A Comparative Analysis of David Hume’s Views on Human Nature and Society with Robert Louis Stevenson’s in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*

Who am I? Who are you? What drives each of us to act and feel the way we do? These are just a few of the questions posed, explored, and opined upon by Scottish Enlightenment philosophers and those authors impacted by the philosophers’ inquiries. David Hume, a leading Scottish Enlightenment philosopher using empirical investigation, examines and explains his view on human nature, society, and morality in *A Treatise of Human Nature* *(Treatise)* and in *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals (Enquiry)*. In *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (Jekyll and Hyde)*, Robert Louis Stevenson draws from the Enlightenment’s empirical explorations in the study of the individual and society, to tell a story examining human nature. Although *Jekyll and Hyde* is a fictional tale, Stevenson’s story and characters reflect Hume’s perspectives on personal identity, skepticism, morality, and society.

In examining human nature and the individual’s role in society, it is essential to first explore the characteristics constituting one’s identity. Most people can describe who they are and what makes them different from others; however, few people can explain what makes them act the way they do and the makeup of their personal identity. In *Treatise* and *Jekyll and Hyde*, each author sets forth his views on these aspects of human nature. In *Treatise*, Hume explains that an individual is “nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity and are in a perpetual flux and movement” (*Treatise*, Sect. VI). Hume stresses the importance of perceptions on the self and the resultant impact being an ever changing self. Hume proposes “that our notions of personal identity proceed entirely from the smooth and uninterrupted progress of thought along a train of connected ideas” (*Treatise*, Sect. VI). Accordingly, Hume rejects the physical image of a person or material item as being the determinative factor in identity. He believes memory is the dispositive factor in determining identity, because it is our memory that brings together the perceptions comprising one’s personal identity. Absent memory, we could not perceive “the continuance and extent of this succession of perceptions” that “constitute our self or person” (Treatise, Sect. VI). According to Hume, one’s memory of their perceptions and experiences over their life enables us to recognize one’s personal identity.

Stevenson similarly explores the question of what makes up one’s personal identity in *Jekyll and Hyde*. Jekyll is generally a good man, a charitable doctor who society looks upon highly, but he also commits immoral acts and has immoral passions. He invents a formula in his laboratory that separates the dark side of his personality from his self. Upon ingesting the liquid, Jekyll alters his physical and moral being. Because his evil passions and not a “noble spirit” are present when he drinks the liquid, he turns into Hyde, who is made up of Jekyll’s immoral passions. (Stevenson 116). Although Jekyll physically transforms, Stevenson does not view Jekyll and Hyde as different individuals. Stevenson presents the two personalities as representing the “thorough and primitive duality of man” and “two natures that contended in the field of [Jekyll’s] consciousness” (Stevenson 111). Jekyll was “radically both,” in his singular personal identity (Stevenson 111). Although Stevenson has Jekyll physically transform into Hyde, he never has him fully lose his singular identity. Not only did the “two natures [have] memory in common,” but Jekyll “projected and shared in the pleasures and adventures of Hyde” (Stevenson 120). Accordingly, although Jekyll’s physicality changed, Stevenson considers Jekyll and Hyde as one identity.

Hume and Stevenson’s perceptions of the makeup of personal identity and human nature are similar. Hume’s belief that “[r]eason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions,” is reflected in Jekyll transforming into his evil doppelganger (Treatise Part III, Sect. III). Although he used reason in developing the drug, it was his evil passions present when he ingested the drug that take over during transformation. With respect to personal identity, the changing body and personality would not affect Hume’s analysis of identity because Hume did not believe the physical body or an aspect of personality comprised identity. The dispositive inquiry for Hume is whether the two personalities share perceptions and memories, for “the same person may vary his character and disposition, as well as his impressions and ideas, without losing his identity. Whatever changes he endures, his several parts are still connected” (*Treatise*, Sect. VI). In *Jekyll and Hyde*, both personalities share memory, and Jekyll was aware and able to share in the activities and impressions of Hyde. Based on shared memories and perceptions, both writers would consider Jekyll and Hyde as one personal identity.

The Scottish Enlightenment philosophers and the writers influenced by them studied and opined on those innate attributes that enable humans to form progressive societies. Hume’s writings display his skepticism, and he opines on the reasons humans form societies, as well as our moral sense. Stevenson draws from the Scottish Enlightenment’s focus on scientific method, as well as Hume’s skepticism and focus on morality and society, in creating the characters in *Jekyll and Hyde*.

Hume places importance on the passions in determining human actions. He opines that it is our passion of self-interest in protecting ourselves and our property and our passion for self-gratification as the motivating sources for the formation of society and government. Society and justice provide the moral and political systems in which humans can safely pursue their passions. Stevenson reflects Hume’s view on society and justice as the framework humans create to protect their self interest and turn “socially destructive impulses into socially useful ones” by presenting Hyde as a character whose innate insidiousness and evil are repugnant to proper society (Herman 201). He is a man so vile, his destructive passions can never have utility and be a part of society. Hyde is a “creature,” “monkey,” and “dwarfish,” characteristics of a being other than a human (Stevenson 61, 94, 106). In *Enquiry*, Hume notes “that a man whose habits and conduct are hurtful to society, and dangerous or pernicious to everyone who has an intercourse with him,” be an object of disapprobation, and communicate” to society “the strongest sentiment of disgust and hatred” (Section V, Part 1). Like Hyde, these individuals are outside the realm of civilized society as that type of person “from a cold insensibility, or narrow selfishness of temper, is unaffected with the images of human happiness or misery” and “indifferent to the images of vice and virtue” (*Enquiry*, Section V Part II).

Hume also focuses on the innate human attributes of sympathy and benevolence in forming and promoting society. Humans are social creatures, and “every man has a strong connexion with society, and perceives the impossibility of his solitary subsistence” he favors those “habits or principles” promoting an orderly society (*Enquiry* Sect. V, Part I). Hume, in examining the origin of our morality, believed that our impressions of right and wrong come from a moral sense caused by our human ability to sympathize with others. The trait of sympathy is an innate human quality to share another’s feelings and is an essential quality humans possess enabling them to be social beings. Hume notes that it is one’s social interaction with others that amplifies our innate ability to sympathize, as “the more we converse with mankind, and the greater social intercourse we maintain, the more shall we be familiarized” with moral distinctions (Enquiry, Section V, Part II). Hume places primary importance on the innate human attribute of benevolence, as contributing the most to the development of society, as

“nothing can bestow more merit on any human creature than the sentiment of benevolence in an eminent degree; and THAT a PART, at least, of its merit arises from its tendency to promote the interests of our species, and bestow happiness on human society (Enquiry, Section II Part II).

He notes that whenever in history benevolent affections are present, “they engage the approbation and good-will of mankind….[is] known in all languages, and universally express the highest merit, which HUMAN NATURE is capable of attaining (*Enquiry*, Section II, Part I).

Stevenson favorably exhibits the human attributes of benevolence and sympathy in *Jekyll and Hyde*. He displays Utterson’s benevolence through his “approved tolerance for others,” inclination “to help rather than reprove,” and as “the last reputable acquaintance and the last good influence in the lives of down-going men” (Stevenson 47). Stevenson portrays a human’s innate sympathy through Utterson as well. After hearing the curious tale from Enfield, Utterson returns home in “somber spirits” and was so worried about his friend that “he began to haunt the door” at all hours of the day (Stevenson 59). It was his concern for his friend and his sympathy for what he may be going through, that causes this distress. Unlike Hyde, Utterson represents the social human, who engages in social interaction and is a sympathetic and benevolent person.

Stevenson also reflects the Enlightenment’s scientific breakthroughs and Hume’s skepticism in *Jekyll and Hyde*. First, the liquid that transforms Jekyll into Hyde is not a magical potion; it is a formula Jekyll develops in his lab using the scientific method. Second, Stevenson portrays Lanyon as the skeptic. He does not believe in the types of experiments Jekyll is performing, calling it “unscientific balderdash” (Stevenson 57). While transitioning, Hyde taunts Lanyon, telling him “you who have so long been bound to the most narrow and material views….behold!” (Stevenson 108). He recognizes that Lanyon would not believe it until he perceives it with his senses, as he is a skeptic in the tradition of Hume.

The Scottish Enlightenment was a time of great discoveries and deep thought and inquiry on human nature and society. The philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment impacted writers such as Robert Louis Stevenson, and they still impact the writings of authors and philosophers today. In *Jekyll and Hyde*, Stevenson examines some of the same issues of human nature and society that were expounded upon by the Scottish philosophers. Similar to Hume, Stevenson places primary importance on the passions and moral virtues innate to humans that enable them to form societies and progress and develop over the ages.

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