

Treatise of Human Nature

Book III: Morals

David Hume

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are described, between brackets, in normal-sized type.

First launched: October 2008

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Part i: Virtue and vice in general

1: Moral distinctions aren't derived from reason

All abstract reasoning has this disadvantage: it can silence an opponent without convincing him, because it's as hard to see the force of such an argument as it was to discover the argument in the first place. When we leave our study and get involved in the common affairs of life, the argument's conclusions seem to vanish like the phantoms of the night when sunrise comes, and it's hard for us retain even the conviction that we had so much trouble acquiring. This is even more conspicuous with a long chain of reasoning, where we have to preserve the evidentness of the first propositions right through to the end, and where we often lose sight of accepted maxims of philosophy or of common life. But I have some hope that the system of philosophy that I am presenting here will gather force as it advances, and that my reasonings about •morals will corroborate what I have been saying about •the understanding and •the passions. We care more about morality than about anything else; we imagine the peace of society to be at stake in every decision concerning it, and obviously that has to make our theoretical thinking about morality appear more real and solid than our thoughts about any subject that doesn't much matter to us. Anything that has an effect on us, we think, can't be a chimera ·and so must be real·; and because our passions are engaged on the one side or the other in disputes in morality, we naturally think that the question lies within our intellectual reach, which is something we aren't sure of in other cases of this nature. Without this advantage, I wouldn't have ventured on a third volume of such abstract philosophy, at a time when most people seem to agree in taking reading to be a mere

pastime and in rejecting anything that can't be understood without a great deal of concentration.

* * * * *

I have said that nothing is ever present to the mind but its perceptions; and that 'perception' covers all the actions of seeing, hearing, judging, loving, hating, and thinking. Anything the mind can do is a 'perception'; so our judgments distinguishing moral good from moral evil are as much *perceptions* as anything else the mind does. Approving this character and condemning that are merely two perceptions.

Perceptions fall into two kinds, impressions and ideas; so let us start our enquiry into morals with that distinction, by asking:

When we distinguish vice from virtue, and declare a given action to be blameworthy or to be praiseworthy, are we doing this by means of our ideas or by means of our impressions?

This will immediately cut short all loose discussions and speeches, and bring us down to something precise and exact concerning our subject.

It has been maintained that

- virtue is nothing but conformity to reason;
- there are eternal fitnesses and unfitnesses of things, which are the same to every rational being who considers them;
- the changeless standards of right and wrong impose obligations not only on human creatures but also on God himself.

All these views have something in common, because they all imply that morality, like truth, is discovered merely by putting ideas together and comparing them. So if we are to judge these theories we need only consider whether unaided reason enables us to distinguish moral good from moral evil, or whether some other principle must be at work to enable us to make that distinction. **[Important note:** More than half of Hume's uses of the word 'principle' in *Treatise* III, including the one two lines up, give it a meaning that it often had in his day, namely that of 'source', 'cause', 'drive', 'mechanism' or the like. From now on, every occurrence of the word in that sense of it will be written as 'principle_c', suggesting 'principle = cause'. A 'principle' without the subscript is a proposition, usually a premise but sometimes a conclusion.]

If morality didn't naturally influence human passions and actions, it would be useless to try so hard to inculcate it, and nothing would be achieved by the multitude of rules and precepts that all moralists churn out. Philosophy is commonly divided into •speculative and •practical; and as morality is always classified as •practical, it is supposed to influence our passions and actions, going beyond the calm inactive judgments of the understanding. And this is confirmed by common experience, from which we learn that men are often governed by their duties, deterred from certain actions by the opinion that they would be unjust, and pushed into other actions by the opinion that they were obligatory.

So morals have an influence on our actions and feelings, which implies that they can't be derived from reason because reason alone (as I have already proved) can never have any such influence. Morals arouse passions and produce or prevent actions. Unaided reason is powerless to do such things. So the rules of morality are not conclusions of our reason.

I don't think anyone will deny that this inference is

valid; there's no way to escape its conclusion except by denying its premise, namely the principle that reason has no influence on our passions and actions. As long as that stands, it's hopeless to claim that morality is discovered purely through a deduction of reason. An active principle_c can never be based on something inactive; and if reason is intrinsically inactive then it must remain so in all its shapes and appearances, whether it exerts itself in natural subjects (the powers of external bodies) or in moral ones (the actions of rational beings).

It would be tedious to repeat the arguments I presented in II.iii.3 to prove that reason is perfectly inert and can never prevent or produce any action or feeling. . . . I'll return here to just one of those arguments, which I'll try to make still more conclusive and more applicable to the present subject.

Reason is the discovery of truth or falsehood. Truth or falsehood consists in an agreement or disagreement either with the real relations of ideas, or with real existence and matter of fact. So anything that isn't capable of this agreement or disagreement isn't capable of being true or false, and can never be an object of our reason. Now, our passions, volitions, and actions are basic facts and realities; they are complete in themselves and aren't in any way *about* other passions, volitions, and actions; so they aren't capable of either of those sorts of agreement or disagreement; so they can't be sorted into 'true' and 'false', and can't be either in conflict with reason or in accord with it.

This argument serves my purpose in two ways at once. •It proves directly that actions don't get their merit from a conformity to reason, or their blame from a contrariety to it; and •it proves the same truth more indirectly, by showing that because reason can't immediately prevent or produce any action by contradicting or approving of it, it can't be the source of moral good and evil, which *do* have that influence.

Actions can be praiseworthy or blameworthy, but they can't be reasonable or unreasonable; so 'praiseworthy' and 'blameworthy' are not the same as 'reasonable' and 'unreasonable'. The merit and demerit of actions frequently contradict and sometimes control our natural patterns behaviour; but reason has no such influence. So moral distinctions are not the offspring of reason. Reason is wholly inactive, and can't be the source of such an active principle_c as is conscience, or a sense of morals.

You may want to say:

Although no will or action can be immediately contradictory to reason, perhaps reason can be contradicted by some of the causes or effects of the action. The action may cause a judgment; or it may be obliquely caused by one, when the judgment goes along with a passion; and in such a case we might say that *the action* is in conflict with reason.

Saying this—attributing the conflict with reason to the action itself rather than to some judgment that is a cause or effect of the action—is a misuse of language, and philosophy will hardly allow it. But without any such misuse, you can still say that what makes an action right or wrong is the relation to reason—i.e. the truth or falsity—of some judgment suitably associated with it. That is the issue I will now look into: To what extent can morals arise from the truth or falsehood of judgments that cause or are caused by the actions in question?

I have pointed out that *reason*, in a strict and philosophical sense of that word, can influence our conduct in only two ways. •It can arouse a passion by informing us of the existence of something that is a proper object of it. •It can discover cause-effect connections, thereby showing us how to go about satisfying some passion. These are the only kinds of judgment that can be said to *produce* our actions in

any way; and of course these judgments can often be false. •You might be led to have a certain passion by your belief that pain or pleasure would come from something that in fact has no tendency to produce either pain or pleasure—or has a tendency to produce pain (if you predicted pleasure) or pleasure (if you predicted pain). •You might go about achieving your purpose in the wrong way, foolishly doing things that hold back your project instead of pushing it forward. These false judgments may be thought to affect the passions and actions that are connected with them, and may be said to render them unreasonable (in a figurative and improper way of speaking). But it's easy to see that such errors are far from being the source of all immorality—so far that they are commonly very innocent, and don't bring any sort of guilt onto the person who has the misfortune to fall into them. All they involve is a mistake of *fact*; and moralists haven't generally thought such mistakes to be criminal, because we don't *choose* to make them. If I am mistaken about what objects will produce pain or pleasure, or if I don't know the right way to go about satisfying my desires, you may feel sorry for me but you won't *blame* me. No-one could think that such errors are a defect in my moral character. . . .

And there's another point: if •moral distinctions are derived from the truth or falsehood of those judgments, •they must be applicable wherever we form the judgments—it won't make any difference whether the judgment in question concerns an apple or a kingdom, or whether the error is avoidable or unavoidable. The very essence of morality is supposed •by the theory I am discussing• to consist in agreement or disagreement with *reason*; so the other details of a situation make no difference, and can't give any action the character of virtuous or vicious, or deprive it of that character. Also: this agreement or disagreement

doesn't admit of degrees—there's no such thing as 'fairly much agreeing' or 'greatly disagreeing'—so on this theory all virtues and vices would be equal.

Someone might say: 'A mistake of *fact* isn't criminal, yet a mistake of *right* often is; and this may be the source of immorality.' I reply that such a mistake can't possibly be the *basic* source of immorality, because it presupposes a real right and wrong—i.e. a real distinction in morals independently of these judgments. So a mistake of right may become a sort of immorality; but it would only be a secondary one, based on some other right/wrong distinction underlying it.

As for judgments that are *effects* of our actions, and which when false might lead us to describe the actions as

contrary to truth and reason: notice first that our actions may cause judgments in others, but never in ourselves. It often happens that an action gives rise to false conclusions in others. Someone who sees me through a window behaving in a lewd way with my neighbour's wife may imagine she is my wife. In this way my action is a little like a lie; but with this difference, that I don't act as I do •with any intention of giving rise to a false judgment in someone else, but merely •to satisfy my lust and passion. Still, it does accidentally cause a false judgment in someone, and this falsehood of its effect may be figuratively ascribed to the action itself. But I can't see the beginnings of any reason for claiming that the tendency to cause such an error is the basic source of all immorality.¹

¹ One might think there was no need to argue for this point if it weren't for the fact that a late author who was fortunate enough to obtain some reputation seriously claimed that such a falsehood is indeed the foundation of all guilt and moral ugliness. [This was William Wollaston, who died about 15 years before Hume wrote the *Treatise*.] To see that he was wrong about that, we need only consider this:

When a false conclusion is drawn from an action, that is because there's some obscurity about the natural forces that were at work: a cause has been secretly interrupted in its operation by contrary causes, making the connection between two items uncertain and variable. But that kind of uncertainty and variety of causes occurs even in natural •non-human• objects, where it produces a similar error in our judgment. If that tendency to produce error were the very essence of vice and immorality, it would follow that even inanimate objects could be vicious and immoral!

[Hume continues at some length with objections to the feeble version of Wollaston's theory that equates moral wrongness with simple causing-false-beliefs. Then he turns to the much more interesting and substantial thesis that Wollaston is] reasoning in a circle. A person who takes possession of *someone else's* goods and uses them as *his own* does in a way declare them to be his own; and this falsehood is the source of the immorality of theft. But are 'property' and 'right' and 'obligation' intelligible without an antecedent morality? A man who is ungrateful to his benefactor does in a way affirm that he never received any favours from him. But in what way? Is it because it's his duty to be grateful? This presupposes that there is some antecedent rule of duty and morals. . . .

Anyway, this whimsical system collapses for another reason. It offers to explain such things as that

ingratitude is morally wrong

in a manner that presupposes that

telling or implying a falsehood is morally wrong,

and it has no explanation of *that*. If you insist, I'll agree that all immorality is derived from this supposed falsehood in action *if* you can give me any plausible reason why such a falsehood is immoral! If you think straight about this, you'll see that it takes you right back to your starting point. . . .

So the distinction between moral good and evil can't possibly be made by reason, because that distinction has something that unaided reason can't have, namely an influence on our actions. Reason and judgment may indeed be the *mediated* cause of an action, by prompting or by directing a passion; but no-one claims that a judgment of this kind is accompanied by virtue if it is true or by vice if it is false. And as for the judgments that are caused by our actions, they are even further from giving those moral qualities to the actions that are their causes.

Here are some more detailed reasons for holding that there's no sound philosophical basis for the view that there are eternal unchangeable fitnesses and unfitnesses of things.

If unaided thought and understanding could fix the boundaries of right and wrong, any item's being virtuous or vicious must consist either in some **relations** between objects or in some **matter of fact** that is discovered by our reasoning. It is obvious that this follows. The operations of human understanding are of two kinds, •the comparing of ideas and •the inferring of matters of fact; so if virtue were discovered by the understanding, it would have to be an object of one of these operations—there's no third operation of the understanding that could discover it.

Certain philosophers have busily propagated the opinion that morality can be demonstrated; and though no-one has ever advanced one step in those demonstrations, it is

assumed that this science •of demonstrative morality• can be brought to a level of certainty equal to that of geometry and algebra. Now, no-one thinks that any **matter of fact** can be demonstrated; so on this supposition •that morality can be demonstrated•, vice and virtue must consist in some **relations**. Let us put the supposition to the test by trying to *fix* those moral qualities that have for so long eluded our researches, by pointing out the **relations** that constitute morality or obligation. . . .

If you contend that vice and virtue consist in relations that are capable of certainty and demonstration, you must confine yourself to the four relations that are the only ones admitting of that degree of evidentness; and if you do so, you'll run into absurdities from which you will never be able to extricate yourself. [Hume is relying here on a conclusion he reached in I.iii.1.] The four relations I have mentioned can apply to beings that don't think—indeed to beings that aren't even alive—so *they* will have to be capable of moral merit and demerit if you are right that the very essence of morality lies in those four relations. They are:

resemblance,
contrariety,
degrees in quality, and
proportions in quantity and number.

These can relate •inert• material things as well as they can relate our actions, passions, and volitions, and that settles

² As evidence of how confusedly people commonly think about this subject, notice that those who say that morality is demonstrable do *not* say:

•Morality lies in the •four• relations, and those relations are distinguishable by reason.

All they say is:

•Reason can discover that any action that stands in *these* relations is virtuous, and any action that stands in *those* relations is vicious.

They seem to have thought that all they needed was to bring the word 'relation' into the proposition, without troubling themselves over whether it was really any help! Here is a plain argument •that they ought to accept; it is obviously valid, its first premise is true, and its second premise is the hypothesis I am now discussing•:

the issue: morality doesn't lie in of any of these relations, and the moral sense doesn't make discoveries about them.²

If you say 'The sense of morality consists in the discovery of some relation other than those four, and when you brought all demonstrable relations under four general headings you left something out', I don't know what to say in reply until you have the courtesy to tell me *what* the new relation is. It's impossible to refute a system that hasn't yet been explained. Trying to do so is fighting in the dark, wasting one's blows on places where the enemy is not present.

In the meantime I must rest content with saying that anyone who wants to clear up this system must make it satisfy two conditions. **(1)** It must say that moral good and evil consist in relations between internal ·mental· actions and external objects. (Why? Well, consider the options:

- (a)** Morality consists in relations of external objects to other external objects.
- (b)** Morality consists in relations of internal objects to other internal objects.
- (c)** Morality consists in relations of internal objects to external objects.

If **(a)** were right, it would follow that even inanimate things would be capable of moral beauty and ugliness; so that is out. If **(b)** were right, it would follow that we could be guilty of crimes *within ourselves*, independently of where and how we were situated within the universe; so that is out too. All that remains is **(c)**.) It's hard to believe that any relation can be

discovered that will **(c)** relate internal objects to external ones that couldn't also **(b)** relate some of our passions, volitions, and actions to others of our passions, volitions and actions, or **(a)** relate external objects to other external objects.

(2) The second condition that this system must satisfy will be even harder to make good on. Those who maintain an *abstract rational* difference between moral good and evil, and a *natural* fitness and unfitness of things, maintain that because these relations are eternal and unchangeable,

- (i)** they are the same when considered by every rational creature, and
- (ii)** their effects must also be the same, which implies that they influence the will of the Deity as much as—indeed *more than*—they influence rational and virtuous human beings.

These are evidently distinct points. It is one thing **(a)** to know virtue, and another **(b)** to conform your will to it. Thus, if you want to prove that the measures of right and wrong are eternal laws that are obligatory on every rational mind, it isn't enough merely to show the relations they are based on; you must also point out the connection between those relations and the will, and to prove that this connection is so necessary that it must have its influence—the same influence—in *every* well-disposed mind, even when in other respects the differences between these minds are immense and (·in the case of ourselves and God·) infinite. Now, I have already shown that even in human nature no relation can

•Demonstrative reason discovers only relations.

•Reason also discovers vice and virtue.

Therefore

- Vice and virtue are relations.

The hypothesis we are examining isn't intelligible unless it says this: When we blame any action in any situation, the whole complex action-in-situation object must form certain relations that constitute the essence of vice. . . .

ever *on its own* produce any action; and I have also shown in Book I that there is no connection of cause and effect (which is what we are supposed to have here) that can be discovered in any way except through experience, so there is none that could be discovered just by thinking about the objects. All the beings in the universe, considered in themselves, appear entirely loose and independent of each other. It's only by experience that we learn about their influence and connection, and this influence we ought never to ·be said to· extend beyond experience.

So there we have it: it's impossible to fulfill **(1)** the first condition for a system of eternal rational measures of right and wrong, because it's impossible to point to any relations on which the right/wrong distinction could be founded; and it's equally impossible to fulfill **(2)** the second condition, because we can't prove *a priori* that those relations, if they really did exist and really were perceived, would be universally forcible and obligatory.

To make these general reflections more clear and convincing, I shall illustrate them by two particular examples, ones that everyone agrees involve the character of moral good or evil. The first concerns ingratitude, the most horrid and unnatural of all the crimes human creatures can commit—especially when it is committed against parents and expresses itself in wounding and killing. Everyone accepts this, philosophers as well as laymen, and the only question about it that arises among philosophers is this: Is the guilt or moral ugliness of an act of ingratitude •discovered by demonstrative reasoning or •felt by an internal sense through some sentiment that naturally arises from thinking about such an action? The former answer to this question will soon be ruled out if I can show that the same relations hold amongst non-human objects without implying any guilt or wickedness in them. Using reason...is nothing

but taking two or more ideas together and discovering the relations among them; and if two instances of the very same relation have different characters, those characters can't be discovered merely by reason. ·I am going to put that truth to work by presenting two instances of a certain relation of which clearly one is morally bad and the other isn't, from which I'll infer that that moral difference isn't discovered by reason·. [Hume is about to use 'inanimate' in a sense that the word had at his time, closer to its etymological sense of 'not breathing' than our sense for it is; thus, 'inanimate' objects included plants as well as sticks and stones.] Let us choose any inanimate object, say an oak tree, and let us suppose that by dropping its seeds this tree produces a sapling below it, the sapling gradually grows until at last it overtops and destroys the parent tree. Doesn't this involve every relation that can be found in parricide or ingratitude? Isn't one tree the cause of the other's existence, and the latter the cause of the destruction of the former, in the same way as when a child murders his parent? You may say 'In the case of the tree no *choice* or *will* is involved', but that won't help you. In the case of ·human· parricide, the act of will of the murderous child is only the cause of the action—it makes no difference to what relations the murderous act involves, these being exactly the same relations as are involved in the tree-killing episode that arises from some other principle_c. It is a will or choice that determines a man to kill his parent; and the laws of matter and motion determine a sapling to destroy the oak from which it sprang. The relations have different causes in the two cases, but it's still the same set of relations in both; the discovery of those relations doesn't bring immorality into the picture in both; so that notion doesn't arise from such a discovery, ·which means that immorality is not discovered by reason·.

My second example is even more like its human analogue.

Why is it that in the human species *incest* is criminal, when in non-human animals the very same action and the very same relations haven't the faintest touch of moral baseness and ugliness? [The rest of this paragraph is unduly hard to follow. Its main point is that the rationalist—the person who says that morality is discovered by reason—won't be helped by pointing out that humans have reason while other animals don't, or anyway don't have enough reason to discover how disgustingly wrong incest is. That response doesn't spare the rationalist from the conclusion that incest in non-human animals is disgustingly wicked, though they aren't equipped to discover this. To avoid that conclusion on the grounds that such animals don't have reason, the rationalist would have to say not that reason *discovers* moral truths but that it *creates* them. Hume winds up:] This argument deserves to be weighed, because it is in my opinion entirely decisive.

My argument doesn't merely prove that morality doesn't consist in any •relations that are the objects of science [here = 'objects of treatment by strictly demonstrative procedures']; it also proves, just as conclusively, that morality doesn't consist in any •matter of fact that can be discovered by the understanding. This is the second part my argument, and if it can be made evident we can conclude that morality is not an object of reason. [The phrase 'the second part' links with the opening sentence of the paragraph starting 'If unaided thought. . .' on page 238.] Can there really be any difficulty in proving that vice and virtue are not matters of fact whose existence we can infer by reason? Take any action that is agreed to be vicious—willful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find the matter of fact or real existence that you call 'vice'. However you look at it, all you'll find are certain passions, motives, volitions, and thoughts; those are the only matters of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you as long as you focus on the object, .i.e. the individual action, the

murder. You can never find it until you turn your reflection into your own breast and find a *sentiment of disapproval* that arises in you towards this action. [The next two sentences are verbatim from Hume.] Here is a matter of fact, but it is the object of feeling, not of reason. It lies in yourself, not in the object. So when you say of some action or character that it is vicious, all you mean is that you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from contemplating it. [Hume says that you have this feeling 'from the constitution of your nature', by which he means: that you have this feeling is just a fact about how you are built; it's not something that you could derive from some deeper-lying thought or feeling that you have.] So vice and virtue may be compared to sounds, colours, heat, and cold, which modern philosophy says are not •qualities in objects but •perceptions in the mind; and this discovery in morals, like the other in physics, is to be regarded as a considerable advance in the speculative sciences; though it is also like the other in having little or no influence on practice. Nothing can be more real, or concern us more, than our own sentiments of pleasure and uneasiness; and if these are favourable to virtue and unfavourable to vice, this is all that is needed for the regulation of our conduct and behaviour. [Hume uses the phrase 'conduct and behaviour' several times. Perhaps he means 'what we do and how we do it'.]

I can't forbear adding an observation that may be found of some importance. In every system of morality I have met with I have noticed that the author •proceeds for some time reasoning in the ordinary way to establish the existence of a God, or making points about human affairs, and then he suddenly surprises me by •moving from propositions with the usual copula 'is' (or 'is not') to ones that are connected by 'ought' (or 'ought not'). This seems like a very small change [Hume writes 'This change is imperceptible', but he can't mean that literally], but it is highly important. For as this 'ought' (or

'ought not') expresses some *new* relation or affirmation, it needs to be pointed out and explained; and a reason should be given for how this new relation can be—inconceivably!—a deduction from others that are entirely different from it. Authors don't ordinarily take the trouble to do this, so I

recommend it to you; and I'm convinced that paying attention to this one small matter will •subvert all the vulgar systems of morality and •let us see that the distinction between vice and virtue is not based merely on the relations of objects, and is not perceived by reason.

2: Moral distinctions are derived from a moral sense

So the course of the argument leads us to conclude that since vice and virtue aren't discoverable merely by reason, i.e. by comparing •ideas, what enables us to tell the difference between them must be some •impression or sentiment that they give rise to. Our decisions regarding moral rightness and wrongness are evidently •perceptions; all perceptions are either impressions or ideas; so ruling out ideas leaves us with impressions. It is therefore more correct to speak of *moral feelings* than of *moral judgments*; though this feeling or sentiment is commonly so soft and gentle that we are apt to confuse it with an idea, according to our common custom of taking closely resembling things to be the same.

The next question is: What kind of impressions are these, and how do they operate on us? We needn't spend long on *this* question! Clearly, the impression arising from virtue is agreeable, and the impression coming from vice is unpleasant. Every moment's experience must convince us of this. No spectacle is as fair and beautiful as a noble and generous action; none more disgusting to us than one that is cruel and treacherous. No enjoyment equals the satisfaction we get from the company of those we love and esteem; and the greatest of all punishments is to be obliged to live with

those we hate or have contempt for. Even plays and romantic fiction can provide us with examples of the pleasure that virtue conveys to us, and of the pain that arises from vice.

Now, since the impressions by which we distinguish moral good from moral evil are nothing but particular pleasures or pains, it follows that when we want to understand why a certain •personal• character is praiseworthy or blameworthy, all we have to do is to discover what the principles_c are in us that make us feel a satisfaction or uneasiness from the survey of that character. Why is this action or sentiment or character virtuous (or vicious)? Because seeing it •or even just thinking about it• causes in us a pleasure (or uneasiness) of a particular kind. So when we have explained •the pleasure or uneasiness we have also sufficiently explained •the virtue or vice. Having a sense of virtue is nothing but feeling a particular kind of satisfaction as a result of contemplating a character. Our praise or admiration *is* that feeling.... What happens here is *not* this:

- We find that this character pleases us, and from that we *infer* that it is virtuous.

What happens is this:

- We feel that this character pleases us in a certain

way, and in having that feeling we are in effect feeling that the character is virtuous.

It's the same with our judgments concerning all kinds of beauty, and tastes, and sensations. Our approval is contained in the immediate pleasure they convey to us.

Against the theory that there are eternal rational measures of right and wrong, I have objected:

There aren't any relations in the actions of thinking creatures that aren't also to be found in external objects, so that if morality always came with these relations it would be possible for inanimate matter to become virtuous or vicious.

Something like this may be objected against my theory:

If virtue and vice are determined by pleasure and pain, they must in every case arise from pleasure and pain; so that any object, animate or inanimate, thinking or non-thinking, might become morally good or evil by arousing satisfaction or uneasiness.

But although this objection seems to be the very same as mine, it has nothing like the force that mine has. There are two reasons why.

It's obvious that the term 'pleasure' covers sensations that are very different from one another, having only the distant resemblance that is needed for them to fall under a single abstract term. A good musical composition and a bottle of good wine equally produce pleasure, and their goodness is determined merely by the pleasure. But is that going to lead us to say that the wine is harmonious or that the music has a good flavor? Well, in the same way we may get satisfaction from an inanimate object *x* and from the character or sentiments of a person *y*; but the satisfactions are different, which keeps our sentiments concerning *x* and *y* from getting confused with one another, and makes us ascribe virtue to *y* and not to *x*. Also, it is *not* the case that

every sentiment of pleasure or pain arising from personal characters and actions is of the special kind that makes us praise or condemn. The good qualities of an enemy are hurtful to us, but may still command our esteem and respect. It is only when a character is considered in general, without reference to our particular interests, that it causes the kind of feeling or sentiment that qualifies it as morally good or evil. It's true that sentiments from self-interest are apt to be confused with moral sentiments. We usually think that our enemy is vicious—not distinguishing his opposition to our interests from real villainy or baseness. But this doesn't stop it from being the case that the sentiments *are* in themselves distinct; and a man with a good temperament and good judgment can preserve himself from these illusions. Similarly, although a musical voice is nothing but one that naturally gives a particular kind of pleasure, it is hard for a man to be aware that an enemy has an agreeable singing voice or to admit that it is musical. But someone who has a fine ear and good command of himself can separate these feelings—the hostility and the music-based pleasure—and give praise to what deserves it.

You will notice an even greater difference among our pains and pleasures if you think back to something in my account of the passions. [Hume is referring here to his account of pride and humility, love and hatred. His explanation of his point is stunningly obscure, and we don't need it for what follows.]

You may now want to ask in a general way: 'What principle_c in the human mind creates this pain or pleasure that distinguishes moral good from moral evil?' The **first** thing I have to say in reply to this is that it would be absurd to imagine that in every particular case these sentiments are produced by a *basic* feature of our innate constitution. There is no end to the list of our duties; so it's impossible

that we should have a basic instinct corresponding to each of them; if we did, that would mean that from our earliest infancy our minds were imprinted with all the multitude of precepts that are contained in the completest system of ethics! If nature had gone about things in that way, that would have been quite out of line with its usual procedure, in which a few principles_c produce all the variety we observe in the universe, and everything is carried on in the easiest and simplest manner. So we need a shorter list of primary impulses—i.e. some more general principles_c on which all our notions of morals are founded.

In the **second** place, if we take the question to include this: ‘Ought we to search for these principles_c in nature, or rather elsewhere?’, I say that how we answer this question depends on the definition of the word ‘Nature’—as ambiguous a word as there is! **(1)** If ‘nature’ is opposed to *miracles*, the distinction between vice and virtue is natural, but so also is every event that has ever happened in the world, apart from the miracles on which our religion is founded. So we aren’t announcing much of a result when we say that the sentiments of vice and virtue are ‘natural’ in *this* sense.

(2) But ‘nature’ may instead be opposed to ‘rare and unusual’; and in this sense of the word—the common one—there can often be disputes about what is or isn’t ‘natural’, and it’s safe to say that we have no precise standard by which these disputes can be decided. •‘Frequent’ and ‘rare’ depend on how many examples we have observed; that number may gradually increase or lessen; so we can’t possibly fix any exact boundary between •them. All I can say about this is that if it is *ever* right to call something ‘natural’ in this sense, the sentiments of morality are certainly natural, because no nation or individual person has ever been utterly deprived of

such sentiments, showing not the least approval or dislike of ways of behaving. These sentiments are so deeply rooted in our human constitution that the only way they could be erased and destroyed is by the relevant mind’s being thrown into confusion by disease or madness.

(3) But ‘nature’ can also be opposed to *artifice* as well as to what is rare and unusual; and in *this* sense it is open to question whether the notions of virtue are natural or not. We readily forget that men’s designs and projects and opinions are principles_c that are as *necessary* in their operation as are heat and cold, moist and dry; we instead take them to be *free* and entirely our own, contrasting them with the other principles_c of nature. Is the sense of virtue natural or artificial? I don’t think that at this stage I can give any precise answer to this question. It may appear later on that our sense of some virtues is artificial while our sense of others is natural. The topic will be better discussed when we come to the details of each particular vice and virtue.³

Given these •three• definitions of ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’, we can see how utterly unphilosophical it is to say that virtue is the same as what is natural, and vice the same as what is unnatural. •In **(1)** the first sense of the word ‘nature’, in which it is contrasted with ‘miraculous’, vice and virtue are equally natural; and **(2)** in the second sense of ‘nature’, in which it is contrasted with ‘unusual’, it may be found that virtue is the unnatural one of the two! You must at least agree that that heroic virtue is as unnatural—in *this* sense—as the most brutal barbarity. **(3)** As for the third sense of the word ‘nature’, it is certain that vice and virtue are equally artificial and out of nature. Whatever disputes there may be about whether the notion of merit or demerit in certain actions is natural or artificial, there is no disputing

³ In the remainder of this work, ‘natural’ is also sometimes contrasted with ‘civil’, and sometimes with ‘moral’. In each case, the contrasting term will tell you in what sense ‘natural’ is being taken.

that the actions themselves are artificial, and are performed with a certain design and intention; if that weren't so, they couldn't count as either virtuous or vicious. So there is no way in which the contrast between 'natural' and 'unnatural', in whatever sense you take it, can ever mark the line between vice and virtue.

So we are still brought back to my first position, namely that virtue is distinguished by the pleasure, and vice by the pain, that we get from encountering or thinking about an action, sentiment, or character. This thesis is very *useful*, because it lets us tackle the question

- What is the origin of an action's moral rectitude or

depravity?

without searching for any incomprehensible relations and qualities, without looking around for something that never did exist in nature or even in the clear and distinct part of our imagination. It spares us all that, because it answers *that* question in the same way that it answers *this*:

- Why is it that thinking about certain general kinds of action or sentiment causes in us a certain satisfaction or uneasiness?

I flatter myself that I have carried out a great part of my present plan just by getting the question into that form, which appears to me so free from ambiguity and obscurity.