

Hume

Some issues to consider:

1. His provisions of an explanation of the moral sense
2. His several arguments against the rationalists
3. His picture of reason, and of practical reason (is Hume committed to the hydraulic model of action?).

1.

Hume is clearly influenced by Hutcheson's moral sense theory, but adds to it an explanation of the moral sense in terms of the basic principles of the mind.

The Humean mind contains only **impressions** (of sensation e.g. colors, or of reflection e.g. rage), **ideas**, which are less forceful and vivacious copies of impressions. Hume's **empiricist** claim is that all our knowledge comes from experience. In particular, there are no innate ideas – while we can imaginatively create complex ideas by combining simple ideas, we must receive all our simple ideas from impressions. **Beliefs** are a kind of idea or impression, but they have more force and vivacity than ordinary ideas, thus we can imagine things without believing them, but we can't have an impression of things without believing them.

The mind operates by automatically moving from one idea to another which is related to the first by **resemblance, contiguity in time and place, or cause and effect**.

Hume reasons that we couldn't know that two things were related as cause and effect except by repeated experience, but we receive no new ideas from repeated experience of the same thing. Rather, repeated experience has the effect of habituating the mind to move from one idea (the cause) to the other (the effect). After a while, we only need to see the cause, and we start thinking of the effect.

Hume has a problem though; when we have an impression of a cause we don't merely have an idea of its effect, but we believe its effect actually exists. How does the extra vivacity of belief come about? Hume's answer is that the impressions transmit some of their vivacity to any associated ideas. So in the cause/effect case:

(Causal relation, Transfer of Vivacity)

Impression of cause → Belief in effect

Sympathy is a mechanism that works in the same sort of way to make other people's passions contagious to us. In this case, other people remind us of ourselves by resemblance, and (Hume asserts) we have a constant forceful and vivacious impression of ourselves. So ideas of the passions of others receive vivacity from the impression of ourselves, enough to turn those ideas into full-fledged impressions; passions of our own. That's why we're generally affected by the emotions of those

around us, and why we care about their (pleasurable) approval and (painful) disapproval of us.

So how does **moral approval and disapproval** arise? When we see someone act well, we sympathize with the person(s) affected by their action, and feel their pleasure. We causally associate this pleasure with the actor's motive, and then feel a pleasurable sentiment of love towards them. Because we love the person and their character, we judge them virtuous.

A problem:

Sympathy varies with the degree of relations we have to the person sympathized with, but our moral judgments do not. Also, our sympathy depends on the actual effects of someone's character, but we might judge someone good even if (due to external circumstances) their character never has good effects.

Hume's reply:

We stabilize and regulate our judgments so that we can share them with others and have meaningful agreements and disagreements, just as we do for the other senses. For judging virtue and vice, we take up the **General Point of View**, in which we sympathize impartially with a person's "narrow circle" (of people most directly affected by them) and our minds follow "general rules" that take us from a person's qualities to their *usual* effects.

- Something to think about: What's the importance of explaining the moral sense from general principles? How could this explanation strengthen the sentimentalist account of what morality consists in?
- How does Hume's list of the virtues differ from Hutcheson's? Which view is more plausible?

2 and 3.

Let's put these questions together. In thinking about Hume's arguments against the rationalists as well as his theory in general, it might be useful to think about his picture of what reason is and does.

Hume argues: Reasoning judges of either relations between ideas or, from experience, of relations between objects. The only way these relations can be relevant to action is in cause/effect reasoning. But cause/effect reasoning alone never gives us any ends to follow; rather it directs our existing passions. So reason cannot motivate us. Since reason cannot motivate us, it cannot oppose passion either. "Reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions" (5).

- How does Hume's picture of reason differ from that of Clarke and the rationalists? How does his empiricism inform his picture?