Secret Sentiments: Hume on Pride, Decency, and Virtue

Enrico Galvagni[[1]](#footnote-1)

This is a pre-print version of the paper. Please quote from the final version appeared in *Hume Studies* 47 (1):131-155 (2022) https://doi.org/10.1353/hms.2022.0007

*Abstract*:In this paper, I reconstruct Hume’s account of decency, the virtue associated with a limited display of pride, and show how it presents a significant challenge to standard virtue ethical interpretations of Hume. In section I, I explore his ambivalent conception of pride as both virtuous (because useful and agreeable to oneself) and vicious (when excessive and disagreeable to others). In section II, I show how the virtue of decency provides a practical solution to these two clashing aspects of pride. In doing so, I demonstrate that decency is a merely behavioural virtue that requires no virtuous motive and consists of nothing more than “a fair outside.” I argue that this account of decency represents a serious and underexplored challenge to standard interpretations of Hume as a virtue ethicist committed to the idea that actions derive their moral value from underlying motives. In section III, I reply to some objections.

INTRODUCTION

Hume’s attempt to analyse the passions as natural and empirical facts of human psychology is in line with a lively discussion on the same topic that had been flourishing in early modern times. The passions of self-love and pride were central subjects discussed in this period.[[2]](#endnote-1) Authors such as La Rochefoucauld, Pierre Nicole, and Nicolas Malebranche (on the Continent) and Bernard Mandeville, Archibald Campbell, and Francis Hutcheson (across the Channel) had, in various ways, examined the ambivalent value of pride. Tapping into this debate, Hume emphasised two opposite forms that this passion can take. On the one hand, Hume strongly contributes to the rehabilitation of pride that he takes to be an agreeable and useful “impression of reflection”: “The merit of pride or self-esteem is deriv’d from two circumstances, *viz*. its utility and its agreeableness to ourselves; by which it capacitates us for business, and, at the same time, gives us an immediate satisfaction” (T 3.3.2.14; 600).[[3]](#endnote-2) On the other hand, however, Hume also acknowledges that pride can turn into a vice and become detrimental to social interactions: “excessive pride or over-weaning conceit of ourselves is always esteem’d vicious, and is universally hated” (T 3.3.2.1; 592).

The double-edge sword of pride needs to be handled carefully. Hume’s introduction of “decency” (sometimes called “modesty”) as a virtue that “require[s]” us to “avoid all signs and expressions, which tend directly to show this passion [pride]” (T 3.3.2.10; 597–98) is conceived of as a tool to provide a solution to these two clashing aspects of pride.[[4]](#endnote-3) In other words, decency is the virtue that Hume associates with a *limited display* of pride. I claim that, in his view, we should aim to feel “secret sentiments” (T 3.3.2.11; 598) of pride, but we must hide them in order to be “decent.” The virtue of decency, therefore, is compatible with motives that are contrary to real humility. Elaborating on this point, this paper challenges the common idea that for Hume *every* virtue derives its value from underlying virtuous motives.

The paper is structured as follows. In section I, I explore Hume’s account of pride and pay special attention to the two ways in which pride can be excessive. Keeping this distinction in mind helps us to shed light on how the virtue of decency works. Decency is a virtue that consists merely in not *displaying* an excessive pride, it does not go “beyond the outside” (T 3.3.2.11; 598). In turn, a fresh and detailed account of decency brings to light an internal tension in Hume’s ethics, namely the contrast between his statement that “all virtuous actions derive their merit only from virtuous motives” (T 3.2.1.4; 478) and his account of decency as a virtue of the outside. I offer such a reconstruction in section II, where I demonstrate that decency is a merely behavioural virtue consisting in nothing more than “a fair outside” (T 3.3.2.10; 598) and needs no virtuous motive or intention. Detailed in this way, the case of decency offers a strong challenge to interpreters who read Hume as a virtue ethicist committed to the idea that all virtues derive their moral value from virtuous motives. In section III, I deal with a number of objections that can be raised against my reconstruction of Hume’s account of decency and provide replies based on textual evidence.

I. THE RISKS OF PRIDE

In Book 2 of his *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume argues that pride is an important passion that is not only agreeable but also beneficial. Hume’s account of pride has been studied in detail.[[5]](#endnote-4) According to Hume, pride and humility, its opposite passion, cannot be properly defined because they are “simple and uniform impressions,” and it is “impossible we can ever, by a multitude of words, give a just definition of them” (T 2.1.2.1; 277). We must, instead, detail their structure explaining the circumstances in which these passions arise. If we do so, Hume believes, pride emerges to have a threefold structure. The *object* of pride must be the self because “[w]hen self enters not into the consideration, there is no room either for pride or humility” (T 2.1.2.1; 277). Together with the object, Hume claims that pride always has a cause that excites this passion. There is a “vast variety” (T 2.1.2.5; 279) of causes of pride. In order to explain this variety, he says that “we shou’d make a new distinction in the causes of the passion, betwixt that *quality*, which operates, and the *subject*, on which it is plac’d” (T 2.1.2.6; 279). Putting the pieces together, pride emerges from the interaction of three components: an object (the self), a subject, and its positive quality.

***I.1. Positive Pride***

Delving deeper into his description of pride and humility, Hume recognizes that vices and virtues “are the most obvious causes of these passions” (T 2.1.7.2; 295; see also T 2.1.5.2; 285). This connection between pride, humility, and virtue was far from being the traditional understanding of this topic in Hume’s time. Before he detailed his account, pride was commonly understood as a vice and, in the Christian tradition, a deadly sin.

Some of Hume’s important predecessors had already developed accounts of the self-regarding passions which emphasised their positive outcomes. According to Bernard Mandeville (1670–1733), for example, pride and vanity can be curbed to generate various virtues. His discussion of courage in the *Remark (R.)* annexed to his *Fable of the Bees* (1732)[[6]](#endnote-5) is a case in point. Here, Mandeville argues that true courage stems from the passion of anger: “all Men, whether they are born in Courts or Forests, are susceptible of Anger. When this Passion overcomes (as among all degrees of People it sometimes does) the whole Set of Fears Man has, he has true Courage, and will fight as boldly as a Lion or a Tiger” (Vol. 1, 207). However, even in absence of that passion, one can bring oneself to act courageously out of pride and a desire of honour. In this case, the virtue of courage will not be real but “spurious and artificial” (Vol. 1, 207). In the case of human beings, acts of courage can be “rous’d by [one’s] Vanity, as a Lion is by his Anger” (Vol. 1, 216); by curbing pride, humans can generate artificial virtues which are useful to society at large. In spite of this positive function of some self-regarding passions, however, even Mandeville retains the idea that pride is a vicious, albeit useful, passion.

In his *Treatise*, Hume explicitly moves away from the idea that pride must be a vice. In the following passage, he engages directly with the tradition and speaks his mind openly:

There may, perhaps, be some, who being accustom’d to the style of the schools and pulpit, and having never consider’d human nature in any other light, than that in which *they* place it, may here be surpriz’d to hear me talk of virtue as exciting pride, which they look upon as a vice; and of vice as producing humility, which they have been taught to consider as a virtue. But not to dispute about words, I observe, that by *pride* I understand that agreeable impression, which arises in the mind, when the view either of our virtue, beauty, riches or power makes us satisfy’d with ourselves: And that by *humility* I mean the opposite impression. (T 2.1.7.8; 297)

Hume’s account of pride is of a passion that generates agreeable impressions. If you feel proud, it means that you (the object) are feeling good because of a positive quality attached to a subject that you are proud of (the cause). In addition, since the most obvious cause of pride is virtue, Hume’s account of pride is not only good from one’s own individual perspective but also for moral reasons.

This connection between virtue and pride becomes even stronger in Book 3 of the *Treatise*. In section 1 of part 3, Hume affirms that “these two particulars are to be consider’d as equivalent, with regard to our mental qualities, *virtue* and the power of producing love or pride, *vice* and the power of producing humility or hatred” (T 3.3.1.3; 575). Since agreeable qualities of the mind are listed among the virtues, it is natural to think that Hume conceives of one’s disposition to feel proud of oneself as virtuous. In addition, pride is also useful to oneself: “The merit of pride or self-esteem is deriv’d from two circumstances, *viz*. its utility and its agreeableness to ourselves; by which it capacitates us for business, and, at the same time, gives us an immediate satisfaction” (T 3.3.2.14; 600). It is therefore clear that, since pride is both agreeable and useful to oneself, it must count as virtuous.

***I.2. Excessive Pride***

But this is not the whole story. In Book 3, Hume returns to this issue and now seems to turn the tables, affirming that pride can be excessive and, therefore, a vice, and that decency, understood along the lines of moderate humility, is a virtue. In T 3.3.2, *Of greatness of mind*, in which he concerns himself with “the passions of pride and humility, and . . . the vice or virtue that lies in their excesses or just proportion,” Hume begins by noting that when pride is excessive, it turns into an “over-weaning conceit of ourselves” and “is always esteem’d vicious” (T 3.3.2.1; 592). On the contrary, “a just sense of our weakness” generates love in others and is, therefore, virtuous (T 3.3.2.1; 592). Since Hume has maintained that virtue has to “be consider’d as equivalent” to “the power of producing love or pride,” and “vice” to “the power of producing humility or hatred” (T 3.3.1.3; 575), his conclusion must be that, insofar as it produces hatred in others, *excessive* pride is vicious: “The necessary consequence of these principles is, that pride, or an over-weaning conceit of ourselves, must be vicious; since it causes uneasiness in all men, and presents them every moment with a disagreeable comparison” (T 3.3.2.7; 596).

That pride can be *excessive*, however, is an extremely vague formulation. Interpreters take excessive to mean undue, inappropriate, or misplaced. This is surely true: Hume believes without a doubt that an “over-weaning conceit of ourselves” (T 3.3.2.7; 596) is vicious and that one is doing something morally problematic when they *overestimate* themselves. But there is another relevant way in which pride can be excessive, one that has been overlooked by interpreters.[[7]](#endnote-6) For Hume, pride is not “excessive” only when it is undue. One could have good reasons to feel superior to others and be much prouder than one’s peers, but this does not make one’s pride less excessive. Hume’s point is that one’s pride can be immoderate simply because other people will feel inferior in one’s presence.[[8]](#endnote-7)

In order to explain this second way in which pride can be excessive, Hume mentions a “general rule”: “That impertinent, and almost universal propensity of men, to over-value themselves, has given us such a *prejudice* against self-applause, that we are apt to condemn it, by a *general rule*, wherever we meet with it” (T 3.3.2.10; 598). Pride is not considered excessive only when one feels it *in disproportion* to the real positive quality of the cause, but also—and more importantly for what follows—when it goes beyond the general established norms, regardless of the match that may exists between the feeling and the cause. This is so because “custom and practice” bring to light some principles that contribute “to the easy production of the passions, and guide us, by means of general establish’d maxims, in the proportions we ought to observe in preferring one object to another” (T 2.1.6.9; 294).

Hume acknowledges a human tendency to overestimation. This point, far from being a novel discovery, had been observed by previous writers. For instance, in his *Remark (M.)*, Mandeville claimed that “PRIDE is that Natural Faculty by which every Mortal that has any Understanding over-values, and imagines better Things of himself than any impartial Judge, thoroughly acquainted with all his Qualities and Circumstances, could allow him” (*Fable*, Vol. 1, 124). At the same time, as Hume explains “’tis our own pride, which makes us so much displeas’d with the pride of other people; and that vanity becomes insupportable to us merely because we are vain” (T 3.3.2.7; 596). This observation echoes La Rochefoucauld, who in his *Maxims* wrote that “[i]f we did not have pride, we would not complain of it in others.”[[9]](#endnote-8) Mandeville, again, noticed that pride “being odious to all the World, is a certain Sign that all the World is troubled with it” (*Fable*, Vol. 1, 124). Elaborating on this human tendency, Hume argues that we have established a general rule that leads us to negatively judge every forceful manifestation of pride. Even the exceptionally meritorious individual will be subject to blame if they display their (due, but still excessive) pride.

Some interpreters explicitly conflate these two ways in which pride can be excessive (we could call them overestimation and disproportion). Walter Brand, for example, writes that “it is only when we do not believe that people are justified in their pride that we compare them to ourselves” (“Hume on the Value of Pride,” 347). However, Hume is explicit in saying that we find disagreeable *all* expressions of excessive pride and we do not “make any exception to this rule in favour of men of sense and merit” (T 3.3.2.10; 598). Even if some especially virtuous individuals have good reasons to be very proud of themselves, their pride will not be less disagreeable to others. There is a way in which pride is due, yet excessive. Jacqueline Taylor has emphasised this aspect of Hume’s account by writing that “[e]ven cases of well-grounded pride can be displeasing to others” (*Reflecting Subjects*, 147) and, therefore, vicious and detrimental. In summary, in Book 3, pride emerges to bear some risks for human sociability: if a person displays the passion of pride only on the basis of the proper value of its cause, they risk ending up turning pride into a vice, with detrimental social consequences.

***I.3. Explaining the Tension: “A Disagreeable Comparison”***

Such a change of perspective between Book 2 and Book 3 becomes psychologically understandable if we focus on a principle of human nature that Hume calls “comparison.” This principle appears already in Book 2, but it is only in T 3.3.2 that Hume analyses it in detail and explains how it interacts with sympathy.[[10]](#endnote-9) Comparison is described as the principle in human nature that is responsible for “the variation of our judgments concerning objects, according to the proportion they bear to those with which we compare them” (T 3.3.2.4; 593). Hume goes on to affirm that “no comparison is more obvious than that with ourselves; and hence it is that on all occasions it takes place, and mixes with most of our passions” (T 3.3.2.4; 593).

The principle of comparison is essential to understand Hume’s position on the viciousness of excessive pride. Hume offers various clear formulations of this point:

[B]y making us enter into those elevated sentiments, which the proud man entertains of himself, presents that comparison, which is so mortifying and disagreeable. (T 3.3.2.6; 595)

[P]ride, or an over-weaning conceit of ourselves, must be vicious; since it causes uneasiness in all men, and presents them every moment with a disagreeable comparison. (T 3.3.2.7; 596)

The fact that one appears to be very proud, even if for a good reason, tends to make other people feel inferior and generates hatred rather than love. But, since Hume argued that “vice” is “the power of producing humility or hatred” (T 3.3.1.3; 575), excessive pride must be vicious.

Despite the admission that excessive pride is a vice, however, Hume does not go back on his word. He recognizes that another’s pride can be disagreeable only because it clashes with one’s own pride: “No one, who duly considers of this matter, will make any scruple of allowing, that any piece of ill-breeding, or any expression of pride and haughtiness, is displeasing to us, merely because it shocks our own pride, and leads us by sympathy into a comparison, which causes the disagreeable passion of humility” (T 3.3.2.17; 601). This observation is essential because it allows Hume consistently to affirm that “tho’ an over-weaning conceit of our own merit be vicious and disagreeable, nothing can be more laudable, than to have a value for ourselves, where we really have qualities that are valuable” (T 3.3.2.8; 596). The fact that a disposition to feel pride (even due pride) can be disagreeable to others makes it sometimes vicious, but this does not counter the positive value of pride that Hume is very careful to point out:

[N]othing is more useful to us in the conduct of life, than a due degree of pride, which makes us sensible of our own merit, and gives us a confidence and assurance in all our projects and enterprizes . . . ’Tis requisite on all occasions to know our own force; and were it allowable to err on either side, ’twou’d be more advantageous to overrate our merit, than to form ideas of it, below its just standard. (T 3.3.2.8; 596–97)

In short, a certain degree of pride and self-esteem is essential to one’s well-being and the achievement of one’s ends and projects in life.

II. DECENCY: A VIRTUE WITHOUT MOTIVES

Hume’s definition of the virtue of decency emerges from the need to reconcile the two aspects of pride described in the previous section of this paper. On the one hand, an individual should be proud of their own achievements and positive qualities; on the other, they should also conceal their pride (even when they have good reason to feel it!) in order to prevent others from feeling belittled by comparison. For this reason, Hume affirms that “a just sense of our weakness, is esteem’d virtuous, and procures the good-will of every-one” (T 3.3.2.1; 592). In this section, I explore Hume’s introduction of the virtue of decency, and argue that he believes that we should aim to have “secret sentiments” (T 3.3.2.11; 598) of pride, but we must also hide them to live well in society. The case of decency, therefore, represents a serious and underexplored challenge to standard interpretations of Hume as a virtue ethicist completely committed to the idea that actions derive their moral value from underlying virtuous motives. Contrary to these interpretations, the case of decency shows that Hume does not always believe that a match between motives and actions is required to be virtuous. A person needs not to have underlying virtuous motives to be decent. What makes a piece of behaviour decent is the outward effects, not the presence of virtuous motives. Consequently, a decent person—one who reliably acts in a decent way—can be described fully without reference to virtuous motives or praiseworthy inward states of mind.

II.1. Modesty, Decency, Good Breeding

Before analysing the virtue of decency in detail, we need to devote some attention to Hume’s oscillating terminology. In the context of his discussion of greatness of mind, Hume explores the virtue that consists of “a just sense of our weakness” and “procures the good-will of every-one” (T 3.3.2.1; 592). He sometimes calls this virtue “decency,” some other times “modesty,” “humility” or “good-breeding.”[[11]](#endnote-10) In key passages clearly concerned with the display of pride and humility, Hume uses the word “modesty” rather than “decency”:

[M]odesty, or a just sense of our weakness, is esteem’d virtuous, and procures the good-will of every-one. (T 3.3.2.1; 592)

[T]ho’ pride, or self-applause, be sometimes disagreeable to others, ’tis always agreeable to ourselves; as on the other hand, modesty, tho’ it give pleasure to every one, who observes it, produces often uneasiness in the person endow’d with it. (T 3.3.2.9; 597)

In the same section, however, Hume also employs the word “decency” to refer to the exact same concept as denoted by “modesty”: “good-breeding and decency require that we shou’d avoid all signs and expressions, which tend directly to show that passion [pride]” (T 3.3.2.10; 597). This virtue, therefore, could be called either “modesty” or “decency.” There are two reasons why it is better for us consistently to adopt the latter term. First, our common understanding of the word ‘modesty’ today is characterized by the reference to a person’s actual beliefs of themselves and their value. Individuals are *really* modest only if they sincerely believe that they are less valuable than they actually are.[[12]](#endnote-11) As we will go on to see, this is not a requirement in Hume’s account of the virtue concerning the display of pride.[[13]](#endnote-12) Second, it is preferable to use the word ‘decency’ in order to avoid confusion with Hume’s account of modesty as a virtue connected to chastity (as in T 3.2.12: *Of chastity and modesty*). To eliminate all confusion, let me note that when Hume talks of modesty in connection to chastity, he means something that “we require in the expressions, and dress, and behaviour of the fair sex” (T 3.2.12.2; 570). Modesty, in other words, is strictly connected to chastity in this context because it consists in being dressed and behaving in a way that is not suggestive or sexually explicit. This virtue has nothing to do with one’s display of pride or self-esteem. As Ann Levey has noted, modesty in this sense “arises as part of a mechanism to enforce female chastity” and “is strictly a female virtue.”[[14]](#endnote-13) She puts it very clearly when she affirms that “[m]odesty in dress and behavior is a public display of repugnance towards the erotic” (“Under Constraint,” 219). The same cannot be said, of course, for the regulation of pride.[[15]](#endnote-14)

Although the words “modesty” and “decency” are sometimes used in ways that seems largely interchangeable in Hume’s text, in what follows I will try to identify the virtue that Hume associates with a limited display of pride, and I will call this virtue ‘decency.’

Now that, despite Hume’s inconsistent terminology, we have made a clear conceptual distinction between modesty and decency, it is important to notice that other terms are often associated with decency in Hume’s discussion. In the context of T 3.3.1, Hume uses the words “decency” and “good-breeding” in pairs. The phrase “good-breeding and decency” appears twice (T 3.3.2.10 and T 3.3.2.11; 597–98), and in other passages he refers to them in a way that is less straightforward but still clearly identifiable. Hume also talks of “good manners” and “politeness.” These terms are used in a way that is not always clear, and this has caused a significant amount of confusion in subsequent historiography. While Hume is concerned with politeness and good manners, they are conceptually distinct from the virtue of decency. Hume conceives of good manners as rules concerning conduct in company and conversation, and not specifically as a virtue for the regulation of the display of pride: for Hume, “good manners” are “a kind of lesser morality” that has to do with the ceremonies “calculated for the ease of company and conversation” (EPM 4.13; 209).

Decency is not the same as good manners: the former concerns only the display of pride, the latter—together with politeness—regards ceremonies, table manners, and etiquette. In their discussion of this topic, some interpreters fail to distinguish between a virtue consisting of the regulation of pride and a more general conformity to good manners. In doing so, they end up conflating politeness with the virtue consisting in a limited display of pride. Mikko Tolonen, for example, writes that “[i]n the *Treatise*, Hume characterizes politeness as an outward principle directly related to the passion of pride.”[[16]](#endnote-15) However, as Tolonen himself emphasises, in an important discussion of politeness to be found in a letter to Michael Ramsay written on September 12, 1734, Hume describes politeness as consisting of “the little Niceties” that “serve to polish the ordinary Kind of People & prevent Rudeness & Brutality” (*Letters*, 21). This shows clearly that politeness goes well beyond the simple suppression of external pride and rather includes a series of gestures, courtesies and formalities which are without doubt artificial. Tolonen fails to isolate decency as a specific virtue made of the regulation in one’s display of pride and speaks of ‘politeness’ (a word that appears one single time in the *Treatise*!), decency, modesty and good manners as if they were the same virtue. In older literature, other interpreters fall into the same trap. Peter Johnson, despite a remarkable analysis of Hume’s conception of good manners as “a necessary feature of an ordered social existence,”[[17]](#endnote-16) ends up conflating Hume’s thoughts concerning the regulation of pride with more general remarks on etiquette and civility which stem from redirected pride but go well beyond the mere hiding of this passion. In his book *The Suasive Art of David Hume*, M. A. Box rightly notices that “Hume places good manners among the artificial rather than the natural virtues,”[[18]](#endnote-17) but assumes that decency, politeness, and good manners are only different names for the same virtue. As I have argued above, a more fine-grained analysis of Hume’s text shows that this assumption needs to be challenged.

Against Box, Johnson, and Tolonen, I claim that Hume describes a specific virtue that is required in the regulation and display of pride in order to prevent disagreeable comparisons. If we clear the way of the conflation silently operated by various interpreters, decency emerges as a virtue that is not only different from good manners or politeness, but also raises a powerful challenge to a common interpretation of Hume’s ethics that assumes a match between true virtuous behaviour and correspondent motives.

II.2. Decency or “A Fair Outside”

As we have seen in the previous section, despite Hume’s ambivalent view of pride, he is clear that “self-satisfaction and vanity may not only be allowable, but requisite in a character” (T 3.3.2.10; 597).[[19]](#endnote-18) We should feel pride when we have good reason to do so but we also have to hide it to live well in society. From this tension we approve of one’s tendency to feel pride but only when this passion is moderate and properly concealed. For this reason, Hume affirms that, “good-breeding and decency require that we shou’d avoid all signs and expressions, which tend directly to show that passion [pride]. We have, all of us, a wonderful partiality for ourselves, and were we always to give vent to our sentiments in this particular, we shou’d mutually cause the greatest indignation in each other” (T 3.3.2.10; 597). Although we all have “a wonderful partiality for ourselves,” we also hide our pride in order not to be disagreeable to others. Note here that Hume is not talking of a way in which we curb or redirect pride. Rather, he is talking of *concealing* this passion. This, in my view, is an essential difference between decency as a virtue consisting of hiding pride, and politeness as a practice arising from the redirection of the same passion, a difference which interpreters have not stressed in previous readings.

The virtue of decency resides precisely in a *hiding* process, a process that does not require an erasure of what is concealed: “I believe no one, who has any practice of the world, and can penetrate into the inward sentiments of men, will assert, that the humility, which good-breeding and decency require of us, goes beyond the outside” (T 3.3.2.11; 598). Here, Hume is claiming that one’s humility is required by good breeding and decency, but such humility does not go “beyond the outside.”[[20]](#endnote-19) We need not have any real feeling of humility in order to achieve the virtue of decency.[[21]](#endnote-20)

The lack of motives of humility becomes even more evident as Hume stresses that decency is a virtue that is compatible with a sort of emotional camouflage. No decent motives are required for true decency. Even more telling, a person can be decent and proud at the same time, as long as she keeps her sentiments secret:

[S]ome 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. We must, on every occasion, be ready to prefer others to ourselves; to treat them with a kind of deference, even tho’ they be our equals; . . . And if we observe these rules in our conduct, men will have more indulgence for our secret sentiments, when we discover them in an oblique manner. (T 3.3.2.10; 598)

This excerpt makes clear that Hume’s account of decency only requires one to hide the *signs* of one’s feeling of pride. On the basis of what we have discussed in section I, it is evident that Hume unequivocally encourages one to feel pride even if he suggests that this passion will have to be kept secret in society. We should not aim to *truly* eradicate our pride in favour of the opposite passion of humility. All we ought to do is to make sure that the *external* manifestation of our sentiments is decent. We should aim to have “secret sentiments” of pride, but we must also hide them in order to live well in society.

The lack of motives for decency is a remarkable feature of this virtue that has not been taken seriously. This absence of motives is especially striking because decency does not fit with Hume’s definition of the artificial virtues. The most important difference that separates decency from good manners is that while good manners are merely artificial and based on social conventions, decency has a natural core.[[22]](#endnote-21) In her discussion of modesty and pride, Jacqueline Taylor seems to identify two different virtues concerning pride and its display. She distinguishes a form of sincere modesty, “a real sense of humility” (presumably a natural virtue), from modesty as “a form of social etiquette” (*Reflecting Subjects*, 147). This latter kind of modesty, which throughout this paper I have named “decency,” is explicitly identified by Taylor as “an artificial virtue requiring us to ‘carry a fair outside’” (*Reflecting Subjects*, 147). While Taylor recognizes an important distinction previously overlooked in Hume’s philosophy, I believe that this “modesty of the outside” need not be artificial. I agree with Taylor that there is an artificial virtue that tells us “who owes how much deference and respect to whom, and who expects deference or respect,” and that all this “will be a matter of custom” (*Reflecting Subjects*, 147). This, however, is closer to good manners and etiquette than to decency. While decency stems from the natural pain that emerges from comparison with the pride of others, etiquette is an additional artificial layer that codifies and regulates deference, honour, and respect. In other words, the character trait consisting of not displaying one’s pride in order to prevent other people from suffering by comparison is a virtue that does not need reference to social institutions, ranks, and the like. Pride is a common passion, and its effects due to comparison may be disagreeable regardless of any social institution, just as generosity is agreeable without requiring any artificial condition. On the other hand, good manners and etiquette are defined on the basis of the institution of rules established by society. If I am right, decency, as distinguished from etiquette, is a natural virtue which has no matching virtuous motives. As we will see in the next section, this poses an important challenge to a standard virtue ethical interpretation of Hume.

To be clear, I recognize that while discussing decency, Hume explicitly mentions that “we establish *the rules of good-breeding*” (T 3.3.2.10; 598) and that “[t]he rules of good-breeding condemn whatever is openly disobliging, and gives a sensible pain and confusion to those, with whom we converse” (T 1.3.13.15; 152). The fact that some *rules* are established in society prevents us from being able to say that the decent regulation in one’s display of pride is an *entirely* natural virtue. However, the simple existence of general rules is not enough to make something artificial. The passion of pride, for example, is, according to Hume, natural and yet influenced by general rules. In the fifth limitation to his discussion of pride, Hume writes that “*general rules* have a great influence upon pride and humility, as well as on all the other passions” (T 2.1.6.8; 293). This does not make pride an artificial passion. It is therefore possible that decency is equally influenced by general rules without having to be an artificial virtue.

There are, indeed, three reasons to doubt that Hume conceives of decency as artificial. First: unlike artificial virtues such as justice, fidelity to promises, allegiance to the government, and chastity (all discussed in T 3.2), decency is discussed among the “other virtues” in T 3.3. The fact that the virtues related to greatness of mind are discussed after the “natural virtues” and before benevolence and natural abilities gives us a strong suggestion that Hume conceives of decency as a natural virtue (or at least one that is closer to the natural than to the artificial).[[23]](#endnote-22) Second: in addition to the fact that Hume discusses decency among the natural virtues, we must recognize that all instances of decency are agreeable to others. Different from artificial virtues such as justice and chastity, where the positive effect of the virtue emerges only within a larger pattern of social reiteration, decency always produces agreeable results in every single instance: “Of the four sources of moral distinctions, this [decency] is to be ascrib’d to the third; *viz*. the immediate agreeableness and disagreeableness of a quality to others, without any reflections on the tendency of that quality” (T 3.3.2.1; 592). Third: Hume explicitly says that we *naturally* value a well-regulated hidden pride: “I am content with the concession, that the world *naturally* esteems a well-regulated pride, which *secretly* animates our conduct, without breaking out into such indecent expressions of vanity, as may offend the vanity of others” (T 3.3.2.13; 600, my emphases).

I take these three points above as evidence that Hume conceives of decency, unlike etiquette, good manners, and politeness, as a virtue that falls closer to the natural than the artificial. And yet, as I have shown, he also believes that there is no need to feel real humility in order to be decent; all that matters is that one’s pride will be hidden from the eyes of one’s fellow creatures. While decency is a virtue that can be obtained regardless of one’s real feelings, pride, rather than humility, is the passion that we should aim to feel. One’s behaviour will be no less decent when it stems from real feelings of humility than when it derives from hidden pride. But since Hume encourages us to feel pride over humility, it seems that we should possess the virtue of decency *and* feel proud of ourselves. Recognizing decency as a virtue distinct from good manners, and exploring it in its own right, therefore, provides us with a very peculiar element within Hume’s theory of virtue, one that offers an important challenge to some existing interpretations of his moral philosophy.

II.3. The Challenge to Virtue Ethics

The account of decency reconstructed above is something to which Hume scholars have rarely devoted attention. What I have shown is that this virtue, which we have good reason to think of as natural, is one that requires no relevant motives. It is not the case that one should be moved to decency by a real sentiment of humility: “a fair outside” is enough. One can have “secret sentiments” of pride and yet be decent simply because one *acts* in a way that does not directly reveal those sentiments. This means that what counts in our moral evaluation regarding decency are not one’s motives and desires, but simply one’s actions. It does not matter whether a person acts decently because they are truly concerned with the well-being of others or, say, because they fear social marginalization. All that counts in the attribution of decency is that they do not display excessive pride in their actions.

An important point needs to be clarified here. Regardless of whether decency is a virtue with or without an underlying virtuous motive, we still attribute the quality of being decent to a *person* and not only to actions or individual pieces of behaviour.[[24]](#endnote-23) We can affirm that a person is more decent than another, for example, even if there is no single virtuous motive for decency. This is the case even if all that there is to decency is an outward show and it can be justified by appealing to Hume’s text. In T 3.3.1.4–5, Hume stresses that what counts in attributions of virtuousness and viciousness are not simply actions, but rather “durable principles of the mind” (575). In so far as we can recognize a *stable disposition* to behave decently in someone, we can say that they are a decent person. In other words, we can attribute the virtue of decency to someone even if decency does not stem from virtuous motives, as long as we believe that that person *reliably* behaves in a decent way.

It is essential to note, however, that this stable disposition can be derived from a pattern of actions motivated in very different ways. One will count as a decent person because one reliably prevents disagreeable comparison with others. To do so, this person needs not to have any intrinsically good motives. An individual may reliably behave decently because they are scared of being marginalized or ostracized; another may do so because they are concerned with others’ well-being; a third individual can be said decent if they do not show any pride because they have a low self-esteem; and so on. All these individuals, for one reason or the other, will reliably act in a decent way and, therefore, count as decent. This, however, does not erase an important difference between decency and other natural virtues. While in the cases of other virtues a specific motivating passion is required, this is not the case for the virtue of decency. For instance, a benevolent person is not simply one who reliably acts *as if* they cared about others, but one who is motivated in their actions by the feeling of benevolence. Decency, on the other hand, lacks matching motivating passion. While the benevolent, the generous, the caring person needs to be described as acting and feeling in a certain way, the decent person can be described fully without reference to passions.

If my reconstruction of decency in II.2 is correct, we have reasons to doubt a common reading of Hume as a virtue ethicist who consistently holds the claim that the moral value of actions always derives from virtuous motives. The idea that Hume’s philosophy is a form of virtue ethics is more and more common within current Hume scholarship. Rachel Cohon affirms that “Hume is a virtue ethicist” because “he endorses a version of the view that the primary object of moral evaluation is a trait of character, and he identifies a good action derivatively as what the virtuous agent (one with this trait) would do” (*Hume’s Morality*, 161). Lorenzo Greco maintains that Hume’s moral philosophy is a form of virtue ethics because “the objects of moral judgments are not people’s actions, but the motives that lie behind them; human actions may well be regarded in a positive or in a negative light, but only insofar as the motives that activated them are valued positively or negatively” (“Toward a Humean Virtue,” 211). Similarly, Don Garrett insists that Hume’s virtue ethics consists of his acceptance of the idea that “all virtuous actions derive their merit only from virtuous motives, and are consider’d merely as signs of those motives.”[[25]](#endnote-24) These examples could easily be multiplied.

The virtue ethical reading of Hume is supported by textual evidence. The thesis, which we may call Hume’s motives-for-virtue thesis, is stated in various key paragraphs in T 3.2.1:

’Tis evident, that when we praise any actions, we regard only the motives that produced them, and consider the actions as signs or indications of certain principles in the mind and temper. The external performance has no merit. We must look within to find the moral quality. (T 3.2.1.2; 477)

It appears, therefore, that all virtuous actions derive their merit only from virtuous motives, and are consider’d merely as signs of those motives. (T 3.2.1.4; 478)

By taking these excerpts seriously, the virtue ethical interpretation builds on and explains an important feature of Hume’s theory that a consequentialist reading has trouble making sense of. When it comes to moral evaluation, Hume places a great deal of importance on *motives*. Here, Hume’s point is that we cannot ascribe moral value to an action alone unless it is taken as the sign of an underlying virtuous motive. The “external performance” and, plausibly, also its consequences, cannot be considered as virtuous or vicious in themselves. Since one “must look within to find the moral quality,” a virtue ethical reading seems plausible.[[26]](#endnote-25)

Such an interpretation can be challenged because some virtues seem to have no underlying motives in Hume’s theory. Justice and chastity, for example, are *prima facie* problematic for Hume because they have no natural motives. In the case of chastity, however, Hume himself explains how an artificial motive is generated in society to make sure that women develop “a repugnance to all expressions, and postures, and liberties, that have an immediate relation to [sexual] enjoyment” (T 3.2.12.5; 572). An artificial motive such as this is not explicitly provided by Hume in the case of justice. For this reason, some argue that justice raises a major concern for Hume’s motives-for-virtue thesis and, thus, for virtue ethical readings of Hume. In “Hume on the Moral Obligation to Justice,” James Harris, for instance, gives a historical account of justice in Hume, arguing that he conceived of it as a virtue only because of its positive *consequences* for society in line with the Grotian tradition.[[27]](#endnote-26) In a more recent paper, Harris reinforces this point noting that “Hume’s engagement with modern natural law could have led him, without his being fully aware of it, to the Grotian conclusion that the morality of justice and injustice is different in kind from the morality of virtue and vice.”[[28]](#endnote-27) If this is indeed the case, the agent’s underlying motives do not matter in considerations of justice, and this is enough to undermine the possibility of interpreting Hume’s thought as a coherent form of virtue ethics. After all, if virtue ethics is based on making virtue the fundamental evaluative concept of a moral theory, a theory that defines a virtue on the basis of utility and consequences—as Hume does with justice—can hardly be read as a form of virtue ethics. Hence, there is at least a non-irrelevant part of Hume’s moral philosophy that the virtue ethical interpretation fails to capture. While an artificial motive is not explicitly provided by Hume in the case of justice, interpreters have reconstructed in various ways such a motive using Hume’s text.[[29]](#endnote-28) I do not have the space to discuss these solutions in detail. It is enough to say that they offer strong reasons to believe that Hume’s account of justice is at least compatible with the presence of a non-natural motive for this virtue.

The characterization of the virtue of decency presented above offers a stronger case against Hume’s own affirmation that actions are virtuous only when they derive from virtuous motives. The construction of an artificial motive for the virtue of decency is something that interpreters cannot pursue since Hume has openly stated that this virtue is one that evaluates the outside rather than the inside.[[30]](#endnote-29) In T 3.2.1, Hume affirmed that “[t]he external performance has no merit” (T 3.2.1.2; 477), but later while discussing the virtue of decency he says that all we need to do to be decent is to “carry a fair outside.” A person can be decent even when they “harbour pride” in their breast and have secret sentiments that are contrary to real humility. There is, therefore, one virtue that *explicitly* does not require virtuous motives.

While the concept of character remains central in Hume, the virtue of decency poses a neat and powerful challenge to a reading that puts too much emphasis on motives. When accepting that decency is a virtue, Hume is clearly going against his motives-for-virtue thesis: “[w]e must look within to find the moral quality” (T 3.2.1.2; 477), he said, but in the case of decency no virtuous mental state or motive is required for the act to be virtuous. If Hume believes that “all virtuous actions derive their merit only from virtuous motives” (T 3.2.1.4; 478) and that decency is a virtue, as he has been arguing in T 3.3.2, it should follow that we have a virtuous motive to restrain our pride. However, Hume denies exactly this point in his characterization of the virtue of decency. One can be said to be a decent person because they possess a reliable disposition to hide their pride, but no reference to any particular set of virtuous motives is needed. Decency, therefore, poses a challenge to a reading of Hume that takes his motives-for-virtue thesis as something that he consistently accepts all along the *Treatise*. The interpreters who see Hume as committed to the motives-for-virtue thesis all the way through will need to provide a way to account for this tension in Hume’s thought.

III. OBJECTIONS

This section considers three objections to my reconstruction of decency as a virtue without matching virtuous motives. I offer a response to each of these objections which also helps to clarify my reconstruction of Hume’s account of decency.

III.1. First Objection: All Virtues are Mental Qualities

A first objection to my reconstruction above is that the simple fact that Hume talks of decency as a virtue prevents us from saying that it has no motives. A virtue is per definition a trait of character, or, to be more respectful of Hume’s terminology, a “quality of the mind.” Saying that decency is a virtue, therefore, is to say that there is a quality of the mind that corresponds to our positive evaluation of decent behaviour. If Hume really believed that no mental quality is associated with decency, then he could not call it a virtue at all. A virtue with no motives is simply not a virtue. Recall how in the case of chastity it is only when one develops a “repugnance to all expressions, and postures, and liberties” (T 3.2.12.5; 572) that we can properly say that chastity becomes established as a virtue. So, regardless of whether decency is natural or artificial, we cannot properly call it a virtue unless we are ready to admit that there is a correspondent quality of the mind.

This may seem a legitimate point to raise. However, when Hume says that decency is a virtue, he seems to mean nothing more than the mere fact that we regard certain acts and behaviour as decent. This attribution of virtuousness to specific actions that conform to decency needs no reference to a matching underlying stable motive or quality of the mind. To be clear, this does not mean that the action is uncaused, or that there is no motive whatsoever that generates a given decent action, but simply that we need not identify a single stable motive, mental quality, or character trait from which all decent actions derive their virtuousness. The common-sense account of the attribution of virtuousness in Hume’s terms has been spelled out by Rachel Cohon, who describes it as follows: “To behave virtuous*ly* (in a virtuous manner), one’s action must be brought about by . . . suitable feelings or desires. This is because to act virtuously or well, it is not enough to do the right thing; one must do it for the right reasons” (*Hume’s Morality*, 193). However, this does not apply to the case of decency where internal mental states and reasons become irrelevant.[[31]](#endnote-30)

Walter Brand has tried to argue in favour of the idea that decency has an underlying motive. He says that “[a]n implicit expression of justified pride is a virtue, provided that our intimations *sincerely* express doubt about our intrinsic value. The insinuation of pride *ought to go beyond the appearance of modesty*. Without the element of sincerity, we merely follow the decorums of decency” (“Hume on the Value of Pride,” 349, my emphases). Brand’s conclusion is that a “sense of humility” (350) provides us with a motive to act according to the virtue of decency. However, Brand does not explain how such a motive is possibly virtuous given that Hume unequivocally values pride and affirms that it is essential for one’s success. Besides, Brand does not consider the passages that I have analysed above where Hume affirms that decency does not go “beyond the outside” and is based on “disguise.” Brand seems to assume that Hume could not conceive of virtue as a mere following of the “decorums of decency,” and therefore also assumes that Hume relies on an “element of sincerity.” This operation, however, fails to take seriously Hume’s text. As we have seen, Hume repeatedly and explicitly describes decency as a virtue of the “outside” and stresses that it is based on “appearance” and “disguise.” A reconstruction of Hume’s account that ignores these elements is implausible.

Decent actions are decent simply because they put up a “fair outside.” A person can be said to be virtuous in so far as she *exhibits* decent behaviour. This is all that is prescribed since Hume explicitly denies that “a thorough sincerity in this particular is esteem’d a real part of our duty” (T 3.3.2.11; 598). Decency is a virtue because it allows others to maintain their own self-esteem during social interactions: it is required “in order to prevent the opposition of men’s pride” (T 3.3.2.10; 597) and, as Hume notices, “vanity becomes insupportable to us merely because we are vain” (T 3.3.2.7; 596). We have to be decent—this is why decency is a virtue—but there is no need to be sincere about it. Decency is a virtue that shows itself in social interaction, but there is no intrinsic moral worth to it. All that matters is to *behave* decently. It is not necessary to identify a specific mental quality, a kind of sincerity in our humility that must be the right reason for which we act decently. Indeed, what is best is to act decently without being sincere about one’s humility since one should feel pride.

III.2. Second Objection: Motives of Benevolence

A reader committed to the virtue ethical interpretation could try to dismiss the challenge set by decency by saying that I have ignored the fact that we should be decent for a reason, namely a regard for the well-being of others. We know that other people will feel bad when presented with excessively proud individuals, and *therefore* we hide our pride. The virtue of decency, then, would be a disposition stemming from a regard for our fellow human beings to make sure that people around us do not feel belittled by comparison. According to this view, one could try to construct a sort of benevolent motive for decency by saying that what really matters is that a decent person is moved in their decency by a concern for others’ feelings.

This objection, however, fails to fully distinguish benevolence from decency. Hume, in contrast to Hutcheson, does not believe that benevolence is the most important and all-encompassing virtue. He constructs a thorough account of virtue that is not bound to benevolent motives. When we evaluate character *in general*, of course, it will be relevant to see whether that person acts decently because of a concern for the wellbeing of others or for merely egoistic reasons. Discovering these motives, however, will tell us something about the virtues or vices of that person *other* than decency. An analogy can be helpful here. A good artist is such because they produce excellent artwork. Whether they do it for money, for success, or for a genuine love of beauty, these motives do not affect our judgment about them *as an artist*. Of course, if we know they sculpt only to gain money and they do not care at all about art, we can judge them as selfish or acquisitive, but this does not allow us to retract our judgment of them being a good artist. In the same way, a decent person may act decently with no regard to others, and yet this does not make them an indecent person. Benevolence and decency, therefore, must be kept distinct and motives of benevolence should not be taken as necessary for one to be decent.

III.3. Third Objection: Decency and Justice

There is a third objection that may be in the reader’s mind at this point. Since Hume underscores various similarities between decency and justice, it can be argued that the account of decency and the problems that this virtue poses to virtue ethical readings of Hume are not different from problems posed by justice. And yet, the debate on justice tends to lean toward a resolution of the issue that considers the possibility of introducing a virtuous non-natural motive. If we can solve the problem with the apparent lack of motives in Hume’s account of justice, and if justice and decency are similar, then we have reason to believe that we can solve the same problem in the case of decency.

This objection seems supported by Hume’s text. Indeed, Hume himself draws a parallel between justice and good breeding:[[32]](#endnote-31) “In like manner, therefore, as we establish the *laws of nature*, in order to secure property in society, and prevent the opposition of self-interest; we establish the *rules of good-breeding*, in order to prevent the opposition of men’s pride, and render conversation agreeable and inoffensive” (T 3.3.2.10; 597).

Behind Hume’s parallel, however, we can find an important disanalogy. While Hume encourages the pursuit of pride, he does not do the same with self-interest. A person can be said to be truly just only when they have detached their conduct from their own direct self-interest. If they act justly only to *camouflage* their self-interest under a façade of just acts, they will be acting in a way that lacks the relevant motives. This seems to speak in favour of the idea that an act of true justice needs to stem from relevant underlying motives: “Mere rule‐following is not enough for this virtue; one needs morally motivated rule‐following” (Cohon, *Hume’s Morality*, 182). In the case of decency, however, things are different. As we have seen, Hume says explicitly that this virtue is based on “disguise” and that it never goes “beyond the outside.” Decency and good breeding are virtues only insofar as they allow one to avoid the disagreeable effects on others of another virtue that we could call “pride in oneself” or “self-confidence.” Pride in oneself is “useful to us in the conduct of life” and “gives us a confidence and assurance in all our projects and enterprizes” (T 3.3.2.8; 597). It is useful and agreeable to oneself and is, therefore, a virtue. It is only because of the negative effects that this virtue sometimes produces in others that we have to play one virtue against the other—the most virtuous option is to be proud inside *and* decent outside.

Since decency is a virtue only because it moderates the disagreeable effects of pride, we are not bound to be decent in the same way as we are bound to be just. A hypothetical motive for justice can be constructed in Humean terms, building upon the internalization of rules. The same, however, is not possible for decency, which Hume considers a surface virtue. In specific circumstances where we would find ourselves able to express our pride in a way that is not disagreeable to others, we would have reason to do so and to act out of the virtue of self-confidence. This is a fact that opens a remarkable gap between decency and justice.

The disanalogy between these two virtues can be further developed by noticing that dispositions to act reliably in a decent and just manner are motivated in a very different way. The person who acts in accordance with justice but does so only out of self-interest will not be said to possess the virtue of justice because they will not *reliably* act justly. They will conform to the rules of justice only as long as someone is watching but will break them as soon as they can do so without getting in trouble. Decency, however, is a virtue that always requires the eyes of others to come into the picture. One cannot exercise decency unless one is in a social setting. This makes it so that a motivational pattern based on fear of being judged negatively will be enough to produce reliable decent behaviour. As argued above, a reliable and stable motivational pattern is enough for the attribution of the virtue of decency even in the absence of a matching motive of decency or humility. This cannot be the case for justice because, inevitably, one may find oneself in circumstances where no one is looking. Only the person who has internalized justice making it a stable disposition will act justly (e.g., bringing to the police a wallet full of money found in the woods instead of keeping it for oneself). Without a moral motivation for following the rules of justice, one will not reliably act justly in circumstances when one can have some personal gain with no risk. The same, however, is not true for decency since the very nature of this virtue requires that it is exercised in the presence of others.

As a foil to this view, consider Hume’s notorious case of the “sensible knave,” a man who breaks the rules of justice every now and then, but is careful enough to do so only as long as that does not endanger himself or social stability:

[A] sensible knave, in particular incidents, may think, that an act of iniquity or infidelity [i.e., injustice] will make a considerable addition to his fortune, without causing any considerable breach in the social union and confederacy. That *honesty is the best policy*, may be a good general rule; but is liable to many exceptions: and he, it may, perhaps, be thought, conducts himself with most wisdom, who observes the general rule, and takes advantage of all the exceptions. (EPM 9.22; 282–83)

According to Hume, by behaving *unjustly* when he can, the sensible knave “sacrifice[s] the invaluable enjoyment of a character . . . for the acquisition of worthless toys and gewgaws” (EPM 9.25; 283). Because of his unjust behaviour, the knave gives up on his own “inward peace of mind, consciousness of integrity, [and] satisfactory review of [his] own conduct” (EPM 9.23; 283). The same, however, is not true in the case of decency. Since the disposition to feel pride is a virtue, by being proud when one can be so without being detected by others, one would not be culpable of ‘sensible knavery.’ The proud sensible knave does not renounce his inward peace of mind as the unjust sensible knave does. He is an individual who makes the most of the opportunities that he has to feel proud, and, at the same time, he makes sure that other people around him do not feel belittled by comparison. But this means that the proud sensible knave is not a knave at all. When presented with the opportunity to feel pride, the virtuous individual should take it. On the contrary, being unjust in the same circumstances would be problematic for its disruptive effects on one’s own character and mental peacefulness.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

From my analysis, decency has emerged as a virtue that has been profoundly overlooked by Hume scholars. Even the rare studies that touch upon this virtue have conflated it with concepts such as good manners and politeness. If the account that I have reconstructed above is correct, this lack of attention to decency is an important gap in the study of Hume’s theory of virtue. Hume’s account of decency, I have stressed, is that of a virtue that we naturally approve of and yet requires no “sincerity” or real humility. In order to judge a person as decent, we can limit our observation to her “fair outside”: no reference to specific motives or mental states is required. Decency is a virtue that can be attributed to any individual whose actions produce some particular positive consequences or, more precisely, avoid the production of negative consequences due to an excessive display of pride.

The thesis that decency is a virtue without underlying virtuous motives is strengthened by Hume’s observation that decency is compatible with motives that are in conflict with real humility. “Secret sentiments” of pride are perfectly fine to have as long as they are well-hidden. The case of decency, therefore, represents a serious and underexplored challenge to all interpretations of Hume’s ethics that see him as completely committed to the idea that virtues derive their moral value from underlying motives. In no other place does Hume affirm so explicitly that motives are not required for virtuousness as in his discussion of decency. Despite the neglect that has characterized this virtue, decency poses a compelling challenge to some influential virtue ethical interpretations of Hume’s moral theory.

NOTES

1. Enrico Galvagni, Ph.D. candidate in Philosophy, University of St. Andrews, Department of Philosophy, Edgecliffe, 5 The Scores, KY16 9AL, United Kingdom. E-mail: eg240@st-andrews.ac.uk. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For helpful comments and/or discussion on previous versions of this paper, I would like to thank Jonathan Cottrell, Julia Driver, Michael Gill, Lorenzo Greco, James Harris, Heather Jeffrey, Lauren Kopajtic, Nick Kuespert, Xiao Qi, and Philipp Schoenegger. Some of the ideas developed in this paper were presented at the St. Andrews Friday Seminar on April 9th, 2021, and at the Edinburgh Early Modern Workshop on May 7th, 2021. I am grateful to all the participants in these events for their comments on my work in progress. Finally, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the editors of *Hume Studies* and two anonymous referees of the journal for giving me the opportunity to enhance my paper.

   See, among others, Christopher Brooke, *Philosophic Pride: Stoicism and Political Thought from Lipsius to Rousseau* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Jennifer Herdt, *Putting On Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008); and Christian Maurer, *Self-love, Egoism and the Selfish Hypothesis: Key Debates from Eighteenth-Century British Moral Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
3. I quote Hume’s *Treatise* from David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), as “T” followed by numbers indicating Book, part, section, and paragraph numbers, followed by page number. References to the second *Enquiry* are to Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), cited as “EPM” followed by section and paragraph number, as well as page number. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
4. In spite of the fact that Hume sometimes calls this virtue “modesty” or “humility,” it is more appropriate to speak of “decency”—used two times in the *Treatise* (T 3.3.2.10, 3.3.2.11; 597, 598); one additional time in the negative “indecent” (T 3.3.2.13; 600)—because, as I will show below, Hume’s account of this virtue is a far cry from our present-day account of modesty. Using a different term seems appropriate to underscore this gap. See section II.1 for further terminological and conceptual clarifications. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
5. Among others, Annette Baier, “Hume’s Analysis of Pride,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 75, no. 1 (1978): 27–40; Donald Davidson, “Hume’s Cognitive Theory of Pride,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 73, no. 19 (1976): 744–57; Jacqueline Taylor, “Hume on Pride and the Other Indirect Passions,” in *The Oxford Handbook of David Hume*, ed. Paul Russell, 295–310 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
6. Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, ed. F. B. Kaye, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), cited in text by page numbers. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
7. For example, Walter Brand purports that when Hume explains “why excessive pride is a vice,” he has in mind individuals who “exhibit unjustified pride, people who overestimate the qualities they have.” Brand, “Hume on the Value of Pride,” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 44, no. 3 (2010): 341–50, 346. Similarly Christian Maurer writes that Hume’s “crucial and most influential point is to make room for a notion of *due* pride or self-esteem, against the more common depiction of pride . . . involving an excessive, unjustified and unduly positive attitude towards ourselves” (Maurer, *Self-love*,181). Other discussions, such as Lorenzo Greco’s “On Pride,” *Humana.Mente* 12, no. 35 (2019): 101–23, focus mostly on Hume’s rehabilitation of pride and neglect to specify how it can become excessive. Annette Baier, in a similar vein, affirms that “If the pride in question really is well founded . . . then the only restraint that seems in order is one on the expression of ill-founded excessive and uncorrected pride.” Baier, “Master Passions,” in *Explaining Emotion*, ed. Amelia Oksenberg Rorty (Oakland: University of California Press, 1980), 418. Even Páll Árdal, in his extremely influential book, conflates the two ways in which pride can be excessive when he remarks that “[t]he trouble with the man whose pride is greater than his qualities merit lies just in this: that he is insensitive to the fact that his pride is disagreeable to others.” Árdal, *Passion and Value in Hume’s* Treatise, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989), 150. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
8. Jennifer Herdt recognized this aspect noting that “[p]ride that we detect in others tends to be regarded as vicious for two reasons: because it is often overblown and because it encourages uncomfortable comparisons with ourselves and our own virtues and capacities” (Herdt, *Putting on Virtue*, 314). Jacqueline Taylor also touches upon the fact that pride can be excessive in two different ways when she affirms that “an excessive pride is usually ill-grounded (the person is not as great as she thinks or is not superior to others) or displayed in an exaggerated manner to draw attention from others.” Taylor, *Reflecting Subjects: Passion, Sympathy and Society in Hume’s Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 145. This point, however, needs further explanation. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
9. La Rochefoucauld, *Maxims*, ed. and trans. Stéphane Douard and Stuart D. Warner (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine’s Press, 2001), 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
10. For a classic analysis of comparison see Postema, “‘Cemented with Diseased Qualities’: Sympathy and Comparison in Hume’s Moral Psychology,” *Hume Studies* 31, no. 2 (2005): 249–98, 263–69. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
11. When quoting from Hume’s text, I maintain his spelling of “good-breeding” (with a hyphen). When I use the same word out of quotation marks, however, I adopt the present-day spelling “good breeding.” [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
12. For philosophical discussion of this point see Driver, “The Virtues of Ignorance,” *Journal of Philosophy* 86, no. 7 (1989): 373–84, and Driver, “Modesty and Ignorance,” *Ethics* 109 (1999): 827–34. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
13. In her short remarks on this virtue, Annette Baier writes that “modesty is simply a recognition of the limits of one’s grounds for pride.” Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments*: *Reflections on Hume’s “Treatise”* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 207. This is inaccurate, and, I believe, stems from a projection of our common-sense account of modesty on Hume’s account of the virtue that I prefer to call “decency.” The same imprecision is in Christine Swanton’s discussion, *The Virtue Ethics of Hume*, 101). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
14. Ann Levey, “Under Constraint: Chastity and Modesty,” *Hume Studies* 23, no. 2 (1997): 213–26, 217. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
15. Hume’s terminological imprecisions extend beyond his use of the word ‘modesty’. He also uses the word ‘decency’ in a rather confusing way. In the following passage, for example, Hume uses ‘decency’ in a way that has nothing to do with pride: “Men have undoubtedly an implicit notion, that all those ideas of modesty and decency have a regard to generation; since they impose not the same laws, *with the same force*, on the male sex, where that reason takes not place” (T 3.2.12.7; 573). A similar conflation of the terms ‘decency’ and ‘modesty’ in the case of sexual conduct can be found in passages like the following: “Of the nations in the world, where polygamy was not allowed, the Greeks seem to have been the most reserved in their commerce with the fair sex, and to have imposed on them the strictest laws of modesty and decency” (EPM D.44; 338). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
16. Mikko Tolonen, “Politeness, Paris and the *Treatise*,” *Hume Studies* 34, no. 1 (2008): 21–42, 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
17. Peter Johnson, “Hume on Manners and the Civil Condition,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (1998): 209–22, 211. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
18. M. A. Box, *The Suasive Art of David Hume* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 142. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
19. Here I take self-satisfaction to mean “pride” and “vanity” a desire for reputation (T 2.2.1.9; 332). For a more systematic analysis of Hume’s distinction between pride and vanity see Enrico Galvagni, “Hume on Pride, Vanity and Society,” *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 18, no. 1 (2020): 157–73. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
20. This aspect has been incidentally noted in one of the few discussions of the topic. Mikko Tolonen puts it this way: “In the case of politeness, the virtue is a sign of deference without reference to motives or underlying true qualities” (“Politeness, Paris and the *Treatise*,” 31). Tolonen states the same point again affirming that “the actual virtue is the sign of humility, and no questions about motives or real quality have to be asked.” *Mandeville and Hume: Anatomists of Civil Society* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2013), 222–23. This idea, however, needs to be further developed and, as I will show in the rest of the paper, there are some important questions which we can ask about the motivational structure in the case of decency. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
21. With this I am not implying that Hume believes that there is no such a thing as real humility. One could have a disposition to often feel the passion of humility, but this, Hume would say, is not a real virtue. Such a disposition would have to be defined as a vice based on Hume’s own idea that “vice and the power of producing humility or hatred” have “to be consider’d as equivalent, with regard to our mental qualities” (T 3.3.1.3; 575). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
22. Rachel Cohon seems to recognize that decency is a natural virtue—“the natural virtues of self‐confidence and modesty,” *Hume’s Morality. Feeling and Fabrication* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 234—but she does not remark that Hume insists on the lack of motives for this virtue. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
23. More could be said about the virtue of strength of mind and whether it should be counted as artificial or natural (see e.g., Lauren Kopajtic, “Cultivating Strength of Mind: Hume on the Government of the Passions and Artificial Virtue,” *Hume Studies* 41, no. 2 (2015): 201–29; Jane McIntyre, “Strength of Mind: Prospects and Problems for a Humean Account,” *Synthese* 152 (2006): 393–401; Elizabeth S. Radcliffe, “Strength of Mind and the Calm and Violent Passions,” *Res Philosophica* 92, no. 3 (2015): 547–67). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
24. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer of this journal for pressing me to think about this point and its implication for my argument. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
25. Don Garrett, *Hume* (London/New York: Routledge, 2015), 264. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
26. In recent years, various authors have built different forms of virtue ethics inspired by Hume, e.g., Erin Frykholm, “A Humean Particularist Virtue Ethic,” *Philosophical Studies* 172, no. 8 (2015): 2171–91; Christine Swanton, *The Virtue Ethics of Hume and Nietzsche* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015); and Rico Vitz, “Character, Culture, and Humean Virtue Ethics. Insights From Situationism and Confucianism,” in *Hume’s Moral Philosophy and Contemporary Psychology*, ed. Philip A. Reed and Rico Vitz (London/New York: Routledge, 2018). Interesting as they are, these explicitly present neo-Humean accounts and do not attempt to faithfully interpret Hume’s moral philosophy as a form of virtue ethics. An evaluation of these views falls outside the scope of this paper. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
27. James A. Harris, “Hume on the Moral Obligation to Justice,” *Hume Studies* 36, no. 1 (2010): 25–50. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
28. James A. Harris, “Hume’s Peculiar Definition of Justice,” in *Philosophy, Rights and Natural Law: Essays in Honour of Knud Haakonssen*, ed. Ian Hunter and Richard Whatmore (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 228. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
29. For example, see Stephen Darwall, *The British Moralists and the Internal Ought: 1640–1740* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), chap. 10; Don Garrett, “The First Motive to Justice: Hume’s Circle Argument Squared,” *Hume Studies* 33, no. 2 (2007): 257–88; David Gauthier, “Artificial Virtues and the Sensible Knave,” *Hume Studies* 18, no. 2 (1992): 401–27. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
30. Note that an explicit specification of this kind is absent in Hume’s discussion of justice. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
31. Consider, for example, four individuals A, B, C and D. A is someone who feels no pride and has no good reason to feel pride; B feels pride but is naturally inclined not to show it; C feels a great amount of pride and hide it for prudential reasons since C knows that it would be self-detrimental to show it; and D feels as much pride as C and hides it for benevolent reasons. Hume, I believe, would say that all these individuals are *decent* to the same degree. In order to see this, the reader should try to put aside our common-sense conception of modesty and consider only what *Hume* says about decency as a virtue that requires no sincerity. This is why I have decided to use the word ‘decency’ rather than ‘modesty’ to talk about it. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
32. Richard H. Dees notes that in the case of both justice and good breeding there is an “artifice” that mediates between two opposing tendencies: “conflicting prides are eased through the convention of etiquette, and conflicting interests are mollified through the convention of property and the rules of justice.” “Hume on the Characters of Virtue,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 35, no. 1 (1997): 45–64, 53. As I have argued above, we have reason to believe that, even if the rules of good breeding are socially constructed, decency is a natural virtue.

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