

Virtue and Its Social Underbelly

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September 2020

Hume assumes that all virtues are defined by their social utility. Truth, courage, humility, benevolence, fidelity, and etc. are only virtues in a practical sense—not an absolute sense. Courage is useful when an admiral plots an intelligent, winning naval strategy. Courage is useless if an admiral is overzealous and suffers massive casualties without achieving the strategic goal. Benevolence in a king is useful when the king wins the support of his subjects through positive acts. Benevolence in a king is useless in a society demanding democracy. Wealth is useful when used to build a better society. Wealth is useless in a state with a small plutocracy where millions are poor and starving. The pragmatic definition of virtue moves away from any form of absolute truth. It is impossible to define virtue without its practical use in mind. What is courage, benevolence, or wealth without their social components? For Hume they are indefinable without social utility—the utility itself can be judged or critiqued but it is difficult to get to such a point without understanding its contextual world.

The problem with virtue is that it is not traditionally analyzed in same manner as science, math, or logic. Hume says that truth itself “is disputable; not taste: what exists in the nature of things is the standard of our judgement; what each man feels within himself is the standard of sentiment” (Hume I). Hume’s solution is to approach ethics in manner as similar as possible to the scientific method. Instead of using other methods, all ethical systems should be founded through experience “and reject every system of ethics, however subtle or ingenious, which is not founded on fact and observation” (I). From this, Different virtues will carry utility entirely dependent on the utility to the individual.

Virtues such as “celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, solitude, and the whole train of monkish virtues; for what reason are they everywhere rejected by men of sense, but because they serve to no manner of purpose” (Hume I). Context is critical to virtues because a virtue useful in social setting A may be completely useless in social setting B. The “public utility of these virtues is the chief circumstance, whence they derive their merit, it follows, that the end, which they have a tendency to promote, must be some way agreeable to us, and take hold of some natural affection. It must please, either from considerations of self-interest, or from more generous motives and regards” (II). This social merit

allows for different virtues to emerge that are specific to the historical conditions of a country. In most countries of

Europe, family, that is, hereditary riches, marked with titles and symbols from the sovereign, is the chief source of distinction. In England, more regard is paid to present opulence and plenty. Each practice has its advantages and disadvantages. Where birth is respected, unactive, spiritless minds remain in haughty indolence, and dream of nothing but pedigrees and genealogies: the generous and ambitious seek honour and authority, and reputation and favour. Where riches are the chief idol, corruption, venality, rapine prevail: arts, manufactures, commerce, agriculture flourish (Hume VI).

All virtues will have a social credit unique to its needs that is weighed not by argument, but by utility. Looking at such virtues from our modern prospective or even from the viewpoint of a neighboring country allows us to critique a different system of virtues because they differ from our own—but we should note that the specific society seems to find social justification for these virtues from their own experiences. Our virtues may not work there and their virtues may not work in our own society.

While virtues may be born from self-love, we adapt and approve virtues with social utility because they please those around us in addition to ourselves. Hume's Scottish counterpart Adam Smith argues that this concept underlies the entire economic system saying:

It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own self-interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of their own necessities but of their advantages. Nobody but a beggar chooses to depend chiefly upon the benevolence of his fellow citizens (Smith 119).

This extends beyond simple human relationships and into the economic relationships we commit to. In general, economic growth comes from an organic relationship between a product or service that brings us joy—a synonym for social utility. Of course there are some sectors of the economy that bring less joy than others—someone who likes smartphones probably does not hold their telephone service provider in the same regard as an Apple or Samsung, but nevertheless social utility exists there because joy and social utility

spring from the information and communication potential provided. Social utility abounds from this economic relationship and therefore we believe in its good the way we do other social utilities.

An objection to Hume can come in the form of virtue existing beyond the human experience. Consider the three transcendentals: truth, beauty, and goodness. Truth can be as simple as the law of gravitation. Gravity is eternal. Nothing in the universe exists beyond gravity—it is a component of all things. We have never observed otherwise (perhaps we will one day—even gravity is open to Hume’s problem of induction). Beauty abounds in the arts—the most stern atheist must concede that *The Creation of Adam* or the finale to Mahler’s *Symphony No. 2* are amongst the most beautiful works of art ever created. The virtue of goodness is an essential component of the New Testament, Buddhism, and the Tao Te Ching. How can Hume possibly deny that virtue exists beyond its social merits?

Hume might respond saying that everything within the transcendentals is given the light of day precisely because of their utility. The best science is an attempt to understand the truth and to transform murky truths into something of utility through experience, observation, and experimentation. This concept of truth is different from more metaphorical concepts as truth. As Nassim Taleb recently tweeted: “Much of the problems of modernity is taking religion literally and science metaphorically, rather than the reverse”, something Hume would delightfully agree with (@nntaleb). To the question of the arts, Hume would answer that *The Creation of Adam* and Mahler’s *Symphony No. 2* are beautiful precisely because “[i]n every judgement of beauty, the feelings of the person affected enter into consideration, and communicate to the spectator similar touches of pain or pleasure” (Hume Ch. V). To the question of goodness, Hume would respond that goodness comes not from religion, but simply because good acts benefit us as individuals and the larger societies we make. Truth, beauty, and goodness are what they are precisely because they bring pleasure and utility to our lives. They need not be something greater.

Works Cited

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