocation of the secondary indirect passions.

(4) This same passage also contains implicitly a point of central importance for my thesis, which is made explicitly in III, i, 2. There, discussing the possibility of distinguishing between a variety of different sorts of pleasures and pains, Hume recalls that in the case of pride and humility, love and hatred, a distinction is to be drawn between the object and the cause of the passions. He continues,

Now virtue and vice are attended with these circumstances. *They must necessarily be plac'd either in ourselves or others*, and excite either pleasure or uneasiness. . . (p. 473, my italics).

That is to say, if Jones's kindness evokes in us moral approval, although the element of pleasure in this may be *caused* by Jones's kindness, it is in fact Jones who is the *object* of our moral approval. The *objects* of the moral sentiments are always either ourselves or some other person. This is an important point to which I shall return.

(5) One final small point on the relations between moral sentiments and secondary indirect passions relates to the structure of Book II, *Of the Passions*. Two-thirds of the book is given over to the discussion of the secondary indirect passions. Of the primary passions, little is said, and the remaining third of the book is given to the discussion "Of the will and direct passions".

⁹Cf. *Treatise* III, iii, 1, pp. 575-6.

¹⁰Cf. *Treatise* II, i, 11 and III, iii, 1.

The obvious suggestion is that this is a measure of the importance which Hume attached to the secondary indirect passions, and that the reason for this was their importance *vis-à-vis* his account of the nature of moral approval and disapproval.

The points made in this section are offered as justification for the moves which I shall make in the next section in offering a critique of Kenny's version of Hume's theory of the passions. That is to say, I hope that I have established strong grounds for regarding the moral passions as very similar to, if not a sub-class of, the secondary indirect passions.

III

I want now to propose a test of the adequacy of Kenny's interpretation of Hume's account of the passions. Two remarks already quoted from Kenny can provide the subject-matter to be tested.

- (a)₁ A passion can be, and be recognized as, pride before the idea of its object comes before the mind.
- (b)₁ It always happens that we feel proud of our own achievements and not, say, of the industry of ants in stone-age Papua; but the suggestion that we might feel proud of such things is as perfectly intelligible as the suggestion that the trees might flourish in December and decay in June.¹¹

If these are adequate statements of Hume's views of the indirect passions, then, on my thesis, they ought to be transposable in such a way as to provide at least non-misleading claims about the moral passions. The transposition is as follows:

- (a)₂ A sentiment can be, and be recognized as, moral approval before the idea of its object comes before the mind.
- (b)₂ It always happens that we morally approve of people, their characters and deeds, and not, say, of the natural contours of a hillside; but the suggestion that we might morally approve of such things is as perfectly intelligible as the suggestion that the trees might flourish in December and decay in June.

Are these reliable guides to Hume's account of moral approval?

Take (a)₂ first. There is an unclarity here in the expression 'comes before the mind'. If what is meant is that Jones can feel moral approval without being fully aware of the object of that moral approval, then I find in Hume's terms nothing unacceptable about that; e.g., the knowledge that someone has taken old Jake in off the street and given him a home may evoke our moral approval before we know *who* has done this. Indeed, on Hume's account if the appropriate feeling is had in ignorance of *who* has done this, then it is more likely to be moral approval. This, however, is not to deny that there *is* an object of the moral approval in question, and if by implication Kenny is suggesting that Hume allowed that there could be either moral approval, or pride, without an object then he is, I suggest, mistaken. In a passage already quoted, Hume tells us not only what the objects of moral

¹¹*Op. cit.*, p. 24.

approval and disapproval *are*, he tells us what “*they must necessarily*” be: Now virtue and vice are attended with these circumstances. *They must necessarily be plac’d either in ourselves or others . . .*” (III, i, 2, p. 473).

If, taking the second feature of this assertion, “a sentiment *can be recognized* as moral approval, before the idea of an object comes before the mind”, the allusion is to a type of knowledge or recognition gained through introspective means alone, then once again this is not Hume’s view. Whatever the naivety of Hume’s explicit theory of meaning he certainly did not allow the implication to be drawn that we can know, as surely as we might, that a particular sentiment is the sentiment of moral approval solely by introspection. According to Hume at least three criteria must be invoked before we can claim with reasonable certainty that a particular sentiment is moral approval:

- (i) that the sentiment in question is pleasurable rather than painful
- (ii) that the object of our sentiment is a person
- (iii) that the pleasure is one which could be felt by a disinterested person contemplating the same situation.¹²

(ii) is, of course, the crucial point here. My conclusion is that assertion (a) above does not transpose from pride to moral approval without producing false claims about Hume’s views.

Now take (b)₂. By implication Kenny argues here that according to Hume we could (logically) morally approve of anything whatsoever. As an account of Hume, this is simply false. Hume confronts precisely this fear expressed in the transposition of Kenny’s claim from pride to moral approval:

Now it may . . . be objected to the present system, that if virtue and vice be determin’d by pleasure and pain, these qualities must, in every case, arise from the sensations; and consequently any object, whether animate, or inanimate, rational or irrational, might become morally good or evil, provided it can excite a satisfaction or uneasiness (III, i, 2, p. 471).

In the case of the moral sentiments at least, it is clear that Hume was well aware of the dangers which Kenny expressed in relation to the indirect passions. Hume’s reply is embodied in what I have called the three “criteria” listed above for distinguishing moral sentiments from other sentiments. Also quoted earlier is his statement that virtue and vice “must necessarily be placed in ourselves or others”. Approval may well have objects other than ourselves or others, but according to Hume if approval is not of *persons*, then it is not *moral* approval—a very strict limitation indeed of the possible objects of the moral sentiments. Although he was not quite so explicit concerning the indirect passions, I believe that Hume intended a similarly strict limitation upon the possible objects of those. Thus love and hate, properly so called, always, according to Hume, have as an object a person other than oneself; and pride and humility always have as an object the

¹²*Treatise* III, i, 2, pp. 472-3.

self.¹³ Whereas Kenny is inclined to take these remarks, in the light of the epistemological and methodological views of Book I, as empirical generalizations, I am inclined to take them in the light of the firmer claims made about the objects of the moral sentiments in Book III and thus to see them as rather stronger claims than that, i.e., as laying down conditions which must be satisfied for the proper use of these expressions.

Nonetheless Kenny might well be inclined to argue that there is something deficient in Hume's account of the indirect passions/moral sentiments, viz., that they are contingently related to their objects. For, he claims,

It is because our minds happen to be made as they are that the object of pride [moral approval] is self [a person], not because of anything involved in the concept of *pride*; just as it is because our bodies happen to be made as they are that our ears are lower than our eyes, not because of anything involved in the concept of *ear*.¹⁴

Certainly some of the things which Hume says do support such a view, not least his insistence that he hopes to produce a "science of man" or of "human nature".

However, all is not quite as clear as Kenny implies, and this is relevant to how we interpret Hume's claim to be offering a "science of human nature". Kenny seems to imply that there is such a thing as the concept of pride independently of the way it is with men. Consider the following examples:

- (i) It is because our bodies happen to be made as they are that the things which we use for walking are legs (e.g., we *might* use arms and tails).
- (ii) It is because our bodies happen to be made as they are that we have the concept of walking (who ever heard of a worm going for a walk?).

In his treatment of pride/moral approval Kenny is assuming that Hume's conclusions are all of form (i): my alternative suggestion is that whereas *some* of Hume's conclusions are of form (i), the conclusions which he draws about the relation between the indirect passions, or moral sentiments and their objects if they are put into the form 'it is because . . .', should be put into form (ii). Of course, what would be gained from this is not clear—other, that is, than reminding philosophers that some of the concepts which we have are as they are because we are as we are. To moderate that a little, I think that Hume would want to insist that a number of the concepts which govern our social and political life can be understood only on the basis of a developed science of human nature because these concepts are intimately connected with the possibility, as distinct from the actuality, of there being men and women, in a way that, for example, the concept of a peninsula is not.

Thus whereas Kenny interprets a passage which states that "upon the removal of pleasure or pain, there is in reality no pride nor humility" as

¹³Cf. *Treatise* II, ii, 1: "Our love and hatred are always directed to some sensible being external to us; and when we talk of *self-love* 'tis not in a proper sense . . ." (p. 329). Cf. also II, i, 2, pp. 277-8.

¹⁴*Op. cit.*, p. 24.

implying a causal relation between pleasure and pride, I prefer to equate it to something like "in the absence of leggedness, or limbedness, there is no concept of walking".

Kenny might finally protest that I have as yet given no account of the most crucial passage of all, the one to which he refers as "Hume's explicit denial of intensionality", *Treatise* II, iii, 3.

A passion is an original existence, or, if you will, modification of existence, and contains not any representative quality, which renders it a copy of any other existence or modification. When I am angry, I am actually possess'd with the passion, and in that emotion have no more a reference to any other object, than when I am thirsty, or sick, or more than five foot high.¹⁵

What Hume is doing here, as the context makes abundantly clear, is denying that having a passion is like reasoning about something. Reason deals with the relation between ideas or the relation between ideas and objects, and a judgement is to be declared false if it misrepresents the relation between ideas and objects. The term 'object' is used widely and in a number of different senses by Hume. For example,

In order to excite pride, there are always two objects we must contemplate, *viz.*, the *cause* or that object [sense 1] which produces pleasure; and self, which is the real object [sense 2] of the passion.¹⁶

In the quotation offered by Kenny it is clear that Hume is using 'object' in sense 1 above and what he is saying is that a passion does not in any sense offer a representation of the relation between an object (an item in the world) and an idea. This passage simply has nothing to do with intensionality as discussed by Kenny, i.e., with the relation between a passion and what Hume calls above its "real object".

There are other passages which Kenny misinterprets,¹⁷ but these are less crucial than those which we have considered. What I hope has been established is that Kenny's view of Hume on the passions is a distortion. Certainly his remarks are not wholly unfounded. Certainly also, much in Hume that derives from the first pages of Book I and the basic structure of perceptions, ideas and impressions gives force to Kenny's account of Hume. There are, however, "tensions", and these become most apparent when we see where Hume's detailed discussion of the nature of the moral sentiments led him.

A clear case in point is his treatment of pleasure. Hume allows to pleasure and pain a central role in the formation and evocation of moral sentiments.

The chief spring or actuating principle of the human mind is pleasure and pain (III, iii, 1, p. 574).

Here more than anywhere one is confronted by his notorious disregard of the niceties of precise formulation. For example, in one paragraph in Book II (II, i, 7, p. 296) he writes seriously of unease and satisfaction "constituting

¹⁵p. 415, quoted in Kenny, *op. cit.*, p. 25 n.

¹⁶*Treatise* II, i, 6, p. 292; cf. also II, i, 9, pp. 305-6.

¹⁷II, i, 2; II, ii, 1; II, iii, 1.

the very essence of pain and pleasure", and of pain and pleasure being "the primary causes of vice and virtue". And in the space of a few lines in Book III he refers to particular pains and pleasures as "the distinguishing impressions [criteria?] by which moral good or evil is known", but at the same time suggests that these particular feelings "*constitute* our praise or admiration" (III, i, 2, p. 471; my italics). He also goes to considerable lengths to argue that we can distinguish between different pains and pleasures, and that the pleasures associated with the moral sentiments are distinguished, at least in part, by appeal to the situation within which or the standpoint from which they are had:

'Tis only when a character is considered in general, without reference to our particular interest, that it causes such a feeling or sentiment, as denominates it morally good or evil (III, i, 2, p. 472).

Whatever the difficulties which this leaves for Hume (e.g., how do we know when we have reached this standpoint?) at least they are not the difficulties of introspectively discriminating between different kinds of pleasure. The most significant point in all this, for our purposes, is that Hume was here struggling to find an adequate account of the ways in which pleasures and pains might be discriminated, but that of all the variety of claims which he makes, not once does he make what according to Kenny's account would be the consistent move: he does *not* argue that we know the meaning of the expressions 'moral approval' or 'moral pleasure', or 'aesthetic pleasure' by directly introspecting the particular feelings which we have.¹⁸

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¹⁸This paper was originally presented in August 1974 at a Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Studies Conference, arranged by the Humanities Research Centre of the Australian National University.