‘Effects on the Mind’ as Objects of Reasoning: A Perspectivist Reading of the Reason-Passion Relation in Hume’s Sentimentalism

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Introduction

On a scale from the most subjective to the most objective, moral judgements seem to fall somewhere between judgements of taste on one end of the scale and descriptions of the physical world on the other. If there is disagreement on a moral matter, we are less prone to think that someone must be in error than if there are conflicting views on, say, the circumference of the earth. On the other hand, there is a radical difference between saying, for example, that slavery is wrong, and saying that coffee tastes good or that ice baths are pleasant. In contrast to such matters of subjective taste, there can be reasons and complex argumentation for and against the moral judgement, and it makes sense to say that someone is mistaken about it, or that slavery would be wrong and those who practised it morally blameworthy even if everyone thought the opposite. A theory of ethics ought to explain how moral discourse can have these features and how it nevertheless differs from physical discourse—if nothing else by explaining some or all of this away as misleading appearances.¹

I think this is part of what Hume sets out to do in his “sentimentalist” theory of morality. The result is difficult to fit into a coherent picture, however. Moral qualities are ultimately “distinguished by our sentiments, not by reason” (T 3.3.1.27; SBN 589).² Moral approbation and disapprobation therefore “cannot be the work of the judgment, but of the heart” (EPM App1.11; SBN 290).³ The wrongness of a crime, for instance, is not a “particular fact or relation, which can be the object of the understanding” (EPM App1.16; SBN 292-293). It “lies in yourself, not in the object” (T 3.1.1.26, SBN 468). But virtue and vice are qualities that exist independently of the moral spectator’s sentiments about them; virtue is the tendency to be “useful or agreeable” to oneself or others, vice the disposition to have effects of the opposite kind, and it is a ”plain matter of fact”, determinable by “the experimental method”, which
actions and character traits have such causal tendencies (EPM 9.1; SBN 268, EPM App1.10; SBN 289, EPM 1.10; SBN 173-174; cf. T 3.3.1.3; SBN 575). Not surprisingly, Hume has been interpreted in very different ways, as saying that moral statements do not state facts but merely express the speaker’s feelings (expressivism), that they are descriptions of the speaker’s feelings (subjective naturalism), that they describe tendencies of actions and characters to excite moral pleasure or pain in beholders (dispositionalism), and that moral merit and demerit consists in the largely observer-independent property of utility and agreeableness to others or oneself (objectivism).

Part of the difficulty, I think, is to be clear about the question Hume is asking, or perhaps better, to which his argument fits as a possible answer. As he states it, the problem concerns the respective roles of reason and passion, or sentiment, in moral judgement and reasoning. Among other things, this leads him to discuss whether vice and virtue are a special kind of relations between ideas or matters of fact, and hence potential objects of human understanding (T 3.1.1.18; SBN 463, EPM App1.6; SBN 287). I think it is important to note, however, that a solution to the first problem does not necessarily depend on a solution to the latter. In a footnote to the essay “The Sceptic”, Hume compares secondary and moral qualities. Like tastes and colours, he says, virtue and vice “lie not in the bodies, but merely in the senses”.

This doctrine, however, takes off no more from the reality of the latter qualities, than from that of the former [...] There is a sufficient uniformity in the senses and feelings of mankind, to make all these qualities the objects of art and reasoning, and to have the greatest influence on life and manners. And as it is certain, that the discovery above-mentioned in natural philosophy, makes no alteration on action and conduct; why should a like discovery in moral philosophy make any alteration?

Because of the uniformities in human perception and feeling, virtue and vice can thus be “objects of reasoning” even if they are not relations of ideas or matters of fact but merely effects produced upon the mind (as Hume says of beauty a paragraph earlier). I think there is an important hint here, namely, that a sentimentalist understanding of morality does not essentially depend on the intricate metaphysical and semantic
problems with which today’s meta-ethical theories and interpretations of Hume’s ethics are typically concerned: whether moral statements can be true or false or merely express the attitudes of the speaker, whether there exist mind-independent or perhaps mind-dependent states of affairs that make moral views and their linguistic expressions true and false, etc.

I will argue that Hume is primarily concerned with a different (although obviously related) problem, namely, to what extent and under which conditions issues of moral disagreement and inquiry are rationally decidable, in other words, possible to determine one way or the other by valid arguments. Sentimentalism suggests that some moral issues are in principle rationally decidable and others in principle non-decidable. (By “in principle”, I mean that they are one or the other in an ideal case where no participant in the disagreement or inquiry proceeds from false or misleading evidence or draws ungrounded conclusions from the evidence.) The problem, then, is to determine which issues belong to the first category and which to the second. If morality were entirely a matter of subjective taste, then no moral issue would be rationally decidable, and if moral discourse had the same degree and kind of objectivity as non-evaluative discourse about the physical world, then all moral matters would be rationally decidable. But apart from such hard-line subjectivism and realism or objectivism, the problem of rational decidability as it arises for the sentimentalist does not imply or depend on any particular semantic or metaphysical meta-ethical stance.

I will go on to argue that Hume’s solution to the problem of rational decidability, or at least a solution suggested by much of what he says, is a view that I will call moral perspectivism. A perspectivist sees the rational decidability of an issue of disagreement as depending on the perspectives of the participants in the disagreement (discussion, debate, inquiry). If the disagreeing parties share a perspective, they can reach agreement by valid arguments, provided that none of them reasons from false or misleading evidence or draws hasty conclusions. If their perspectives are different, however, then even the best evidence and the most faultless reasoning from it may not be sufficient for agreement. By a perspective, I here mean a set of factual or normative presuppositions, the accepting of which may in turn depend on
affective dispositions such as the capacity to share other people’s feelings. For example, an issue of debate may be decidable by argument between two people who both have a fully developed capacity for what Hume calls sympathy, or sympathy and humanity, but not between someone who has that capacity and someone who lacks it.

Elaborating and clarifying the idea of perspectivism and the related notions of rational decidability and perspectives will require a conceptual apparatus far beyond anything available to Hume himself. This leads to the question whether the result can represent a view that Hume held or even could have held. The answer, I think, is no, but I do not see this as deeply problematic. Hume seems to vacillate between different positions, possibly because he was simply not entirely clear about certain aspects of his own argument. To my mind, the interesting task is therefore not so much to establish what Hume “really thought” as to develop his argument further. What I will try to show is that moral perspectivism represents a line of argument that Hume would have done well to think through more deeply because it solves an important problem which he does not fully solve, is compatible with the main lines of his argument, and is suggested by important parts of it.

The term “perspectivism” is intended to stress the parallel to what Robert Fogelin has called a radical perspectivism in Hume’s analysis of inductive knowledge, where Hume shifts back and forth between points of view that are treated as incompatible but nevertheless equally legitimate: the unreflective stance of everyday thought, the intellectually sophisticated standpoint of a cautious inquirer who believes only that for which he can find sufficient evidence, and the philosophical outlook of a radical skeptic who considers nothing more likely than anything else. For example, Hume first argues at great length for skepticism about causation, and then goes on to state criteria for determining causes and effects in particular cases (T 1.3.15; SBN 173-176, cf. EHU 4, 10; SBN 25-39, 109-131). In a similar way, I think, Hume shifts between the moral perspective of someone with a fully developed capacity for moral feelings and the perspective of someone who lacks that capacity, when saying, for example, that it is not contrary
to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of one’s finger (T 2.3.3.6; SBN 416). In both cases, certain important issues are considered rationally decidable within a perspective, while it is impossible to decide by reason alone, without some other contributing factor, between the perspective as a whole and a certain conflicting perspective.

In what follows, I first take a closer look at the notion of reason in Hume’s account of the reason-passion relation, arguing that Hume is primarily concerned with reason as the capacity to decide matters of disagreement and inquiry by argumentation, and that his account of this capacity is perspectivist. I then go on to explore the idea of perspectivism and the related notions of rational decidability and perspectives, and discuss parallels and divergences between moral perspectivism and perspectivism about inductive knowledge.

**Reason: understanding, causal inference, or argumentation?**

In the first appendix of the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hume sums up his view of the relation between reason and sentiment in moral thought:

> The former conveys the knowledge of truth and falsehood: The latter gives the sentiment of beauty and deformity, vice and virtue. The one discovers objects as they really stand in nature, without addition or diminution: The other has a productive faculty, and gilding or staining all natural objects with the colours, borrowed from internal sentiment, raises, in a manner, a new creation... After all circumstances and relations are laid before us, the latter makes us feel from the whole a new sentiment of blame or approbation (EPM App1.21; SBN 294).

Here the basic division of cognitive labour seems clear: reason discovers facts, sentiment (feeling, passion, taste) determines their moral qualities. But Hume’s view on the reason-sentiment relation is deeply ambiguous—partly, I think, due to an ambiguity in the notion of reason. When Hume talks of “reason”, he sometimes has in mind what he also calls human understanding, sometimes a particular part or aspect of the understanding, namely causal reasoning, and sometimes the settling of
issues of disagreement and inquiry by argumentation.

“Reason” has the first sense when, in the *Treatise*, Hume talks of the “objects of human reason or enquiry” and divides them into relations of ideas and matters of fact, the former being objects of mathematical intuition and demonstration and the latter of immediate sense experience and causal inference (EHU 4.1; SBN 25; cf. EPM App1.6; SBN 287 and T 1.3.1-1.3.2; SBN 69-78). Thus understood, reason is the mind’s capacity to gain empirical and non-empirical knowledge by applying intuition, demonstration, observation, and causal inference to their respective objects. A lengthy discussion in the *Treatise* (omitted in the main text of the moral *Enquiry*) is devoted to the problem whether vice and virtue are a particular type of natural or philosophical relation, alongside with causality, contrariety, and so on (T 3.1.1.18-26; SBN 463-469).

Hume uses “reason” in a narrower sense when it is said to direct the impulses of passion by showing how objects holding the prospect of pleasure or pain are causally connected to other objects. This is followed by the remark that “reason is nothing but the discovery of this connection” (EPM App1.2; SBN 285-286, T 2.3.3.3; SBN 414). In other words, “reason” is just causal inference, or reasoning on empirical matters (or, possibly, inference more generally, including mathematical and logical demonstration).

But “reason” is not just the capacity to gain knowledge of matters of facts and relations of ideas. With the possible exception of his remarks on animals, Hume associates reason with the practice of giving reasons, of using argument to defend and question beliefs, opinions, judgements, and statements. Reason—“sound reason”, “accurate and just reasoning” (T 3.2.10.15; SBN 563, EHU 1.12; SBN 12), is characterised by the employment of arguments answerable to certain standards, which Hume calls “rules of just reasoning” (EHU 10.1; SBN 109) and explores in his investigations of human understanding. Reason in any sense is therefore opposed to superstition (for instance in T 3.2.10.15; SBN 563, EHU 1.12; SBN 12), to the debating practices of those who exhibit “blind adherence to their own arguments” (EPM 1.1; SBN 169), to non-rational influences
on thought such as education when its teachings are contrary to reason (T 1.3.9.19; SBN 117), and to attempts by metaphysicians to go outside the “proper province of reason” (EHU 1.12; SBN 12). More positively, it is associated with common sense (EPM 1.2; SBN 170) and with the impartial enquirer, “who will be satisfied with nothing but sound reason and philosophy” (T 3.2.10.15; SBN 563). The emphasis here is thus on argumentation and on deciding issues of inquiry and disagreement by sound arguments.

What depends on differentiating these senses of “reason”? To begin with, I believe Hume needs it to avoid contradiction when arguing that the mind’s transition from cause to effect “is not determined by reason” (T 1.3.6.12; SBN 92; cf. EHU 5.20; SBN 54). If reason is equivalent to human understanding or causal reasoning, this says, paradoxically, that the inferences of reason are not determined by reason. But if reason is understood as argumentation, then what Hume claims is that the operations of the understanding when associating causes and effects are ultimately not justifiable by sound arguments. In other words, human understanding is, to that extent, not based on argumentation but on custom and habit and ultimately on human nature.

More important for our present purposes, the interpretation of reason as argumentation has implications for the understanding of Hume’s moral sentimentalism. If “reason” stands for human understanding, then the idea that sentiment rather than reason distinguishes vice from virtue implies or at least strongly suggests that moral qualities are not facts or properties of a kind that can become objects of knowledge (the understanding). But if “reason” means argumentation, then what Hume says is either that argumentation is unnecessary for moral thought and discourse, or—much more plausibly—that it is necessary but not sufficient for it. Argumentation is part of moral thought and discourse, but it depends on sentiments. What is the nature of this dependence?

**Argumentation and the moral point of view**

When Hume in the moral *Enquiry* introduces the controversy between rationalists and sentimentalists, he explains that the question debated is whether the foundations of morals are “the same to every rational
intelligent being” or, like our ideas of beauty, are founded “entirely on
the particular fabric and constitution of the human species” (EPM 1.3;
SBN 170). One way to formulate this problem is to ask whether anything
more than reason is required for resolving moral issues, and, more
precisely, for making it possible to resolve them by argumentation.
Hume’s answer is of course that morality depends on “some internal
sense or feeling, which nature has made universal in the whole species”
and which pronounces “the final sentence” that stamps characters and
actions as praise-worthy or blameable (EPM 1.9; SBN 172-173).

Similarly, the investigation of human understanding “to its first
principles” led him to conclude that the connection between causes and
effects really lies in us and not in the objects, and that reason itself
depends on principles that cannot be defended by argumentation (T
1.4.7.5; SBN 266). In both cases, the conclusion is that the practice of
deciding issues by sound arguments depends on factors outside reason
itself, factors that are part of human nature. In his moral theory, Hume
specifically stresses that those foundations of

reason outside itself must be universal. If different humans or groups of
humans had radically different moral feelings or dispositions to feeling,
or if some of them lacked such feelings altogether, then it would be
possible to argue rationally with members of the same group but not with
members of other groups. Rational discussion on moral matters is
possible only where there exists a common ground of feelings, or
dispositions to feelings. (See below on the notion of common ground.)

How is the need for a common ground to be reconciled with the fact that
people differ widely in their emotional responses to objects and facts?
Part of the answer is that moral thought and discourse require a special,
moral point of view (EPM 9.6; SBN 272, T 3.3.1.15, SBN 581-582), in
contrast to what one might call our natural or undeveloped individual
points of view. If I call someone my “enemy” or “rival”, Hume says, then
it is clear that I “speak the language of self-love” and do not make a
moral judgement. I thus judge the other according to my own self-interest
in my present circumstances and by my utterance express what I feel
from that individual point of view, which may be quite different from
what other people feel. If I call someone “vicious” or “perverted”,

however, then I have shifted to characteristically moral terminology and aim to express feelings that I expect others to share or at least have reason to share. When a speaker uses moral language, he must therefore depart from his private and particular situation, and must choose a point of view, common to him with others: He must move some universal principle of the human frame, and touch a string, to which all mankind have an accord and symphony (EPM 9.6; SBN 272; cf. T 3.3.1.15, SBN 581-582).

Adopting the moral point of view is a precondition for rational decidability, not only in discourse with others but also in individual moral reasoning. Just as sense impressions of external things change with distance and light conditions, for instance, moral feelings change with circumstances and state of mind, so that even an individual subject would get into contradiction unless he compensated for those variations. The moral point of view must be constant under variation within as well as between individual points of view. It must be “steady” and not just “general” (T 3.3.1.15; SBN 581; by the moral point of view, or perspective, I here mean the point of view adopted by someone who shifts from the “language of self-love” to moral language; I leave open the question whether it is identical to what Hume calls the common or steady and general point of view, although I tend to think that it is).

The moral point of view both allows for and in a sense requires argumentation. If people speak entirely from their individual viewpoints, then the fact that their judgements differ is not in itself a sign that someone is in error or has reasoned badly. You consider someone your enemy, and I consider the same person my friend, because our interests and circumstances are different (including our relations to other people). There is no real contradiction and nothing to debate. But if you say of someone that he is vicious and I say of the same person that he is virtuous, then argumentation for and against our respective views is both possible and called for.

When we see things from the moral perspective, we disregard our self-interest and share other people's feelings and opinions through sympathy (T 3.3.1.14; SBN 580-581, T 3.3.1.30; SBN 590-591, EPM 5.43-45; SBN
230-321, EPM 9.6, SBN 272-273). This can happen by means of direct emotional and cognitive contagion, as when seeing someone else’s sad or angry face puts one in a low spirit. But it can also result from what contemporary empathy theorists call perspective-taking, that is, by viewing the others’ situation the way they themselves do it, as when the sight of a city in ruins makes one imagine how the inhabitants must feel, and wish to help them (T 2.2.9.17; SBN 388, T 2.1.11.2; SBN 317).

In sum, then, taking the moral perspective makes argumentation on moral matters possible, and requires it when there is contradiction or disagreement. According to sentimentalism, only someone who has certain dispositions to feelings can assume that special perspective on others and himself.

**The idea of perspectivism**

Here are what I take to be the main tenets of moral perspectivism:

1. *Perspective-dependence of rational decidability*: Moral issues of disagreement and inquiry are rationally decidable only among speakers and thinkers who share a particular perspective.

2. *Contingency of the moral perspective*: The moral perspective is partly determined by contingent traits of the subject, such as the tendency to have feelings of particular kinds.

3. *Universalism*: The capacity for such feelings is shared by everyone (all humans, or perhaps all humans with normally developed intellectual and emotional abilities).

It seems to me that Hume commits himself to (1) by what he says about moral discourse and the common point of view, (2) by the sentimentalist thesis that morality is founded on sentiment and thus “on the particular fabric and constitution of the human species” (EPM 1.3, SBN 170), and (3) by saying that the moral sentiment is “so universal and comprehensive as to extend to all mankind” (EPM 9.5, SBN 272).

As a universalist, Hume rejects the relativist view that what is right or
good for people in one tradition or group may be wrong or bad for people in another. Morality depends on feelings of a particular kind, but these are feelings “which nature has made universal in the whole species” (EPM 1.9; SBN 173). In the essay “A Dialogue”, he specifically argues that there exist universal moral standards, grounded in sentiment but valid independently of particular traditions. But Hume also makes it clear that morality cannot be grounded in arguments that would be valid for intelligent beings with a different “fabric and constitution” than humans (EPM 1.3, SBN 170). Thus, if someone had a psyche deviant enough to prefer

the destruction of the whole world over the scratching of his finger, then we could provide no argument to convince him otherwise (T 2.3.3.6; SBN 416). Although Hume repeatedly stresses the universality of moral feelings among human beings, it seems to me that something similar might also be the case with born psychopaths, who for some reason or another lack the disposition to “sympathy and humanity” crucial to moral sentiment.

**Rational decidability**

Perspectivism, thus understood, is concerned with the rational decidability of moral issues. What is meant by rational decidability here, and how can a “mere effect on the mind” such as beauty or virtue be determined by argument in the same way as mind-independent qualities? It seems to me that Hume’s answer to this question is at best incomplete, so that we must temporarily part company with him in search of a solution.

We may begin by noting that the distinction between rationally decidable and non-decidable matters is one that speakers make in everyday communication, whether they reflect on it philosophically or not. People tend to argue on certain matters but find argument on other matters pointless. If someone says there are polar bears in Alaska and someone else replies that there are not, then they will be likely to dispute each other’s views and adduce evidence for and against them (consulting the zoological literature, for example). But if one speaker says that clams are delicious and another replies that they are not, it is likely that they will
choose not to dispute the matter. Certain topics seem to be such that they cannot be rationally decided by even the most thorough investigation by the most conscientious and well-informed enquirers imaginable. Some people find clams delicious and others do not, and there is no objective truth of the matter to be right or wrong about. However, other topics seem to be such that an objective truth (or something like it) about them exists and holds independently of individual perspectives. The polar bears are either there or not, regardless of what anyone thinks about the matter. If two persons disagree on an issue of the second type, it is possible in principle if not always in practice to decide it by argumentation, but when people have opposite views on matters of the first type, no argument can show one side to be right and the other wrong. The maxim De gustibus non disputandum est is an over-simplified but handy criterion for recognising topics of this kind, and helps speakers avoid wasting time and energy on fruitless argumentation.\textsuperscript{xiv}

Here is a proposal for a more precise criterion: A statement $s$ is rationally decidable if there cannot be faultless disagreement about it, and rationally non-decidable if there can. In other words, it is not rationally decidable if one speaker can assert $s$ and another not-$s$ without any of them having made a cognitive error, and it is rationally decidable if whenever one speaker states $s$ and another not-$s$, then one of them must have made a cognitive error.\textsuperscript{xv}

By a cognitive error, I here mean a violation of what Hume calls the rules of just reasoning. Proceeding on the (broadly Humean) assumption that we reason about the world by making observations and inferences from observation, we can make a basic division of cognitive errors into those that concern observation and those that concern inference. One can err in one’s thinking by making observational mistakes (conflating perceptual objects of different kinds, for example), by reasoning from insufficient evidence, or by making purely inferential errors (such as affirming the consequent). Hence a thinker has made a cognitive mistake whenever he has reasoned from erroneous, incomplete or misleading evidence, or drawn conclusions that do not follow from the premises.
As defined so far, the criterion of rational decidability categorises all statements as either rationally decidable or not. There is reason to be more nuanced on this point, however. Among the statements on which there can be faultless disagreement among speakers with different perspectives, and which are thus rationally non-decidable according to the criterion, there may be some that are nevertheless sign of cognitive error if there is disagreement about them between speakers with the same perspective.\textsuperscript{xvi}

Suppose, for example, that at a dinner Peter, Paul, and Simon are served fermented herring and discuss the question whether it is tasty. (Fermented Baltic herring, \textit{surströmming}, is a traditional dish in parts of Northern Sweden.) Peter hates fermented herring altogether, but Paul and Simon both love it, especially when it is firm in consistence and not very salty. Resisting his impulses, Peter takes the first bite, and immediately expresses his total disgust. Paul responds by praising the dish and blaming Peter for not appreciating it appropriately. Here it seems obvious that none of the two has made a cognitive mistake. Both are in possession of all relevant evidence and none has drawn hasty conclusions. Nonetheless, they cannot reach agreement, because the matter under debate is not rationally decidable. But suppose now that Paul is also challenged by Simon, this time on the grounds that Oskar’s, the particular brand of fermented herring served, is not up to standard. “Oskar’s herring isn’t that good this year”, he says, “It’s too salty and not as firm as last year’s”. They taste it, and Paul admits that he was wrong; the fish was indeed too salty and not sufficiently firm. Moreover, he explains that he had so far only tasted last year’s brands and not this year’s, and so had drawn hasty conclusions from incomplete evidence. Being due to a cognitive error, the disagreement could thus be resolved by the introduction of additional empirical evidence.\textsuperscript{xvii}

An implication, I think, is that a given matter of disagreement or inquiry is in itself neither rationally decidable nor the opposite. Whether it is one or the other depends on the perspectives of speakers. The criterion of rational decidability allows for this if revised as follows:\textsuperscript{xviii} A statement is rationally decidable among the members of a certain group of speakers if there cannot be faultless disagreement on it between members of the
group, and otherwise not rationally decidable among them.

The notion of a perspective

According to moral perspectivism, rational decidability thus depends on perspectives. What precisely can be meant by a perspective here?

The notion of a perspective occurs in ordinary language and has special uses in the theory and history of visual arts, in philosophy, linguistics, sociology, history, and psychology. As we have noted, taking other people’s perspectives is part of empathetic understanding, and thereby also of what Hume calls sympathy. In a very wide sense, perspectives are that which makes the same thing appear differently to different subjects or the same subject at different occasions—an object looks small from a distance but large when the observer is close, a certain character trait commands respect and admiration in one historical period but is looked down upon in another. In the present context, perspectives can be thought of as that which makes something true, warranted or justified for a particular person or group of persons, but false, unwarranted or unjustified for another person or group.

In what seems to be its most literal sense, a perspective is the physical position from which something is observed—the observer’s “point of view”, as it were. Looking from opposite sides, Peter and Paul see a ball lying next to a pole. From Peter’s position, the ball is to the right of the pole, while from Paul’s it is to the left. Hence they assign opposite truth-values to the sentence “The ball is to the right of the pole”. The two speakers are expressing the same propositional content, and there is no contradiction or disagreement. What depends on perspectives here is primarily meaning or reference and secondarily truth of sentences or utterances.

A perspective in the sense indicated—and in ordinary usage of the term—can also include things like a scientific paradigm or a cultural tradition. Non-circular planetary motion is an anomaly from a Ptolemaic but not from a Newtonian perspective. Same-sex marriage is morally acceptable from the perspective of many contemporary Westerners, but not from that of, say, a Christian who interprets certain Biblical passages
in traditional ways. Here “perspective” refers to sets of explicit or implicit factual or evaluative background assumptions, and what depends on them is justification, or the strength of reasons. It was a deeply entrenched assumption in the Ptolemaic paradigm that celestial bodies and their motion were circular. That assumption would typically function as an implicit premise in arguments both for and against predictions or hypotheses within the theoretical framework of the paradigm.

When people who share a perspective talk with each other, they will express their evaluative views by talking about objects and their properties in the same way that they would talk about non-evaluative physical properties. In this particular linguistic mood and frame of mind, the tastiness or non-tastiness of herring is ascribed to it in the same way as its length or weight. What is described, disputed or inquired into, one might say, is the herring, not the views or attitudes of the speakers and thinkers. Talking with people who do not share their perspective, however, the same people will often shift from “object-talk”, as one may call it, to mentalistic “perspective-talk” about the attitudes of themselves and others.

In moral object-talk, the relevant feelings—of sympathy, humanity, or benevolence—are part of the common ground, and are therefore presupposed but not asserted. As uttered in such a context, a statement about right or wrong or good and bad expresses something about which one can be right or wrong within the perspective, and arguments about it can be good or bad according to shared standards. By contrast, if the speaker addresses someone with a conflicting perspective, he can shift to perspective-talk in order to facilitate communication. However, he may also maintain his perspective and continue in the object-talk mood, as when one person shouts “You can’t do that!” to another who obviously has a different opinion and is not open to argumentation on the matter.

In the herring example, taste is a decisive element in the perspectives of the speakers. Hume occasionally talks of a “moral taste”, or “taste or sentiment”, and of moral “beauty” and “deformity”, thus indicating continuity between the two types of evaluative thought and discourse
Arguing that both reason and sentiment are essential to moral thought, he draws a distinction between “immediate” moral and aesthetic feelings on the one hand, and feelings resulting from argumentation on the other.

Some species of beauty, especially the natural kinds, on their first appearance, command our affection and approbation; and where they fail of this effect, it is impossible for any reasoning to redress their influence, or adapt them better to our taste and sentiment. But in many orders of beauty, particularly those of the finer arts, it is requisite to employ much reasoning, in order to feel the proper sentiment; and a false relish may frequently be corrected by argument and reflection. There are just grounds to conclude, that moral beauty partakes much of this latter species, and demands the assistance of our intellectual faculties, in order to give it a suitable influence on the human mind (EPM 1.9; SBN 173, cf. T 3.3.1.30; SBN 591).

Feeling and taste of the first kind informs us of immediate agreeableness of actions, character traits, or objects, while feeling of the latter kind informs us of their utility, or agreeable effects not directly discernible in sense experience. This suggests two ways in which the moral perspective is constituted by dispositions to feelings.

First, our tendencies to feel in certain ways determine the “moral sense”, if understood by analogy to the five senses, that is, the way we immediately perceive virtuousness and viciousness when we see people acting and displaying character traits.

Second, the fact that we perceive (or react to perception) in this way causes us to accept, if only implicitly and unreflectively, a principle that is presupposed in all moral discourse, namely, “that Personal Merit consists altogether in the possession of mental qualities, useful or agreeable to the person himself or to others” (EPM 9.1; SBN 268, cf. T 3.3.1.30; SBN 591). This principle is “implicitly maintained” in common life,
nor is any other topic of praise or blame ever recurred to, when we employ
any panegyric or satire, any applause or censure of human action and behaviour. If we observe men, in every intercourse of business or pleasure, in every discourse and conversation; we shall find them no where, except in the schools, at any loss upon this subject (EPM 9.1-9.2; SBN 268-269).

This is not to say that people always reason in accordance with the fundamental moral principle (as I will call it). We have a strong tendency to see things from the point of view of self-interest, or “self-love”, as opposed to the moral point of view. Moreover, some people lack the well-developed capacity for sympathy, humanity and benevolence that is required for moral feelings, either because it has not been sufficiently developed by education and intercourse with others, or because it has been perverted by “artificial” philosophical doctrines or religious superstition and “enthusiasm” (Dial. 52-57; SBN 341-343).xx

Although the moral point of view is based on dispositions to feelings that everyone has, it is thus not the perspective of everyone, or even of anyone all of the time. But among people who do think and speak within that perspective, there exists a crucially important common ground for moral discourse and argumentation. Hume gives the example of a man being praised for his cheerfulness, wit, fairness, kindness, and magnanimity, all qualities that contribute directly or indirectly to the man’s own happiness or that of others. By selecting these character traits as praiseworthy rather than, say, fasting or self-denial, the speakers display their “preference of what is useful and serviceable to mankind, above what is pernicious and dangerous”. That preference is in turn caused by their sentiments of benevolence and humanity (EPM 9.3-4, SBN 270-271). To someone who lacked any such sentiments, none of the qualities mentioned would be a reason to hold a person in high regard.

**Perspectives as presuppositions**

In ordinary usage, “perspective” often means little more than belief or opinion. In the present context, however, it stands for something that is typically shared by people of opposite opinions. It is so to speak the background against which discourse and argumentation for and against different views take place. Thus understood, a perspective is as a set of
presuppositions made in communication or reasoning. In discourse with others, we normally take for granted facts that all participants are assumed to know and norms that they are taken to share, but which would have to be explained and justified if we were talking to people with other perspectives. And arguing for and against statements, we are typically satisfied with reasons that are only valid if further assumptions are made, assumptions which are not themselves explicit parts of our arguments. Our explicit statements and arguments make sense only against the background of other assumptions which are implicitly presupposed but not asserted.

One of the things that make the distinction between presupposition and statement important is that both agreement and disagreement with a statement normally implies acceptance of its presuppositions. Suppose that I say: “It’s wrong that my father-in-law’s second wife will inherit almost everything he owned”. On a reasonable interpretation of this statement, I assert that the fact about the inheritance referred to is wrong, but presuppose a large, perhaps indefinite number of other things: that I am married, that my wife or husband has at least one father, that the father was married first to one woman and then to another, that he had fairly considerable assets and that his second wife will inherit most of those assets. Depending on the context, I may also presuppose, for instance, that the content of the letter from the lawyer that informed me of my father-in-law’s will was true, and that the person I am addressing is not a close friend of his second wife. If someone responds to my statement about the inheritance by saying “But he only married once”, or “In fact he had nearly nothing”, he thus challenges my presupposition, but if he replies either “Yes, it’s a shame” or “No, she deserves the money”, then in both cases he accepts my presuppositions and only expresses agreement or disagreement with what I assert.

According to a tradition inspired by Frege and P. F. Strawson, presupposition is a semantic relation holding between sentences or propositions, such that one sentence is presupposed by another if and only if the first must be true for the second to be either true or false. For instance, the sentence “Eldorado was in Colombia” is neither true nor false if Eldorado never existed, and so both the sentence
and the denial of it presuppose that it (or he) did.

In so-called pragmatic theories, however, the distinction between presupposition and statement or statement is drawn, not in terms of the content of the propositions expressed, but in terms of the context in which a statement is made, and in particular the attitudes and intentions of the speaker and his audience, as in the definition quoted above. A pragmatic, or contextual, presupposition of a sentence is a belief which a speaker would normally expect to be part of the “common ground” of beliefs accepted by everyone who takes part in the discourse in which the sentence is uttered. In other words, it is something that “goes without saying” because everyone accepts it and everyone knows that everyone else also accepts it. An interesting attempt at a definition of contextual presuppositions is the following:

Statements and requests are made, questions asked, proclamations and commands issued, against a background of common knowledge, or at least what is represented as common knowledge. This background of knowledge or beliefs purportedly shared by the speaker and his audience constitute the presuppositions which define the context. A rough definition might go something like this: A speaker presupposes that \( P \) at a given moment in a conversation just in case he is disposed to act, in his linguistic behavior, as if he takes the truth of \( P \) for granted, and as if he assumes that his audience recognizes that he is doing so.

Implicit assumptions, or suppressed premises, are a special form of contextual presuppositions. The following attempt to explicate this notion will be helpful for our present purposes:

One shows that a person ‘presupposes’ something by showing that, if one or more of the person’s beliefs were made the conclusion of an explicit logical argument, premises in addition to those explicitly avowed by the reasoner would be required to make the argument valid.

This explication fits in with the as if-clauses in the contextual definition of presupposition above. One presupposes something if one reasons as if one holds it true, whether or not one has explicitly reflected or even thought of it. For instance, someone who draws inductive conclusions from observations of particular cases (as everyone does) presupposes the
reliability of induction even if he has never thought about the matter or even knows what induction is (cf. T 1.3.16.3; SBN 176-177).

It is in the same sense, I think, that all moral discourse presupposes the principle that virtue is usefulness and agreeability to others and oneself. If someone says that a certain action is morally right or a character trait virtuous, then if his statement were made the conclusion of an explicit deductive argument, the principle would be required to make the argument valid (if Hume is right), and if someone takes the opposite view, he presupposes the same principle in the same way.

**Presuppositions, moral sentiments, and rational decidability**

To sum up the discussion so far, I have argued that Hume in the analysis of reason and passion in morality is concerned with a problem about the range and limits of rational decidability, and proposes a perspectivist solution to it. As the term suggests, the notion of perspectivism is bound up with that of perspectives, or bodies of presuppositions, that enable argumentation and discourse on factual, moral and other matters. Discourse between people proceeds from a common ground of shared presuppositions. Argumentation takes place against a background of implicit premise-type presuppositions. According to moral perspectivism, issues about right and wrong and good and bad are rationally decidable only among people who share a common ground of presuppositions—according to Hume, what I have called the fundamental moral principle and the tendency to feelings of sympathy and humanity that make us accept that principle. With people who have no such feelings, we lack sufficient common ground for moral argumentation. For instance, we cannot argue with the man who will let the world go under to avoid a small bodily pain of his own.

The fermented herring example illustrates the crucial difference between discourse with and without a common ground for argumentation. Sharing a particular taste, the two herring-lovers Paul and Simon could give perfectly valid reasons for and against aesthetic judgements about fermented herring—ranking different brands, for instance. No such argumentation was possible with Peter, who took no pleasure whatsoever
in the herring and with whom they therefore lacked a common ground for discussion. Although Hume does not use the term presupposition, I think he takes moral feelings to play the same in moral thought and discourse as gustatory taste in this example. Sentiments so to speak put the foundations in place on which moral argumentation can build. These foundations cannot be derived from reason, but depend on contingent features of human nature.

This line of reasoning suggests that aesthetic and moral “taste”, or sentiments, or tendencies to pleasure and pain of particular kinds, are presuppositions of aesthetic and moral statements and arguments. However, presuppositions are usually understood as propositional attitudes, and, more precisely, attitudes of holding something true. A question here is therefore whether moral sentiments are propositional attitudes: and if not, how their apparent presupposition-like role is to be interpreted. This question calls for a more thorough discussion than is possible here. But it seems to me that if moral sentiments are propositional attitudes, then it is clear in what sense they are also presuppositions of aesthetic and moral statements, respectively; and if they are not, then it is strictly speaking not the moral taste or sentiments themselves that are presupposed in moral discourse, but the fact or presumed fact that everyone who participates in the discourse (and thus takes the common point of view) are causally determined by such sentiments in their judgements of character traits and actions.

A further possible objection against the idea of moral sentiments as presuppositions is that Hume appears to think of reason and sentiment as two consecutive and distinct steps in a mental process, in which sentiment comes after rather than before reason, and that, if so, moral judgement cannot properly be said to presuppose feelings in any sense (but rather to “post-suppose” them). For instance, he writes that in moral deliberations, we must be acquainted, before-hand, with all the objects, and all their relations to each other... All the circumstances of the case are supposed to be laid before us, ere we can fix any sentence of blame or approbation (EPM App1.11; SBN 290).
But as far as I can see, this remark just emphasises the logical distinction between moral premises and conclusions, and does not imply any psychological claims about the existence of phenomenologically separable mental entities. It is like saying that the mind must “first” be acquainted with constant conjunction of objects or events “before” it can draw any conclusions about necessary connections or causes and effects. This is true in a logical sense but not as a description of any introspectively available mental goings-on. Hume himself emphasises this when he writes, in the analysis of induction, that the mind is not led by “reflection” from the idea of a cause to the idea of its effect (T 1.3.8.13; SBN 103-104). Apart perhaps from exceptional cases, we do not explicitly formulate arguments with previous experience and its presumed conformity to future experience as premises. Instead, we are carried by habit along a certain train of ideas as by “a wonderful and unintelligible instinct”, just like animals when they associate causes and effects (for instance, a dog who hears his master’s angry voice and thinks of his own punishment; T 1.3.16.6-9; SBN 178-179). Similarly, the non-evaluative ideas of the objects and their relations and the moral feelings they prompt are not temporally and phenomenologically distinct phenomena—or at least I think it would be both implausible in itself and unnecessary from Hume’s vantage point to claim that they were. We simply see certain things as good or bad, right and wrong, and can only later and by a mental effort, if at all, separate the value-free facts or factual beliefs from the evaluation.

**Epistemic and moral perspectivism**

It seems to me that Hume is a perspectivist both in his epistemology and his moral theory, and that a comparison between the two types of perspectivism is illuminating.

Hume argues in his analysis of induction that reason depends on the principle “that instances, of which we have had no experience, must resemble those, of which we have had experience, and that the course of nature continues always uniformly the same” (T 1.3.6.4; SBN 89, italics in the original). This principle is presupposed whenever we draw
conclusions from observed to unobserved facts, but no argument can be
given for it which does not already presuppose it (T 1.3.6.11-12; SBN
91-92).

In all reasonings from experience, there is a step taken by the mind, which is
not supported by any argument or process of the understanding (EHU 5.2;
SBN 41).

Thus all probable reasoning is nothing but a species of sensation. It is not
solely in poetry and music we must follow our taste and sentiment, but
likewise in philosophy... When I give the preference to one set of arguments
above another, I do nothing but decide from my feeling concerning the
superiority of their influence (T 1.3.8.12; SBN 103).

This is why Hume can shift back and forth between the perspectives of
skepticism and common sense, without regarding the one as rationally
more defensible than the other. The point is of course not that we should
give up common sense, but that in holding on to it we are driven by
custom, habit, and nature and not by reason (cf. T 1.4.7.7; SBN 267). If
we do accept the basic presuppositions of common sense, however—the
reliability of induction and the uniformity of nature—then reason so to
speak has what it needs to ground all sorts of

claims about the future, unobserved causes, laws of nature, and so on. In
his moral theory, Hume ascribes a very similar role to the fundamental
principle of

virtue as utility and agreeability to others and oneself. It functions as a
premise in all moral discourse and reasoning, but one for which we can
give no reason that does not already presuppose it. The amoral
perspective of someone who does not care about the well-being of others
is no less rational than the moral, common point of view. It is not reason
but feeling and taste that make us see things from the moral perspective.
If we do see things from that perspective, however, then we can take part
in moral discourse and decide moral issues of disagreement and inquiry
by argumentation.

Besides these parallels between epistemic and moral perspectivism, there
are divergences. Except for short moments of philosophical reflection, it
is impossible to avoid relying on induction. Our very mental constitution seems to force upon us the “indolent belief in the general maxims of the world”, so that we find ourselves “absolutely and necessarily determined to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life” (T 1.4.7.10). The tendency to moral thought and feeling seems much less compelling. People may be too egoistic to take up the moral point of view, their moral feelings may be perverted by superstition and enthusiasm, and some, like the “sensible knave”, might perhaps even lack any tendency whatsoever to think in moral terms (EPM 9.22; SBN 282).

Moreover, Hume treats the capacity and tendency to induction as an ultimate principle of human nature, which does not allow of further explanation. By contrast, there is a detailed account in the Treatise of the origins of moral thought and feeling in the mechanism of sympathy. Interestingly, though, Hume in the moral Enquiry seems to equate induction and morality in this regard, saying little more about the roots of sympathy, humanity, and benevolence than that they derive “from the original frame of our temper” (EPM App2.13; SBN 302).

Despite the divergences, I think the parallel between epistemology and moral theory is helpful. Epistemic perspectivism is a view on the foundations of empirical thought, or in more Humean terms reasoning about matters of fact. As such it obviously does not support any particular empirical theory against another. The common sense, non-skeptical epistemic perspective is not a special theory or view of the world, but that which makes us draw inferences from observed to non-observed objects, regardless of what it is we infer. Similarly, moral perspectivism concerns the nature of moral as opposed to non-moral thought, not the relation between competing systems of moral beliefs. With regard to the latter, Hume’s view is the universalist, non-relativist one that all moral thought ultimately rests on the fundamental moral principle as a shared premise. This premise defines the moral point of view in the same way that reliance on induction and uniformity of nature defines the common sense epistemic point of view.

**Conclusion**

Hume says that “the whimsical condition of mankind” makes people
act and reason and believe; though they are not able, by their most diligent
enquiry, to satisfy themselves concerning the foundation of these operations,
or to remove the objections, which may be raised against them (EHU 12.23, SBN 159-160)

The German author and philosopher Friedrich Schiller writes something
very similar, and takes the thought a step further. Nature, he says, acts for
man as long as he is unable to act for himself as an independent
intelligence, but

the very fact that constitutes him a man is, that he does not remain stationary,
where nature has placed him, [and] that he can pass with his reason, retracing
the steps nature had made him anticipate. xxix

I think Hume would have agreed, and that indeed an important strain in
his moral theory and

epistemology is precisely to retrace or reconstruct the “steps of nature”
(including custom and habit) by identifying the basic presuppositions of
human thought and discourse, and scrutinising those presuppositions for
their rational credentials. In doing so, he explores the province and
boundaries of rational argumentation. An important part of this
investigation is to specify the function and limits of reason in moral
thought and discourse, and its relation to sentiment.

Unlike truths of physics or astronomy, moral statements arguably do not
describe characteristics that reality would possess even if no thinkers
existed. But unlike purely personal judgements of taste, moral statements
also do not just express the idiosyncratic perspective of the speaker.
There can be reasons for and against them, such reasons can be good and
bad, and if they are bad, then it makes sense to say that the speaker is
mistaken. I have argued that a core element in Hume’s view on the
respective roles of reason and sentiment in morality is the idea that the
possibility of deciding issues of disagreement and inquiry by reason
depends on the circumstances of discourse, and more precisely on the
relations between the perspectives, or common ground of
presuppositions, of the participants in the discourse. If “reason” in the
distinction between reason and passion stands for human
understanding—the capacity to gain knowledge of “objects as they really
stand in nature” (EPM App1.21; SBN 294)—then the idea that sentiment rather than reason distinguishes vice from virtue would imply, or at least strongly suggest, that moral qualities are not facts or properties of a kind that can become objects of reason. But if, as I have argued, “reason” means argumentation and inquiry, then what Hume says is that the possibility of deciding moral issues of inquiry and disagreement by reason depends on the existence of a shared perspective, which in turn depends on the existence of common dispositions to feelings.


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v In the *Treatise* Hume asks whether moral distinctions are derived from reason or sentiment and a moral sense (T 3.1-3.2; SBN 455-476), in the moral *Enquiry* whether the foundation of morals are derived from reason or sentiment (EPM 1.3; SBN 170) and “how far either reason or sentiment enters into all decisions of praise or censure” (EPM App1.1; SBN 285).


xiv The criterion is taken from Köbel, Truth Without Objectivity, 31, with “objective” replaced by “rationally decidable” and “content” with “statement”. xv Köbel, Truth Without Objectivity, 107-108. xvi I have used this example in The author 2009a.