

# Hume on well-being

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In this paper, I consider the conception of well-being<sup>1</sup> in Hume's moral philosophy. It is not unusual now for Hume to be read as a kind of virtue ethicist, in which case, we may have a problem in specifying what kind of virtue ethicist (or theorist) Hume is. Indeed, there are some earlier works that address this problem. However, they do not discuss how Hume conceives of the relation between our well-being and the virtues. Hence, it is unclear whether the virtues, in Hume's thought, are necessary or/and sufficient conditions for our well-being.

I consider this relation and claim that, in Hume's thought, some kind of virtue is a necessary condition for our well-being, since such virtue benefits its possessors and his fellows. It is not, however, sufficient. According to Hume, the satisfactory review of one's own conduct is requisite for our well-being. Another kind of virtue, upon which immediate agreeable feelings attend, enables us to undertake this review. Therefore, in Hume's moral philosophy, if we want to attain the happy life – that is, well-being – we have to acquire not only the former kind of virtue but the latter.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I treat the following words as equivalent: well-being, happiness, the good of human beings, the good of society.

## Introduction

In this paper, I consider the conception of well-being in Hume's moral philosophy. In particular, I will consider how Hume thinks of the relation between our well-being and the virtues.

It is not unusual now for Hume to be read as a kind of virtue ethicist, in which case, we may have a problem in specifying what kind of virtue ethicist (or theorist) Hume is. Indeed, there are some earlier works that address this problem. For instance, Christine Swanton argues that Hume should be understood as part of a virtue ethical tradition which is sentimentalist in a response-dependent sense (Swanton [2007, 2009], also see Baier [2009]). And also, Michael Slote regards Hume as a sort of virtue ethicist who focuses attention on "empathy (sympathy)" (Slote [2010]). However, they do not consider Hume's conception of the relation between our well-being and the virtues. It is unclear, therefore, whether, and which, virtues, in Hume's thought, are necessary or/and sufficient conditions for our well-being.

On first glance, it might seem as if Hume does not discuss the relation. However, as I argue below, there are some explanations of it in Hume's writing. In this paper, I consider Hume's position on the relation between our well-being and the virtues. Firstly, I develop a conception of Hume as a kind of virtue ethicist by attending to his discussion of "general points of view". Secondly, I consider the problem of whether, and which, virtues, in Hume's thought, are necessary or/and sufficient conditions for our well-being. Thirdly, I provide my own interpretation that, in Hume's thought, some kind of virtue is a necessary condition for our well-being. This is not, however, sufficient for us to live a happy life. According to Hume, the satisfactory review of one's own conduct is requisite for our well-being. As I demonstrate, another kind of virtue, upon which immediate agreeable feelings attend, enables us to do this review. Finally, therefore, I insist that, in Hume's moral philosophy, if we want to attain a happy life, we have to acquire not only the former kind of virtue but also the latter.

## Hume as a sort of virtue ethicist

Jacqueline Taylor argues that 'Hume's moral philosophy may plausibly be construed as a version of virtue ethics,' because 'among the central concepts of his theory are character, virtue and vice, rather than rules, duty, and obligation' (Taylor [2006] p. 276). I agree

with her and, in what follows, I provide independent support for her contention through considering the role that, the notion of “the general points of view” (hereafter GPV) plays in Hume’s moral theory.

Traditionally, Hume’s GPV is interpreted as some kind of moral point of view (Radcliffe [1994], Korsgaard [1999]). According to the traditional view, we cannot experience the moral sentiments or have moral concepts unless we have already taken up GPV. It is only by taking up GPV that we come to be able to judge whether some action is right or wrong (e.g., Brown and Morris [2012] pp. 130–131). On this traditional view, when we make a moral judgment, we have to take up GPV; also GPV may be regarded as a device for evaluating some action or for reconciling some moral conflicts. However, this interpretation fails to apprehend, not only the role GPV plays, but also the context in which GPV appears.

In the first place, what perspective is GPV? Hume’s first explanation of it is as follows:

Our situation, with regard both to persons and things, is in continual fluctuation; and a man, that lies at a distance from us, may, in a little time, become a familiar acquaintance. Besides, every particular man has a peculiar position with regard to others; and ‘tis impossible we cou’d ever converse together on any reasonable terms, were each of us to consider characters and persons, only as they appear from his peculiar point of view. In order, therefore, to prevent those continual *contradictions*, and arrive at a more *stable* judgment of things, we fix on some *steady* and *general* points of view; and always, in our thoughts, place ourselves in them, whatever may be our present situation. (T 3.3.1.15, original italics.)

This explanation describes how we come to take up GPV. However, this explanation is incomplete, because, from this quotation, we have no idea exactly what perspective, or whose, we have to take in the moral evaluation. It must therefore be made clear what constitutes GPV and whose perspective it is.

In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Part III, Section 3, explaining goodness and benevolence, Hume argues about GPV more precisely. In this section, Hume rephrases GPV as “the only point of view”, in which our moral sentiments concur with those of others. Hume says,

Being thus acquainted with the nature of man, we expect not any impossibilities from him; but confine our view to that narrow circle, in which any person

moves, in order to form a judgment of his moral character. When the natural tendency of his passions leads him to be serviceable and useful within his sphere, we approve of his character, and love his person, by a sympathy with the sentiments of those, who have a more particular connexion with him. (T 3.3.3.2)

According to Hume, whenever we judge someone's moral character, we focus on (or we should focus on) their narrow circle. Their narrow circle is the sphere in which, typically, their family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and so on, live with them. In contrast with this "narrow" circle, the range of the sphere can be extended to the person's native country (*Ibid.*). Since those in the narrow circle have a closer connection with them than anyone else, they therefore are well-acquainted with the agent's character traits. Thus, they are the appropriate objects on which we focus when considering whether the character traits of the agent are virtuous or vicious.

Hence, in my (perhaps unorthodox) interpretation, Hume's GPV is the perspective which the persons in the narrow circle take. In Adam Smith's moral philosophy, on the other hand, the moral point of view is that of "impartial spectators". The traditional view regards Hume's GPV as something like the perspective of impartial spectators. This view insists that 'the general point of view, [...] brings a kind of *impartiality* to our moral judgments.' (Brown and Morris [2012] p. 131, my emphasis.)

I disagree with this view, and insist that, in contrast with Smith's view, the perspective which is involved with moral evaluation is, in Hume's moral philosophy, that of "*partial* spectators", in contrast with the meaning of the word "general" in "the *general* points of view". GPV is only the perspective in which we can know the *character* of the relevant agent. Hume's moral philosophy seldom addresses the problem of whether some action is right or wrong. Rather, it considers what kind of person does such an action, in other words, whether the person who does such an action is virtuous or vicious. Hence, even if we take up GVP, we cannot know what we should do when faced with a moral dilemma, and also we cannot judge whether some action (e.g., getting an abortion) is right or wrong. In taking up GPV, we can merely know someone's character. This suggests that Hume's moral philosophy is a kind of virtue ethics, and Hume is a sort of virtue ethicist, if virtue ethics is understood as mainly focusing on someone's character rather than their action.

## Justice as a means to attain the happiness

Traditionally, Hume's moral theory is interpreted as a sort of Contractarianism, or a precursor of Utilitarianism. (Cf., Gauthier [1979], Rosen [2003]) However, as argued above, Hume can be regarded as a kind of virtue ethicist. The question remains as to what Hume thinks about our well-being and, therefore, about human happiness. In this section, I consider Hume's conception of our well-being and, in particular, of the relation between our well-being and the virtues.

In the majority of Book3 of his *Treatise*, "Of Morals", Hume argues about justice. Justice is one of the artificial virtues that, by means of an artifice or a contrivance, arise from the circumstances and necessity of human beings (T 3.2.1.1). Justice involves, in essence, the following three rules (or laws): the stability of possession, the transference of property by consent, and the performance of promises (T 3.2.6.1). By the standard virtue ethical formula, a just person has the disposition or character trait to observe these rules.

Hume explains that justice is a moral virtue, because it has the tendency to promote the good of human beings (T 3.3.1.9). In *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, he gives a similar explanation:

The use and tendency of that virtue [justice] is to procure happiness and security, by preserving order in society. (EPM 3.8)

Justice is not only useful, according to Hume, but also *absolutely* necessary to human society. He claims that,

‘Tis on the strict observance of those three laws, that the peace and security of human society entirely depend; nor is there any possibility of establishing a good correspondence among men, where these are neglected. *Society is absolutely necessary for the well-being of men; and these are as necessary to the support of society.* (T 3.2.6.1, my emphasis.)

Since justice has the tendency to increase our well-being, justice is a moral virtue. It is also requisite to our well-being because it is the means by which we can maintain society, which is necessary to our well-being and subsistence (T 3.2.2.9). Hence, justice, as a moral virtue, is the necessary condition for our well-being in Hume's thought.

Justice is both useful and requisite to the well-being of human beings. However, it is not only justice that has the tendency to increase the good of human beings. Many natural

virtues, Hume claims, also have the same tendency. For example, beneficence, charity, generosity, and clemency; these have the same tendency to increase the good of human beings and Hume calls these (including justice) ‘social virtues’ (T 3.3.1.11).

However, in contrast to justice, Hume does not say that those kinds of natural virtues are requisite for our well-being. Indeed, Hume says, all virtues are considered as means to some evaluated ends (T 3.3.6.2), and that, all virtues never fail to benefit their possessor or his fellows (EPM 9.15). However, Hume gives no argument for the claim that the acquisition of these natural virtues is a necessary condition for our well-being. I now turn to addressing whether justice is the *only* necessary condition for our well-being.

### **Another necessary condition for happiness**

According to Hume, justice is useful for us, because it is only through the virtue of justice that we can maintain our society which provides much fortune (i.e., goods) for us. Thus, justice is regarded as a necessary condition for our well-being. Hence, we might conclude that it is possible for us to live a happy life, in so far as we acquire the tendency to observe the rules of justice.

However, this is not sufficient for attaining happiness. In the first place, justice is merely the means to some end and the end, in this case, is the acquisition of fortune. Then, it may be supposed that, if we, in some cases, can acquire more fortune by exercising some vices (for example, iniquity or infidelity) than by following the rules of justice, then justice will be not regarded as necessary to our well-being. This objection is, famously, illustrated by the sensible knave, who is a sort of free rider (EPM 9.22).

Against this objection, Hume provides an answer, and in his answer, we can find another important role which some virtues have in leading us to a happy life. Hume’s answer is that having some virtues is itself the path to our well-being. Hume says,

Inward peace of mind, consciousness of integrity, a satisfactory review of our own conduct; *these are circumstances, very requisite to happiness*” (EPM 9.23, my emphasis.).

Hume’s argument about what enables us to engage in this satisfactory review is as follows:

Now if life, without passion, must be altogether insipid and tiresome; let a man suppose that he has full power of modelling his own disposition, and let him

deliberate what appetite or desire he would choose for the foundation of his happiness and enjoyment. Every affection, he would observe, when gratified by success, gives a satisfaction proportioned to its force and violence; but besides this advantage, common to all, the immediate feeling of benevolence and friendship, humanity and kindness, is sweet, smooth, tender, and agreeable, independent of all fortune and accidents. These virtues are besides attended with a pleasing consciousness or remembrance, and keep us in humour with ourselves as well as others; while *we retain the agreeable reflection of having done our part towards mankind and society*. (EPM 9.21, my emphasis.)

According to Hume, we can neither attain the happy life only with the virtue of justice nor only with fortune. In this respect, Hume explains ironically,

... who can think any advantages of fortune a sufficient compensation for the least breach of the social virtues, when he considers, that not only his character with regard to others, but also his peace and inward satisfaction entirely depend upon his strict observance of them; and that a mind will never be able to bear its own survey, that has' been wanting in its part to mankind and society ? (T 3.3.6.6)

In order to be happy, we have to acquire the virtue of justice and some fortune, but these are not sufficient. We also have to cultivate certain kinds of natural virtues, such as benevolence, friendship, humanity, and kindness. By virtue of these natural virtues, we can get a satisfactory review of our own conduct. Hence, not only justice, but also those virtues which enable us to retain this agreeable reflection are necessary conditions for our well-being. This is, Hume says, the just notion of the happiness (T 3.3.6.6).

Here, I want to point out two important qualifications. Firstly, I am not suggesting that, in Hume's moral theory, *all* virtues are necessary conditions for happiness. I am only claiming that, at least, justice and certain natural virtues are. This conception of the relation between the virtues and our well-being is different from that of other virtue ethicists. For example, John McDowell and Rosalind Hursthouse think that *all* virtues are necessary for *eudaimonia* (McDowell [1979]; Hursthouse [1999]). In contrast, Hume makes no such claim.

Secondly, it should be noted that, Hume does not think that the sensible knave can be convinced by appealing to the just notion of the happiness. Hume seems to think, like Hurst-

house, that our ethical outlook and that of sensible knaves (Hursthouse's 'immoralists') are different and that there is no neutral point of view to convince both. That is why, in replying to the sensible knave, Hume pessimistically says

I must confess that, if a man think that this reasoning much requires an answer, it would be a little difficult to find any which will to him appear satisfactory and convincing. If his heart rebel not against such pernicious maxims, if he feel no reluctance to the thoughts of villainy or baseness, he has indeed lost a considerable motive to virtue... (EPM 9.23)

## Concluding remarks

In this paper, I identified Hume as a kind of virtue ethicist and then considered what Hume thinks of the relation between our well-being and the virtues. Justice is the important moral virtue for us to maintain our society and thereby to benefit its possessors. Having justice is one of the necessary conditions for our well-being, but it is not sufficient. In order to be happy, we must also cultivate certain natural virtues. Since these natural virtues make it possible for us to review our own conduct in an agreeable manner, having these natural virtues is another necessary condition for our well-being.

I have, therefore, established Hume's conception of the relation between our well-being and the virtues. There remain some problems with this conception. For instance, McDowell and Hursthouse think that *all* virtues are necessary for *eudaimonia*, but Hume does not think so. The question is which conception makes more sense for virtue ethics. I leave this problem for another occasion.

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