

Hume on the Characters of Virtue

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IN THE WORLD ACCORDING TO HUME, people are complicated creatures, with convoluted, often contradictory characters. Consider, for example, Hume's controversial assessment of Charles I:

The character of this prince, as that of most men, if not of all men, was mixed. . . . To consider him in the most favourable light, it may be affirmed, that his dignity was free from pride, his humanity from weakness, his bravery from rashness, his temperance from austerity, his frugality from avarice. . . . To speak the most harshly of him, we may affirm, that many of his good qualities were attended with some latent frailty, which, though seemingly inconsiderable, was able, when seconded by the extreme malevolence of his fortune, to disappoint them of all their influence: His beneficent disposition was clouded by a manner not very gracious; his virtue was tinctured with superstition; his good sense was disfigured by a deference to persons of a capacity inferior to his own; and his moderate temper exempted him not from hasty and precipitate resolutions.¹

This sketch shows Charles in all his complexities, with his virtues, near virtues, and contradicting virtues. I have quoted it at length because it is hard to summarize without losing the subtleties that lie within it. Hume's moral theory is based fundamentally on judgments of character,² so those subtleties are important to his view. The character sketches that pervade the *History of England* are, then, a key to Hume's theory. They show us how, in practice,

¹ David Hume, *History of England, from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688*, 6 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1983), 5: 542 (in chapter LIX). Future references to the *History* will be in the text, designated by H, followed by chapter, then volume and page. So, e.g., this reference would be H 59; 5: 542.

² David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2nd ed., ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and rev. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 575. Future references to the *Treatise* will be in the text, designated T, followed by the page number. However, when I quote any of Hume's work except the *History*, I have used the improved version of the text in the electronic version of *Humetext*, ed. M. A. Stewart, D. F. Norton, and Tom Beauchamp.

Hume intends for us to apply his moral philosophy. Indeed, they reveal the unique sensitivity of a Humean moral theory to the nuances and contradictions that characterize our moral judgments in "common life."

The sketch of Charles is rich, precisely because Hume displays the many intricacies of his view in it. The details show the enormous effort Hume makes to present a balanced view of his subject. Ironically, this particular sketch caused Hume considerable grief in his lifetime, because his critics thought he judged Charles too kindly.³ But Hume's assessment of Charles is more subtle than most of his contemporaries understood.⁴ Charles, Hume concludes, "deserves the epithet of a good, rather that of a great man" (H 59; 5: 542): he was a good man because he had many private virtues, but he was not a great one because many of those same virtues worked to his disadvantage in public life. He was not, then, a very good king, especially given the delicate situations he faced during his reign. In Hume's judgment, then, Charles was less evil than stupid, less a tyrant than a bungler.⁵

Hume's characterization of Charles I thus summarizes both his explanations of Charles's behavior by suggesting how his actions in both public and private were a product of his lasting qualities and Hume's judgments of Charles's merit by showing the exact degree to which Charles was culpable for the turbulent events of his reign. In addition, the sketch of Charles demonstrates the complexity of Hume's character assessments by displaying the many different qualities that count as virtues in Hume's system and by pointing to some of the ways in which they can conflict.

Because characters are complicated, our moral judgments are complicated as well. Virtue, for Hume, is not a single quality and it cannot be measured by a single criterion, as Platonists, Kantians, and utilitarians have imagined.⁶ As Hume puts it, "they confine too much their principles, and make no account of the vast variety, which nature has so much affected in all her operations."⁷

³ Hume himself says that the volume provoked a "cry of reproach, disapprobation, and even detestation," because he had "presumed to shed a generous tear for the fate of Charles I." See Hume, "My Own Life," in *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985), xxxvii.

⁴ One apparent exception was Horace Walpole, who correctly observes that "where others abuse the Stuarts, he [Hume] laughs at them." Quoted in Ernest Mossner, *The Life of David Hume* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1954), 310.

⁵ See also H 53 n. W; 5: 568–70. For further discussion, see section 3A below.

⁶ For a fuller, if still incomplete, argument for this claim, see Joel Kupperman, *Character* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), esp. chapter 4.

⁷ See Hume, "The Sceptic," in *Essays*, 159. Hume puts this objection in the mouth of one of his four philosophical types: the sceptic. Given Hume's own "mitigated skepticism," we have reason to think that Hume accepts what "the Sceptic" says. And in this case, I think, he does. See Hume, *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, 3rd ed., ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, rev. P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 161.

But in a view that respects the variety of virtues, we cannot always expect the virtues to be compatible with each other in the real world. Hume, then, is forced to deal with the conflicts between the virtues that most moral theories ignore. We solve these conflicts in two ways, Hume says: either by inventing meta-virtues like justice and etiquette or by learning to live with the ambiguity. All the conflicts, Hume argues, will only be resolved in the ideal of a “perfect character.” But constructing such an ideal is a delicate matter: it must be a goal lofty enough to inspire people, but realistic enough that they can have some hope of attaining it.

1. CHARACTER AS EXPLANATION

In Hume’s work, “character” serves many roles: people have characters, of course, but so do nations, professions, political parties, and human beings in general.⁸ In all these uses, character has an explanatory role: it points to a set of qualities and dispositions found in these agents that tend to make them act in certain ways.⁹

Such explanations are, of course, complicated. When Hume discusses Elizabeth’s harsh treatment of Catherine Grey, a potential heir to the throne,¹⁰ he cannot decide if Elizabeth’s behavior is best explained “by the unrelenting jealousy of the queen, who was afraid lest a pretender to the succession should acquire credit by having issue; or by her malignity, . . . which led her to envy in others those natural pleasures of love and posterity, of which her own ambition and desire of dominion made her renounce all prospect for herself” (H 38; 4:50). Hume cannot decide which of two character traits best accounts for this particular action; Elizabeth’s actions were overdetermined by her character. But he never doubts that some character trait or other will explain her actions. Hume is thus committed to determinism as a methodological assumption. We can never explain human action “without acknowledging the doctrine of necessity, and this *inference* from motives to voluntary actions; from characters to conduct.”¹¹ Unless we posit qualities in persons that tie

⁸ For nations and professions, see Hume, “Of National Characters,” in *Essays*, 197–215; for parties, see Hume, “Of the Parties of Great Britain,” in *Essays*, 64–72; for humans in general, see Hume, “Of the Dignity or Meanness of Human Nature,” in *Essays*, 80–86.

⁹ I will not, however, be concerned here with the exact nature of these explanations or with the ontological status of character traits. The best current discussion of these issues can be found in Jane McIntyre, “Character: A Humean Account,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 7 (1990): 193–206.

¹⁰ Catherine was the younger sister of Jane Grey, who had been proclaimed queen after the death of Edward VI, and she was the heir to the Suffolk line, who were descendants of Henry VII’s youngest daughter, Mary. If the Stuart line—which included Mary, Queen of Scots, and her son, the future James I—were excluded from the succession (as Henry VIII insisted in his will), then the Suffolk line would have been the heirs to the throne.

¹¹ Hume, *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, 90.

together their actions, Hume says, we will be unable to predict anything about our fellow humans.¹²

The permanence of character traits that lies behind that predictability is, Hume thinks, a crucial aspect of our moral judgments. Without the durable aspect of character, moral evaluation would be impossible: "Where would be the foundation of *morals*, if particular characters had no certain or determinate power to produce particular sentiments, and if these sentiments had no constant operation on actions?"¹³ Actions alone, Hume claims, "not proceeding from any constant principle" (T 575), cannot be the object of moral evaluations, because they cannot evoke the sentiments that are the basis of our judgments. In isolation, however, the claim that actions are not stable enough to elicit any sentiments is surely false, even on Humean grounds. Actions can be grouped together—as Hume does in the constant conjunctions that constitute our causal judgments—and we can then look at their general tendencies and focus our sentiments on these tendencies. Indeed, Hume himself declares that "reflexions on the tendencies of actions have by far the greatest influence, and determine all the great lines of our duty" (T 590).

A better explanation for the crucial role that character plays in Hume's moral theory lies in the connection of character to explanation. Character traits are an essential part of our explanations of human actions, because they lie at the causal root of actions: they are the causal contribution of the agent herself. Because they are a primary cause of human actions, they are the proper objects of evaluation. To evaluate an agent, then, we must focus on her and her character traits and ignore whatever may later intervene. For that reason, we will judge someone benevolent, even though all her attempts to help others fail through no fault of her own: "virtue in rags is still virtue" (T 584). If we directed our moral attention to actions, our judgments of the person herself would be clouded by factors that lie outside of her, and we would find ourselves looking at the symptoms and not the disease.

2. VARIETIES OF VIRTUE

Any quality that endures long enough to be a continuing cause of action is a character trait, but a trait is a virtue only if it gives us pleasure when we contemplate it from one of the "*steady and general* points of view" (T 581–82) that we use to stabilize our moral judgments in society (T 574–84). To enter a "general point of view," we must meet two requirements: first, we must ignore

¹² We may imagine ourselves free, but outsiders can recognize the patterns in our behavior that are a product of our character. Because we can predict behavior, the traditional idea of free will is illusory (T 408–409; *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, 94). See S. K. Wertz, "Hume, History, and Human Nature," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 36 (1976): 481–96.

¹³ Hume, *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, 90.

our own interests to eliminate the biases that would prevent us from reaching a common judgment; and second, we must adopt a standardized “distance” from the person we are evaluating. Hume describes that distance in the following manner: “Now in judging of characters, the only interest or pleasure, which appears the same to every spectator, is that of the person himself, whose character is examin’d; or that of persons, who have a connexion with him” (T 591). These two requirements are not very restrictive. Because a general point must be one that real people are capable of adopting, it cannot be highly idealized. Historians, not God, are the models for the spectator: “The writers of history, as well as the readers, are sufficiently interested in the characters and events, to have a lively sentiment of blame or praise; and, at the same time, have no particular interest or concern to pervert their judgment.”¹⁴ Historians are removed by time from the people they judge, and so their views are not biased by personal interest. Yet, with sympathy, they can enter into the feelings of the people who are affected by their subject and thereby render a proper verdict.

Thus, a general point of view is certainly not, as Roderick Firth suggests, the perspective of a single ideal observer from which all moral judgments can be made.¹⁵ Indeed, Hume talks about the general points of view in the plural, and the above text suggests that there are at least two: one focused on the agent herself; another, on those affected by her actions. Each of these perspectives evokes unique sentiments in a spectator (T 607–608), and we should not assume that these sentiments can be easily compared, much less amalgamated into a single judgment.

In each of these perspectives, Hume thinks, we will also distinguish between those qualities which are useful and those which are agreeable. The agreeable qualities are those which give immediate, unmediated pleasure; we approve of them from a general point of view simply because they give pleasure to the person. The useful qualities, however, require more thought; they are qualities that tend to promote the ends of the person herself or others. They are therefore only a means to an end, and they “please . . . in proportion to their fitness for that end” (T 588). These qualities please us in a general point of view, because they promote the interest of the person or of others (T 588). For all their variety, then, the virtues fall into four broad categories:

¹⁴ Hume, “Of the Study of History,” in *Essays*, 568. I owe this reference to William Charron.

¹⁵ See Roderick Firth, “Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 12 (1952): 317–45. For a more complete argument along these lines, see Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, “On Why Hume’s ‘General Point of View’ Isn’t Ideal and Shouldn’t Be,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 11 (1994): 202–28; and Elizabeth Radcliffe, “Hume on Motivating Sentiments, the General Point of View, and the Inculcation of ‘Morality,’” *Hume Studies* 20 (1994): 37–58.

they are either useful or agreeable to the person herself or to others (T 591).¹⁶ For example, Charles's bravery and beneficence were useful to others; his temperance, frugality, and good sense were useful to himself (and perhaps to others as well); and his dignity was agreeable to both himself and others.

Chief among the qualities that are useful and agreeable to ourselves are those which constitute "greatness of mind,"¹⁷ all of which are closely connected to pride and self-esteem (T 599): "courage, intrepidity, ambition, love of glory" (T 599) as well as "constancy, fortitude, and magnanimity" (T 608). They are the qualities that make a prince or a warrior a magnificent figure in history, and they evoke awe and esteem in others (T 608). The "great men" Hume cites are all great leaders, with great ambition and self-confidence, like Alexander the Great (T 599).¹⁸ But, in fact, the qualities he cites are those which are needed to succeed in almost any endeavor.¹⁹

Chief among the qualities that are useful and agreeable to others are those which constitute "goodness and benevolence"²⁰: "*generosity, humanity, compassion, friendship, fidelity, zeal, disinterestedness, liberality*" (T 603). These qualities are those which evoke in others, not awe, but love. They make someone a pleasant companion and friend (T 608). But they are also the qualities that keep an ambitious person from becoming "a tyrant and a public robber" (T 604). So, even though we judge these qualities by sympathizing with the "narrow circle, in which any person moves" (T 602), their effects are not restricted to those people. Hume assumes, I think, that a person who is both ambitious and generous to her acquaintances (including those who are not her friends) will endeavor to create great works that help people.²¹ So a

¹⁶ Hume even suggests that these four categories are so broad that they can accommodate the fact that different cultures find different things useful and agreeable. I argue for this point in some detail in "Hume and the Contexts of Politics," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 30 (1992): 219–42, esp. 228–31. For some examples of Hume's view, see Hume, *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, 3rd ed., ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, rev. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 337–38, 335, 241, and 262. Future references will be in the text, designated EM, followed by the page number.

¹⁷ See *Treatise*, Book III, Part III, Section II (T 592–602).

¹⁸ Of Alexander the Great, Hume tells the following story: "Go, says Alexander the Great to his soldiers, when they refus'd to follow him to the Indies, go tell your countrymen, that you left Alexander completing the conquest of the world" (T 599).

¹⁹ Hume thus elevates personal qualities to the status of virtues, and he thereby rejects the traditional Christian model in which the virtues only benefit the person herself indirectly.

²⁰ See *Treatise*, Book III, Part III, Section III (T 602–606).

²¹ Some have argued that the "narrow circle" should include everyone who is affected by a person's action. See, for example, Charlotte Brown, "From Spectator to Agent: Hume's Theory of Obligation," *Hume Studies* 20 (1994): 19–35, esp. n. 12. But such a view ignores Hume's reasons for confining our attention to the "narrow circle": asking people to think about everyone they will affect is asking too much, even for a king or a president. We can only hope their benevolence and ambition will combine so that they will rule well.

person who combines greatness of mind and generosity will be a great person indeed.²²

A. *The agent vs. others and the artificial virtues*

However, greatness and goodness are often not found together, and they can even conflict. Charles I, as I have already noted, was a good man, but not a great one. He was benevolent and temperate, but he did not have the intelligence or the fortitude to govern a country in the midst of the social revolution in which he found himself. Henry VIII, on the other hand, was a great man, but not a good one. He treated others with the greatest contempt: “A catalogue of his vices would comprehend many of the worst qualities incident to human nature: Violence, cruelty, profusion, rapacity, injustice, obstinacy, arrogance, bigotry, presumption, caprice” (H 23; 3: 322). Indeed, in cruelty, he exhibited “the most detested of all vices” (T 605). Yet Hume does not think that Henry was a bad king: “The absolute, uncontroled authority which he maintained at home, and the regard which he acquired among foreign nations, are circumstances, which entitle him, in some degree, to the appellation of a *great* prince; while his tyranny and barbarity exclude him from the character of a *good* one” (H 23; 3: 321–22). Henry ruled gloriously, because he had the qualities “which qualified him for exercising dominion over men; courage, intrepidity, vigilance, inflexibility” (H 23; 3: 322). But his lack of goodness made his actions arbitrary, if not tyrannical—even if his subjects were too awed by him to notice (H 23; 3: 322–23). Thus, Henry’s greatness did not make him a good person, just as Charles’s goodness did not make him a great king.

The quality that makes a person great is “nothing but a steady and well-establish’d pride and self-esteem” (T 599). The constituents of greatness—courage, magnanimity, ambition—are all based on self-confidence and ambition. The qualities that made Henry a great leader for his country were precisely those which allowed him to act with confidence without the approval of others. But those same qualities also made him imperious and domineering, hardly traits that would make him an agreeable companion. Others find such stubbornness to be maddening, even if it is often useful to the person himself because it keeps him focused on his goals and thereby increases his chances of achieving them. In this case, a quality was useful to the person himself, but disagreeable to others. In Henry, a “great” quality was not a “good” one. On Hume’s scheme, then, we should count it as both a virtue and a vice.

The examples of Charles and Henry point to potential conflicts among the

²² For further discussion of such people, see section 3b below.

sources of virtue. The pride that lies behind greatness is a virtue, Hume says, because it is quite useful to people: "Nothing is more useful to us in conduct of life than a due degree of pride, which makes us sensible of our own merit, and gives us confidence and assurance in all our projects and enterprizes" (T 596–97). Nevertheless, others are made uneasy by our displays of pride.²³ Thus, pride is disagreeable to others and for that reason it should be considered a vice. So in pride, we find a character trait that leads to opposing moral judgments.

Hume offers two ways to resolve this apparent tension. The first denies that the conflict is real. Pride is particularly irksome to other people, he says, only when it is out of proportion to the qualities that the person actually has, and it is less disagreeable if it is deserved. In addition, pride is only useful to the agent insofar as she has a proper estimate of her own abilities, because she will create trouble for herself if she overestimates her capacities (T 596–97). Understood in this way, an "over-weening conceit" (T 596) is a vice both to the agent herself and to others, and so no real conflict exists.

Nevertheless, Hume recognizes that this answer does not fully resolve the conflict. For obvious reasons, people do not always accurately assess their own abilities or those of others. So the agent's own estimates of the pride she should have will often differ from those of others. In addition, Hume thinks that if she cannot assess her own abilities accurately, she should err on the side of overestimating her merits, since "fortune commonly favors the bold and enterprising" (T 597). If so, then she is even more likely to have a pride that will be irritating to others, and so "we are apt to condemn it, by a *general rule*" (T 598). Differing perceptions of pride will then reproduce the conflict that Hume's first solution seeks to allay.

To solve this problem, Hume resorts to what looks like a trick: if people are bothered when others show their pride, but pride is necessary for their projects, then we should allow people their pride as long as they don't *show* it. For that reason, we must conclude "that some disguise in this particular is absolutely requisite; and that if we harbour pride in our breasts, we must carry a fair outside, and have the appearance of modesty and mutual deference in all our conduct and behaviour" (T 598). We thus solve the conflict by constructing the "*rules of good-breeding*," which render our interactions "agreeable and inoffensive" (T 597) without depriving anyone of their pride.

Thus do we invent etiquette. In etiquette, we create a convention of behavior that steers us through an important conflict between ourselves and others.

²³ Hume's explanation of this uneasiness relies heavily on his associationistic psychology: he suggests that it is the result of the feelings of inferiority that others will have when they compare themselves with us in our pride (T 595–96).

With it, we create a new virtue—good manners—that arises only out of our delicate interactions with others.

But etiquette is not the only convention that has its origins in the conflict between self-regarding and other-regarding virtues. As Hume himself notes, etiquette is quite similar to justice (T 597). Indeed, the conflict that gives rise to justice is simply a variation of the conflict concerning pride. Self-interest demands that each person secure as many material goods as she can for herself, but the interests of others require them to do so as well. Indeed, since self-interest is surely a virtue because it is useful to the agent herself and since pride is useful to her primarily because it promotes her self-interest, the parallel is even closer than we might think. In both cases, we solve the conflict that these traits produce through an artifice: conflicting prides are eased through the convention of etiquette, and conflicting interests are mollified through the convention of property and the rules of justice, which allow each person to pursue her self-interest within certain rules.²⁴

Of course, justice is an artifice vastly more important than etiquette. Indeed, the instabilities in securing compliance to the rules of justice are important enough that we are willing to establish an external force—government—to enforce them. (And with government, we create the need for yet another virtue, allegiance.) Etiquette, on the other hand, we are willing to leave to more informal means—which in the fragmented societies of the twentieth century, now have little power. Yet we should not underestimate the importance of good manners. For Hume, the very possibility of engaging in conversations with anyone, friend or enemy—and therefore of engaging in the exchange of ideas and goods—depends on observing some rules about proper behavior (T 597).

The artificial virtues of justice and good-breeding thus arise out of a conflict within the natural virtues. If nothing else, this account demonstrates the close relationship between the artificial and the natural virtues. Hume's account of justice seems to make it less central to humans because it is not "natural," but in fact justice and etiquette are crucial to humans because they are *meta-virtues*, virtues about the proper exercise of other virtues.

If pride and self-interest are the most important elements of the qualities that are useful to the agent, but which are disagreeable to others, then the artificial virtues deftly manage these potential conflicts. But the solution

²⁴ See T 484–98. The literature on Hume on justice is vast, of course, but the best accounts can be found, I think, in Annette Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 220–54; J. L. Mackie, *Hume's Moral Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 76–96; David Miller, *Philosophy and Ideology in Hume's Political Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 60–77; and Frederick G. Whelan, *Order and Artifice in Hume's Political Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 218–93.

Hume offers is practical, not theoretical: we do not resolve these problems by showing how the virtues do not really conflict on some abstract level, but by negotiating a meta-practice that, we hope, will keep the conflict subdued. Here—as elsewhere—Hume’s approach is to suggest that the solutions to our difficulties do not lie in philosophy, but in common life.

B. Other conflicts

The conflicts between the sources of virtue that are directed towards the agent herself and those that are directed towards others are particularly deep-seated, because they arise out of the two different general points of view that we typically take up. But we can also imagine conflicts across the other axis of Hume’s four kinds of virtues—between the useful and the agreeable—and once we put both axes in play, we can begin to imagine all kinds of conflicts. But, unlike those between the self and others, these multiple conflicts cannot be deftly resolved.

One conflict between the useful and the agreeable arises out of Hume’s treatment of figures like Simon de Montfort, Earl of Leicester, the leader of a popular rebellion against Henry III.²⁵ Of him, Hume says:

The violence, ingratitude, tyranny, rapacity and treachery of the earl of Leicester, gave a very bad idea of his moral character . . . : Yet must we allow the man to have possessed great abilities, and the appearance of great virtues. . . . His military capacity, and his political craft, were equally eminent: He possessed the talents both of governing men and conducting business: And though his ambition was boundless, it seems neither to have exceeded his courage nor his genius. (H 12; 2: 60)

Montfort was a great leader, Hume says, even if he was ruthless and overly ambitious. So in Montfort we find a set of qualities which Hume praises as useful, but whose ends were horrific. Thus, Montfort seems to have qualities which are both useful and disagreeable.²⁶

Two attempts to solve this apparent conflict immediately suggest themselves. One solution would be to insist that the ends are not really disagree-

²⁵ In 1258, Leicester led a group of barons against Henry III and put himself at the head of a committee to reform the constitution. But the committee refused to give up power when its task was completed, and a civil war broke out in which Leicester was ultimately defeated in 1265. During the time he controlled the sovereign power in England, however, he began the practice of calling two knights from each county to consult the government, and thus founded the House of Commons. See H 12; 2: 32–60.

²⁶ Another example of such a person, Hume thinks, is Hannibal: “To none would HASDRUBAL entrust more willingly the conduct of any dangerous enterprize; under none, did the soldiers discover more courage and confidence. Great boldness in facing danger; great prudence in the midst of it. No labour could fatigue his body or subdue his mind. . . . These great VIRTUES were balanced by great VICIES: Inhuman cruelty; perfidy more than *punic*; no truth, no faith, no regard to oaths, promises, or religion” (EM 320).

able, because we have not taken up a sufficiently general point of view. For example, “the fortifications of a city belonging to an enemy are esteem’d beautiful upon account of their strength, tho’ we cou’d wish that they were entirely destroy’d” (T 586–87). So, we could say that from a general point of view, we can approve of Montfort’s abilities because we understand how they promote his ends (T 472, T 588), even though we find ourselves rooting for his opponents. But the problem here is not that our *own* interests are clouding our judgment of Montfort’s goals. Removing our personal interests does not remove our empathy with the real people who were harmed by Montfort’s actions. From a general point of view, then, Montfort’s goals are still horrible.

The second solution would be to deny that the qualities are really useful, *because* they have such disagreeable consequences. Hume himself suggests that useful qualities “are only regarded as means to an end, and please me in proportion to their fitness for that end. The end, therefore, must be agreeable to me” (T 588). We can thus condemn his ends and the means he uses along with them. But this solution fails to account for the obvious and genuine praise that Hume has for Montfort’s abilities.

A better solution eliminates the conflict by separating the means from the ends. The qualities Hume admires in Montfort are, in practice, all-purpose means: they will help most people achieve whatever ends they have. As such, we can admire them from a general point of view, even when those ends turn out to be evil. We can thus recognize Montfort’s abilities and praise them, even if we condemn both his methods and his goals. The qualities of intelligence and ingenuity that we admire as useful are quite separate from the treachery and tyranny for which those good qualities were used. We can thus separate the useful means from the disagreeable ends, and so this case is not one in which the same quality is both useful and disagreeable.

Yet even if this case presents no real difficulties, other conflicts between the four categories of virtue besides those between the agent-directed and the other-directed will still arise. For example, we can easily imagine a trait which is disagreeable to the agent herself, but which is still useful to her. Hume never explicitly discusses such a case, but a likely candidate is the “constant habit of surveying ourselves, as it were, in reflection,” which “keeps alive all the sentiments of right and wrong” and is “the surest guardian of every virtue” (EM 276). On the one hand, an agent’s constant survey of her own character for moral faults is hardly a pleasant task, so from a general point of view in which we remove our own interest in her self-reflection, we will find it unpleasant because it is immediately disagreeable to her. On the other hand, her self-reflection keeps the image of right and wrong before her, and it thereby helps her to secure a good reputation. Possessing a good reputation is, of course, useful for many of her pursuits since it allows others to trust her.

Thus, the task of moral self-reflection is useful to her, even if it is disagreeable. So if we consider only the good that this trait does *for her*, it seems to count as both a virtue and a vice.

In this case, however, the conflict might be resolved by an appeal to the other two sources of virtue. Moral self-reflection is both useful *and* agreeable *to others*, because it makes a person sociable and thereby makes her both a reliable and a companionable member of society. Thus, the self-reflective trait is a virtue on three of the four indicators. And it is hardly an isolated example: many of the qualities that we think of as peculiarly moral virtues, like courage and limited self-sacrifice, are often painful to the person herself, even if they are useful to her, useful to others, and agreeable to others. Since Hume clearly thinks these traits are virtuous, he must think that the fact that they are disagreeable to her is outweighed by the fact that they are useful to her, useful to others, and agreeable to others.

Yet these examples raise as many questions as they answer. *Why* is the fact that the trait is disagreeable to her outweighed by the other three sources of virtue? Hume cannot simply be tallying a vote among the sources of virtue. Indeed, some traits are so harmful to the agent herself that they are not virtues even if they are both agreeable to her and useful and agreeable to others. For example, an excessive magnanimity “ruins his affairs, and leads him into dangers and difficulties, with which otherwise he would never have been acquainted” (T 600). Nevertheless, Hume claims, “such a passion is still agreeable, and conveys an elevated and sublime sensation to the person, who is actuated by it” (T 600).²⁷ Hume thus thinks that it is agreeable but harmful, but in this case the harm it does to the agent seems to outweigh the benefits. However, Hume admits, excessive magnanimity is not, on the whole, a bad vice; in fact, if “it displays itself under the frowns of fortune, [it] contributes . . . to the character of a hero” (T 600). Just as someone might admit to an “incapacity for business” because it suggests a “philosophical spirit” (T 587), someone may admit to excessive magnanimity because it implies a nobility of spirit that is far better than any “trivial” excesses in other parts of his character. Nevertheless, it is still a vice, Hume thinks, because it has bad effects on the agent—apparently without regard to the positive effects it evidently has on others. Indeed, Hume does not even mention its effects on others; they do not seem to fit into the equation at all in this discussion.

An obvious response would be to argue that a more moderate magnanimity would have most of the positive effects on others without any of the negative

²⁷ This quotation refers explicitly to “extravagant pride and ambition,” but Hume says that “excessive courage and magnanimity” fall into the same category (T 600).

effects on the agent. But this reply is inadequate: an excessive magnanimity will have even greater positive effects on others. So to claim that the negative effects on the agent outweigh the positive effect on others, Hume would need a fairly exact measure of the pleasures and pains caused by various character traits, and his view would begin to look like Bentham's. And in fact, Hume hints at such a view in his account of the "good" qualities. When we try to determine whether a quality is useful or agreeable to others, we sympathize with those "persons who have a connexion with" the agent (T 591). The suggestion is that we sum up the pleasures and pains caused in an observer who empathizes with all the members of this group. Yet Hume does not worry about how that summing would take place: his assumption seems to be that the feelings of those within the circle towards her will be similar. And he never suggests that those sentiments outweigh the sentiments of an observer in the point of view that focuses on the agent herself.²⁸

A different kind of case may shed more light on the matter: "heroism or military glory" (T 600). Here is a trait that is harmful to society in general because it give rise to disorder and chaos, but which is still agreeable to others: "There is something so dazzling in his character, the mere contemplation of it so elevates the mind, that we cannot refuse it our admiration. The pain, which we receive from its tendency to the prejudice of society, is over-power'd by a stronger and more immediate sympathy" (T 601). Hume argues that the trait is so agreeable to others that it overwhelms the pain caused by our sympathy with those who suffer because of it. In this case, an appeal to the other sources of virtue does not help. If anything, heroism is not agreeable to the person herself because it demands so much from her, but it is often useful to her because it helps her achieve goals that others are too timid to pursue. In heroism, then, we have a deep conflict in the four sources of virtue: it is useful but not agreeable to her, and it is quite agreeable but very harmful to others.

Hume is, in fact, quite wary of military courage; he thinks it is exalted only in "uncultivated nations, who have not yet had full experience of the advantages attending benevolence, justice, and the social virtues" (EM 255). Yet he must still account for the obvious esteem which people show for it. To do so, he simply says we find the character "dazzling" and therefore irresistible. But to make the judgment that heroism is on the whole either a vice (as Hume hints) or a virtue (as others believe), Hume seems to need the exact method

²⁸ Indeed, such a move might eliminate the point of view that focuses on the agent altogether, as occurs in an ideal observer theory. In such a view, the good of the agent is usually swamped by the good of others, unless it just happens to advance or to have no effect on the good of others. As such, that move is hardly in the expansive spirit of Hume's account of the virtues.

that he suggests in his account of the “good” qualities. If we want to make a final pronouncement about heroism, we will need a very precise calculation, one which can balance the sympathy of the spectator and which can compare the sentiments found in the perspective of the agent herself with those found in the perspective of others.

But perhaps we need not make such a final judgment. Perhaps Hume’s ambivalence towards heroism—like his ambivalence towards Charles I’s character as a whole—is exactly the correct attitude. The trait has some things in its favor and others against it, and nothing more can be said. Indeed, nothing in Hume’s theory requires him to make a final pronouncement about a virtue like heroism.²⁹ Unlike pride, heroism cannot be regulated well by an artificial virtue, because the glory of heroism can only be shown in wars that inevitably harm others—though the gentlemanly rules of war in Hume’s day and the Geneva Convention in ours are attempts to do so. But besides the obvious problems with enforcing these artifices in even an informal manner, these efforts do not solve the problem. Even in a regulated and attenuated form, heroism is still harmful. For that reason, I suspect, Hume hints that with time, we will understand the truly horrible effects of this trait, and we will cease to find it agreeable at all. It then becomes an example of a case in which our standard of judgment changes as our culture changes. In the meantime, we can only regulate it as best we can and leave its status ambiguous. Hume, at any rate, seems content to let our mixed judgments about it stand.

If this account is right, then the correct response to the case of excessive magnanimity is similarly ambiguous. It is, on the whole, harmful to the person herself, but beneficial to those around her. Hume does not need to provide a final judgment on the trait, but he does attempt to give it its proper place. It is a vice to the person herself, he says, but its agreeable nature “diminishes considerably the blame, which naturally attends its dangerous influence” (T 600). He does not, however, even try to weigh whatever problems it causes to her with its effects on others.

Thus, in cases of conflicts between the virtues, Hume is inclined to recommend a practice that will solve the conflict on a practical level, if he can find one. But if such efforts fail, he does not try to find a theoretical solution; instead, he simply leaves our judgments in the confused state in which they exist in our common life. He does not pretend that morality is a neater business than it really is.

²⁹If I am right here, then this example shows once again why Hume’s view is not an ideal observer theory. Hume simply does not make the comparisons between the general points of view that such a view requires.

3. MODELS FOR CHARACTERS

A. Conflicts within characters

An entirely different kind of conflict is exhibited in Charles I's character. Hume contends that much of Charles's misfortune was the product of the unfortunate combination of three character traits: his ability to pursue a steady purpose, his loyalty to his advisors, and his poor judgment of others. Throughout his reign, Hume contends, Charles relied on the judgments of others, like the Duke of Buckingham and Archbishop Laud, who were "much inferior to himself both in morals and understanding" (H 50; 5: 175). So, for example, when Charles dissolved Parliament in 1626, he listened to the vain and incompetent Duke of Buckingham and coerced "loans" from his subjects. He thereby alienated his political allies, infuriated his enemies, and created a climate of distrust that would ultimately lead to his downfall. In the immediate future, he was still forced to call a Parliament, and it compelled him to sign the Petition of Right in 1628, which greatly restricted his powers and his options (H 50; 5: 175–200). His blind loyalty to Buckingham and his stubborn perseverance in following Buckingham's plan only made his situation worse, both financially and politically.

This example displays a curious conflict that can arise out of virtuous character traits. Two otherwise virtuous qualities—loyalty and perseverance—did Charles more harm than good. Because he was a poor judge of character, he chose poor advisors, who set him on disastrous paths which he accepted out of his faith in them and which he steadfastly would not alter. Poor policy decisions, pursued to the end, became pure folly. His virtues thus compounded the mistakes of his advisors. With these particular virtues, Charles was a worse man than he would have been without them.

Perhaps this example simply demonstrates the truth of Kant's contention that the only thing that is good without qualification is a good will.³⁰ But for Hume, they point to a deep problem, since these supposedly virtuous traits turned out to be neither useful nor agreeable for Charles or for Britain. Hume hints that Charles's character is simply another case of "virtue in rags" in which the usual effects of the traits are accidentally lost (T 584–85): only the "extreme malevolence of his fortune," Hume says, was able to "disappoint them from all their influence" (H 59; 5: 542). But in this case, the usual effects of Charles's virtues were not prevented simply by external circumstances or by bad luck, but by the other features of his character. Worse still, the usual effects were not simply stymied; they were turned upside down. But if a trait

³⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 2nd ed., trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1990), 9.

can lead to such bad results in combination with other traits, then an agent should be wary about cultivating it in herself; a virtue may make *her* character as a whole *worse*, rather than better. Paradoxically, then, cultivating a particular virtue may be a vice for a particular person.

This conclusion creates a problem for Hume. After all, Hume famously contends that “morals excite passions and produce or prevent actions” (T 457), and he thereby insists on morality’s ability to guide action. But if an agent should not develop a virtue in herself, then calling it a virtue has completely lost its ability to guide her. However, as Annette Baier argues, the influence morality has on action is indirect at best in Hume’s *are* view.³¹ Hume admits that “the *heart* does not always take part” in our moral judgments, even though “they are sufficient for discourse, and serve all our purposes in company, in the pulpit, on the theatre, and in the schools” (T 603). Moral judgments thus affect our *language* more than our actions. But if the influence of morality is mostly indirect and moral judgments work mostly on general rules, we should not expect them to be attuned to the idiosyncratic problems of particular people.

However, if particular virtues may not help particular people, then a person should not focus on acquiring a single virtue, which, given her current character, may make her situation worse. Instead, she should think of herself and her virtues more holistically. To change herself, Hume says, she should seek a gradual reform of her entire character:

Let a man propose to himself the model of a character, which he approves: Let him be well acquainted with those particulars, in which his own character deviates from this model: Let him keep a constant watch over himself, and bend his mind, by a continual effort, from the vices, towards the virtues; and I doubt not but, in time, he will find, in his temper, an alteration for the better.³²

She must have an entirely new character in view to effect moral change in herself. So although Socrates and Plato are wrong to think that we must have all the virtues before we can have one, they were right to think that a piecemeal approach to moral improvement is likely to fail. Nevertheless, Hume, like Aristotle, thinks that through education and habit, we can make ourselves better.³³

³¹ Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments*, 183–88. Baier, however, thinks that the claim that morality should influence actions is simply part of a *reductio* against Hume’s rationalist opponents (184). Nevertheless, Hume’s own view that morality is based on sentiments makes morality something which is inherently capable of influencing us. For support of this claim, see Elizabeth Radcliffe, “How Does the Humean Sense of Duty Motivate?” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 34 (July 1996): 383–407.

³² Hume, *Essays*, 170.

³³ Hume, *Essays*, 169–71.

B. The perfect character

If moral change is holistic and if it must concentrate on reforming an entire character, then we can no longer emphasize particular virtues if we want to initiate moral change. Instead, we should focus on a model for an entire character that can provide a goal for people. Hume describes such an ideal character in this way: “’Tis a most certain rule, that if there be no relation of life, in which I cou’d not wish to stand to a particular person, his character must so far be allow’d to be perfect” (T 606). So a perfect character will be that possessed by a person whom everyone is glad to have as an acquaintance, an associate, an employer, a parent, or a spouse.

A perfect character need not, however, be that of a saint. Neither Cleantes (the “perfect character” of the second *Enquiry*), who is a businessman and who is the life of a party (EM 269–70), nor Alcheic (the “perfect character” of “A Dialogue”), who is a homosexual who commits parricide, infanticide, and suicide, is a candidate for canonization. But both embody an ideal that is high but attainable. Importantly, however, Hume thinks it is an ideal that can be achieved by more than just these fictional character. Among real people, Elizabeth I is a good candidate:

Her vigour, her constancy, her magnanimity, her penetration, vigilance, address, are allowed to merit the highest praises, and appear not to have been surpassed by any person that ever filled a throne. . . . By the force of her mind, she controuled all her more active and stronger qualities, and prevented them from running into excess: Her heroism was exempt from temerity, her frugality from avarice, her friendship from partiality, her active temper from turbulency and a vain ambition. (H 44; 4: 351)

However, Elizabeth’s character is flawed, because her relations with her close associates and towards her subjects were too harsh: “A conduct less rigorous, less imperious, more sincere, more indulgent to her people, would have been requisite to form a perfect character” (H 44; 4: 351). For that reason, Elizabeth’s courtier, Sir Philip Sydney, is an even better candidate: “This person is described by the writers of that age as the most perfect model of an accomplished gentleman, that could be formed even by the wanton imagination of poetry or fiction. Virtuous conduct, polite conversation, heroic valour, and elegant erudition, all concurred to render him the ornament and delight of the English court” (H 41; 4: 218). Sydney even had compassion for those in a lesser station: dying on the battlefield, he gave up a bottle of water to a common soldier, saying, “*This man’s necessity is still greater than mine*” (H 41; 4: 218). Now, admittedly, a “perfect gentleman” need not be a moral paragon, but the qualities Hume attributes to Sydney are exactly the qualities of nobility, sociability, learning, and benevolence that Hume gives to his fictional models of perfection.

Yet there is only one actual person whose character Hume explicitly calls “perfect”: Alfred the Great. Of him, Hume says:

The merit of this prince, both in private and public life, may with advantage be set in opposition to that of any monarch or citizen, which the annals of any age or any nation can present to us. He seems indeed to be the model of that perfect character, which, under the denomination of a sage or wise man, philosophers have been fond of delineating, rather as a fiction of their imagination, than in hopes of ever seeing it really existing. (H 2; 1: 74)

In Alfred, all the virtues were found together, but never interfering with each other:

So happily were all his virtues tempered together; so justly were they blended; and so powerfully did each prevent the other from exceeding proper boundaries! He knew how to reconcile the most enterprizing spirit with the coolest moderation; the most obstinate perseverance with the easiest flexibility; the most severe justice with the gentlest lenity; the greatest vigour in commanding with the most perfect affability of deportment; the highest capacity and inclination for science, with the most shining talents for action. (H 2; 1: 74–75)

Alfred was an accomplished military tactician, and yet he also brought England the rudiments of the rule of law (H 2; 1: 67–81). Moreover, he had the physical charms and natural abilities that Hume counts among the virtues (H 2; 1: 75).

What makes Alfred a perfect character is that he exhibits many different abilities. As Hume puts the point, a character will be perfect if the person is “a safe companion, an easy friend, a gentle master, an agreeable husband, or an indulgent father. We consider him with all his relations in society; and love or hate him, according as he affects those, who have any immediate intercourse with him” (T 606). And indeed Alfred seems to have been all of these things. Even more, he was a shrewd yet wise leader and a benevolent king—qualities that enhanced his status in relation to others. So, whether someone was a noble or a peasant, whether she was his daughter or his wife, whether she was a friend or a mere acquaintance, she could be happy in that position. There is, then, no position with respect to Alfred that one could not want to be.

Hume’s claim that in a perfect character there is “no relation in life, in which I cou’d not wish to stand to a particular person” (T 606), however, raises two problematic cases: the person herself and her enemy. The character Hume describes as perfect would seem to be so self-sacrificing that we might think that even if everyone would want to be in some relation to her, they would not want to *be* her. But on this point, Hume is explicit: “If he be as little wanting to himself as to others, his character is entirely perfect. This is the ultimate test of merit and virtue” (T 606). So, we must want to *be* Alfred as much as we would want to be in any other relation to him. And indeed, as

Hume describes him, Alfred is accomplished intellectually, and he is capable of great pleasures. He certainly does not possess the self-castigating qualities that are so often praised in the stories of the saints, and which Hume condemns as “monkish virtues” (EM 270).

The question of whether one would want to be Alfred’s enemy is more complex. Since Hume asks us to judge virtues from a general point of view that does not include our own interests, it is tempting to suppose that even if we were Alfred’s enemy, we could still recognize Alfred’s ability from that vantage point. But if a perfect character is one towards which we could wish to be in *any* relation, then we should not mind being his enemy as well as his friend. Unfortunately, because Alfred’s abilities are so formidable, he is a difficult opponent; we might prefer to have a less powerful and less determined opponent, so that we could hope to win. On the other hand, we know Alfred will be a fair opponent. If we lose the battle, Alfred’s humanity and justice would keep our loss from being too severe. He will not act vindictively towards us, and he would treat us as Henry V treated his French enemies: with “address and clemency” (H 19; 2: 378). Indeed, Henry treated the French so well that they “almost forgot he was an enemy” (H 19; 2: 378).³⁴ So we would rather have Alfred or Henry as an enemy than someone who would take revenge upon us if we lose. In addition, we might also claim that losing to someone as formidable as Alfred is certainly no disgrace, so it should not undermine our own self-esteem. In these respects, at least, we would not mind being his enemy—but only in these respects. On the whole, we might still prefer to win easily. So, the claim that we would want to be in *any* relation to Alfred is something of an exaggeration. But even if Hume’s claim is something of an overstatement, the fact that we can make sense of the assertion that we would prefer Alfred as an enemy is itself significant.

The perfect character Hume sketches is indeed an attractive figure, and it is the model of a well-rounded person: intelligent but not narrow, generous but not to a fault, proud but not vain. Since he is the sum of all the virtues, no particular virtue will cause him the kinds of problems that Charles had. Aiming for such a character will enable someone to use the virtuous qualities to their fullest degree and will thus enable them to live a meaningful life, both for themselves and for others.

4. CONCLUSION

For Hume, we have seen, character traits are particularistic; they are “characters for,” as Baier puts it.³⁵ But the moral goal is still holistic. Hume is, of

³⁴ I owe this reference to a referee for the *Journal of the History of Philosophy*.

³⁵ Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments*, 188.

course, pessimistic about our ability to change our character, and he thinks our best chance is to change our situation rather than our nature (T 537). But the importance of the “perfect character” as a moral ideal should not be dismissed. It is a high goal, but a possible one. And it does bring together Hume’s account of the virtues into a kind of unity.

Yet the unity it brings is contrived. As an ideal, a perfect character is simply a collection of traits, a “catalogue” of virtues (EM 174), as Baier points out.³⁶ It is not different aspects of a single super-virtue, a role served by justice in Plato’s *Republic* or by a good will in Kant’s *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Nor is it a collection built on achieving the greatest good for the greatest number, even if it does bring pleasure of a kind to all those around the person. Hume is simply not concerned to balance the pleasures and pains or to maximize pleasure, as contemporary consequentialists demand.

In Hume’s scheme, the virtues are united only by a favorable response to them from the moral points of view; there is no greater unity to the Humean virtues. Sometimes, we can jury-rig institutions that ameliorate the conflicts: in the marvelous meta-virtues of justice and good manners, we patch together practices that can keep some of the virtues from tearing us apart. But more often, we must simply accept the fact that we cannot reconcile the various sources of virtue or the various demands that different virtues make on us. Those of us who are not lucky enough to have a perfect character must simply accept the many ambiguities and contradictions in even our best traits. In the world according to Hume, even morality can be a chaotic and unstructured place.³⁷

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³⁶ Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments*, 198–219.

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