Freedom and Moral Sentiment: Hume's Way of Naturalizing Responsibility
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Responsibility Naturalized: A Qualified Defence of Hume

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter provides a qualified defense of Hume's naturalistic approach to the problem of free will and moral responsibility. A particularly important theme is the contrast between Hume's naturalistic approach and the “rationalistic” approach associated with classical compatibilism. Whereas the rationalistic approach proceeds as an *a priori*, conceptual investigation into the nature and conditions of moral responsibility, the naturalistic approach is committed to an empirically oriented (i.e., psychologically informed) examination of these issues – giving particular prominence to the role of moral sentiment in understanding moral life and the place of justificatory issues as they arise within it. Whereas the rationalistic approach leads us into intractable difficulties and moral skepticism, the naturalistic approach makes real progress on this subject. On a more critical note, however, I also argue that, despite its strengths, Hume's theory of moral responsibility has significant weaknesses in the areas of moral virtue, moral capacity, and moral freedom.

Keywords: analytic philosophy, compatibilism, dilemma of determinism, free will, justification, moral psychology, moral responsibility, naturalism, rationalism, skepticism

> Men are now cured of their passion for hypotheses and systems in natural philosophy, and will hearken to no arguments but those which are derived from experience. It is full time they should attempt a like reformation in all moral disquisitions; and reject every system of ethics, however subtle and ingenious, which is not founded on fact and observation.

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Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*

The hypothesis which we embrace is plain. It maintains that morality is determined by sentiment. . . . If you call this metaphysics, and find anything abstruse here, you need only conclude that your turn of mind is not suited to the moral sciences.

Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*

Throughout this study, I have been concerned to draw attention to the significance of what I have termed the “naturalistic” aspects of Hume's theory of responsibility. There are, I have argued, two related senses in which Hume's theory is naturalistic (see chp. 4, sec. 3). First, Hume insists on an empirical, descriptive approach to this issue. An adequate theory of responsibility, it is held, must be based on an informed and plausible moral psychology. With this in view, Hume locates the foundation of moral responsibility in the observable features of human nature. Second, Hume's theory is also naturalistic in the sense that it places emphasis on the role of emotion in this sphere. Specifically, responsibility has to be explained in terms of the structure of human feeling. These closely related aspects of Hume's approach may be distinguished as his “scientific” and “feeling” naturalism. In the preceding chapters, I have described the significance of these naturalistic aspects of Hume's theory of responsibility in relation to the details of his system. In this concluding chapter, I consider the wider and more general significance of Hume's naturalistic approach to the problem of responsibility. I am especially concerned to explain the relevance of Hume's naturalism about responsibility to his views regarding moral freedom.

I

According to the classical interpretation, Hume approaches the issue of responsibility primarily through the free will problem. It is also claimed that Hume's general **(p.171)** strategy or approach is essentially conceptual or “verbal”. I have argued that it is a mistake to interpret Hume's views on this subject in these terms. Nevertheless, so interpreted, Hume is presented as taking what may be described as a *rationalistic* approach to the problem of responsibility. We can appreciate the general significance of Hume's naturalism more fully by explaining how it contrasts with the rationalistic approach.

By and large, the major parties in the free will dispute (i.e. libertarians, compatibilists, and moral sceptics) share fundamental rationalistic assumptions. In particular, what they share is the assumption that we must begin our investigations by way of *reflecting* on, or *thinking about*, the concept (idea, notion, etc.) of responsibility and its immediate relatives (e.g. freedom). Having started from the concept, it is argued, we must *then*, on this basis, proceed to see if that concept has any application. In this way, the rationalistic approach suggests that our investigations must be separated into two distinct steps. The first step involves an a priori articulation—or, perhaps more accurately, an a priori construction—of the concept of responsibility and the conditions required for its application. At this stage, an effort is made to identify some specific property, power, or quality in virtue of which an agent may be said to be

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responsible. It is, generally speaking, a further unchallenged assumption of the rationalistic approach that the key element in question must be some particular mode of freedom. Accordingly, these philosophers see a very intimate link between these two concepts.[1] Second, on the basis of this theoretical construct, the rationalist then proceeds to examine the human condition, both its internal and external circumstances, to see if we are in fact ever justified in applying this concept.

Corresponding to these two stages of the rationalistic approach, there are two areas of potential sceptical crisis. First, the sceptic might claim that analysis reveals the concept of responsibility to be, in some way, irredeemably "incoherent", "obscure", or "meaningless". In these circumstances, it is argued, we have no choice—insofar as we hope to maintain the integrity of our moral language—but to jettison this concept in favour of some suitably emended version which we can make some sense of. Second, the sceptic might argue that, although this concept is perfectly coherent and intelligible in itself, it nevertheless lacks any application to human beings as we find them. Thus it might be argued that, if we look at the human condition and consider carefully the limitations of human nature, then we must conclude that we lack the requisite powers, capacities, or qualities which this concept demands of us. It is important to note that these two sceptical challenges raise quite distinct sorts of difficulties and that these difficulties correspond to two quite distinct stages in the rationalistic approach.[2]

When we start from this rationalistic position, we are, from the very beginning, in constant danger of falling prey to the sceptic's doubts. We might find either that this concept has no coherent content or that it has no application in practice. Clearly, then, as soon as we embark on the rationalistic approach, we begin moving along a path that takes us right up to the precipice of scepticism. In response to this situation, the rationalistic philosophers divide into two camps. Some of them, the rationalistic sceptics, take the leap. Others, the rationalistic antisceptics, desperately cling to the ledge. What these two parties share, however, is their understanding of what is required of any adequate (philosophical) justification of responsibility. That is to say, for these **(p.172)** philosophers, an adequate justification of responsibility must proceed through the two stages of the rationalistic approach described above. According to them, such a justification requires the following: (1) a coherent and intelligible concept of responsibility and an account of its conditions of applicability; (2) that we show that this concept does indeed have some application (to human beings); *and* (3) that we tackle this problem in this order—from the concept to its application. The maxim of the rationalistic approach may thus be characterized as "think, *then* look". A rationalistic approach to responsibility of this nature presupposes that the entire framework of responsibility requires some general justification of this kind.

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Unlike the rationalistic sceptic, the rationalistic antisceptic believes he can provide an adequate justification for responsibility—that is, one which succeeds in overcoming *both* of the hurdles which the sceptic might throw in their path. Philosophers in this tradition view the sceptic's challenge as a very real threat to the integrity of our moral life. For this reason, they view their philosophical objective as nothing less than the defence and preservation of the whole edifice of human responsibility and freedom. This edifice, they believe, is constantly in danger of collapse as a result of the corroding and undermining work of the philosophical sceptic.[3] When it comes to presenting their own justifications of responsibility, however, the rationalistic antisceptics have encountered seemingly intractable problems.[4]

In response to the sceptic's challenge, the rationalistic antisceptic tradition has developed two dominant strategies: traditional libertarianism and classical compatibilism. Both these strategies constitute an attempt to "justify responsibility". That is, they both seek to preserve the whole edifice of responsibility and freedom by way of shoring up its (supposed) foundations. Generally speaking, the libertarian begins with an attempt to articulate a fully adequate account of responsibility and freedom. On the libertarian account, responsibility demands "free will" or "categorical freedom". In response to these difficulties associated with the dilemma of determinism, libertarians have had to construct their own distinctive metaphysics.[5] On the whole, they recognize that without some relevant metaphysical apparatus, they will remain firmly impaled on the protruding horn of chance. In many respects, the classical compatibilist strategy is the reverse of that of the libertarian. That is to say, compatibilists approach the enterprise of justifying responsibility with most of the key elements of their metaphysical base *already* clearly defined. To this extent, the compatibilist project seems to start from somewhat surer foundations. Here, however, the compatibilist's difficulties begin. Their account of responsibility and freedom must be constructed from *within* the constraints and limitations imposed by their preestablished metaphysical base. Furthermore, their construction must not only remain true to its metaphysical base but must also keep the compatibilist a safe distance from the apparent dangers posed by the horn of necessity.[6]

The most common charge levelled against the libertarian strategy is that it ultimately depends on what Strawson describes as "obscure and panicky metaphysics" (FR, 80). In order to avoid impaling themselves on the horn of chance, libertarians must construct a metaphysical base whose very *coherence* is in doubt. On the other hand, compatibilists, in order to avoid impaling themselves on the horn of necessity, must rest satisfied with notions of responsibility and freedom whose *adequacy* is in doubt. That is to say, it is argued that the success of the compatibilist project depends **(p.173)** entirely on an appeal to notions which are mere shadows of those which we ordinarily employ and appeal to.[7] In this way, when we embark on the project of "justifying

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responsibility”, we find ourselves either having to appeal to notions which have the appearance of being irredeemably obscure, or else, having set ourselves to eliminate such obscurities, we find that all we have succeeded in defending and preserving is an inadequate conception of responsibility and freedom which is incapable of doing the work we demand of it. In short, the rationalistic antisceptic's project of justifying responsibility appears to oscillate between incoherence and inadequacy and therefore falls to its knees as soon as it encounters the very first hurdle. It would seem, then, that we are quite unable to articulate a credible notion of responsibility and freedom by way of the rationalistic approach. Clearly, an incoherent notion has no intelligible conditions of application. It is also clear that the justified application of an impoverished notion of responsibility will hardly satisfy those who have sought to preserve and defend the full-blooded original.[8]

Neither sceptical nor antisceptical arguments of the rationalistic variety have had a great impact on our actual practice. These arguments are rather like gears that spin and turn but fail to engage the rest of the machinery. We find that the other gears, outside of philosophical life, continue to operate smoothly and efficiently no matter what direction these philosophical gears may move in. On the whole, the ordinary person carries on as before and takes little notice of the philosophical battles which rage in other quarters. By and large, these individuals are neither comforted nor disturbed by the “proofs” which rationalistic philosophers have pulled out of their hats. It would be quite wrong, however, to conclude that in ordinary life we find that most people are unconcerned with the rationale which lies behind their day-to-day ascriptions of responsibility. On the contrary, such individuals often display great sensitivity and sophistication when it comes to noticing significant distinctions and relevantly different cases or circumstances, and they judge the individuals concerned accordingly. In light of this, it may be argued that the problem of responsibility as the rationalist conceives of it is not so much *intractable* as simply *misconceived*. For this reason, we may call into question the rationalist's general approach to “the problem of responsibility”.

II

The wider methodological significance of Hume's naturalistic approach can be judged in terms of the philosophical impasse which the rationalistic approach has reached on the free will issue. According to Hume, we must eschew rationalistic, a priori investigations into the nature and conditions of responsibility in favour of a more empirical approach. More specifically, we must carefully examine and describe the attitudes, sentiments, and practices associated with responsibility *as we find them*. Only then will we be in a position to effectively criticize and evaluate the rationality of the attitudes, sentiments, and practices in question. Moreover, it is by this route that we will be able to

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discover *what sort* of justifications are actually required (or not required) in this sphere.

Whereas the rationalist starts from the concept of responsibility, the naturalist starts from the *fact* of responsibility. That is, our attitudes, sentiments, and practices **(p.174)** in this sphere present themselves as objects for our observation. It is an error of the rationalist's procedure to treat these objects as idealized entities to be theorized over and perfected in a Platonic heaven and then brought back down to earth to see how they “fit”. The naturalist, unlike the rationalist, examines responsibility as she finds it. Its foundations are rooted not in the realm of concepts but rather in human nature and the human condition.

The naturalistic philosopher proceeds to evaluate *critically* the rationale of responsibility as already embodied in moral life. If this rationale suffers from incoherence or inconsistency, then it is an incoherence or inconsistency which can be identified and located in our actual practice. Accordingly, naturalists do not ask, “Does the concept of responsibility have any application to human beings?” Rather, they ask, “Do the attitudes, sentiments, and practices *which are constitutive of responsibility* have any adequate or proper justification?” With their procedure and task formulated in this manner, naturalistic philosophers are in a position to examine the nature and adequacy of the justifications involved. In this way, it should be clear that the naturalistic approach is in no way committed to “leaving everything as it is”. There is no reason whatsoever why the naturalistic philosopher should be committed to the view that the attitudes, sentiments, and practices in question are in all respects perfectly reasonable. Furthermore, where these faults and weaknesses are identified, the naturalistic philosopher is well placed to suggest how, and when, they can be removed or remedied. Hence, this approach to responsibility in no way assumes that the entire superstructure of responsibility is entirely sound. What it does assume, contrary to the rationalistic approach, is that we must begin our investigation from *within* this structure. If alterations have to be made, then they have to be made from *inside*.[9]

Barry Stroud makes the following observation concerning Hume's overall naturalistic approach to the study of humankind:

> [Hume] thought we could understand what human beings do, and why and how, only by studying them as part of nature, by trying to determine the origins of various thoughts, feelings, reactions and other human ‘products’ within the familiar world. The abstract study of such things as ‘meanings’, ‘concepts’ and ‘principles’ was to be engaged in only in so far as they could be grounded in *what people actually think, feel and do in human life. (Hume, 222*; my emphasis)[10]

In a similar vein, Alasdair MacIntyre states that “the virtue of Hume's ethics, like that of Aristotle and unlike that of Kant, is that it seeks to *preserve morality as something*

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psychologically intelligible".[11] The dominant trends in twentieth-century, English-speaking philosophy have been fundamentally hostile to the naturalistic out-look. More specifically, for the better part of this century, moral philosophy has been primarily concerned with the study of moral language and with the formal features of moral reasoning. This "abstract" approach to moral life (to use Stroud's term) has strongly encouraged philosophers to embrace the rationalistic rather than the naturalistic approach to the problem of responsibility. There are, nevertheless, clear signs in the past decade or so that the "rationalistic" approach to moral life is less dominant than it once was. It is noticeable, for example, that more recent work in moral philosophy tends to reflect a stronger interest in the relevance of moral psychology and moral development. To this extent contemporary ethics has taken something of **(p.175)** "a Humean turn". For this reason, therefore, the time may be ripe for a better appreciation of the naturalistic aspects of Hume's approach to responsibility.[12]

The inadequacies and weaknesses of the rationalistic approach to responsibility provide some insight into the more general and more fundamental weaknesses of the rationalistic approach to morals.[13] In this context, however, the point I am especially concerned to emphasize is that the naturalistic approach has the enormous merit of endeavouring to reunite the study of moral philosophy with the study of human psychology. It invites us to view moral responsibility as something that must be understood in terms of a human nature that has, as Murdoch puts it, "certain discoverable attributes".[14] This is, as I have indicated, a theme that is of considerable significance for Hume's entire approach to moral life.

III

Corresponding to the "feeling" dimension of Hume's naturalism, there is an opposing antinaturalistic outlook. This is the philosophical view that reason alone, as opposed to feeling and emotion, must provide us with our understanding of the nature and conditions of responsibility. Accordingly, insofar as rival theories of responsibility tend to overlook or dismiss the role of feeling and emotion in this sphere, then they may be described as rationalistic in this further sense of the term. In highlighting the role of feeling and emotion in the sphere of responsibility, Hume's naturalistic approach once again touches on a theme of much wider and deeper significance in moral philosophy.

Just as moral philosophy in this century has tended to approach its subject matter abstractly, so, too, it has tended to downplay, or ignore, the role of emotion and feeling in moral life. This aspect of the rationalistic outlook, however, has also had its critics.[15] Indeed, some philosophers have been concerned to argue that these shortcomings of modern moral philosophy have very deep roots. Many years ago, John MacMurray diagnosed the lure and danger of this aspect of the rationalistic outlook in terms of what he described as "the modern dilemma". His remarks are in several respects very Humean, and they are therefore worth quoting at length.

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> The tradition of our civilization is heavily biased in favour of the intellect against the emotions. We think that it is wise to trust our minds, and foolish to trust our feelings. We consider that it is the human intellect that raises man above the level of the animal creation, while the emotional movements in us are what gives us kinship with the animals. We behave in terms of that bias. Faced with a problem, we invariably turn to the intellect to solve it for us. . . . As a result we admire and rely upon all those expressions of human life which are intellectual. . . and we spend much time and labour on the task of developing our intellects and training our capacity to think; while we hardly ever think it necessary, or even possible, to train our capacity for feeling. (*Freedom in the Modern World*, 44–45)

MacMurray goes on to note that this bias in favour of the intellect has a long history. Its roots, he suggests, “lie in that very ancient doctrine that teaches the evil of desire and the necessity of subduing desire”. He proceeds to argue that these observations shed light on the modern predicament. **(p.176)**

> It is a commonplace that you cannot argue any man into a real belief if his feelings are set against it. I want you to consider the consequences of this with me for a little, for it is the heart of the modern dilemma. A merely intellectual force is powerless against an emotional resistance. . . . Unless the emotions and the intellect are in harmony, rational action will be paralyzed. . . . In the modern period, that is to say since the break-up of the mediaeval world, there has been an immense development of knowledge. There has, however, been no corresponding emotional development. As a result we are intellectually civilized and emotionally primitive. . . . We have set the intellect free and kept emotion in chains. That is a summary of the inner history of the modern world. (*Freedom in the Modern World*, 46–48)[16]

MacMurray's comments were written well over half a century ago. They are, however, still as pertinent today as they were when they were first written.

It is particularly important to note that MacMurray is concerned to describe a crisis in our self-understanding, one which affects our whole practical perspective on the world. In this way, it may be argued that the general aversion to a proper recognition of the role of feeling and emotion in morals is a deeply ingrained feature of the modern outlook and is a source of many of the seemingly intractable perplexities of modern life. Clearly, then, as long as we continue to overintellectualize human nature and disparage the emotions, we will not only retard and distort our emotional development but find it impossible to achieve the sort of self-understanding on which progress in moral philosophy must depend.[17] This state of affairs is of considerable relevance to the problem of responsibility. Given the widespread tendency to disparage the emotions—both in moral philosophy and beyond—it is, once again, less than surprising to

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find that many contemporary philosophers remain inclined to embrace a rationalistic rather than a naturalistic approach to responsibility.

I have argued that corresponding to the two dimensions of Hume's naturalism (i.e. his “scientific” and “feeling” naturalism), there exist two opposing dimensions in the rationalistic outlook: disdain for the empirical study of human nature and (and related to this) lack of concern with the role of feeling and emotion in the sphere of responsibility. This opposition in outlook and approach, I maintain, touches on problems that cut much deeper and wider in moral philosophy. Throughout most of this century, the dominant outlook in moral philosophy has been rationalistic in both senses of the term described above. This explains in some measure the continuing appeal of the rationalistic approach to responsibility. Nevertheless, as I have already indicated, the tide seems to be turning against the rationalistic approach, and thus what Hume has to say on the subject of responsibility may find an increasingly receptive audience.

IV

I have argued that it is, generally speaking, an unquestioned assumption—we might say a dogma—of the rationalistic approach that the key item for any adequate analysis of responsibility is the concept of freedom. It is thus a commonplace to find that philosophers analyse the concept of responsibility directly in terms of freedom.[18] The classical interpretation, as I have indicated, presents Hume as committed to a rationalistic strategy of this kind. According to this view, the central feature of Hume's **(p.177)** theory of responsibility is his account of freedom, in particular his (conceptual) distinction between “liberty of spontaneity” and “liberty of indifference”. Hume, it is claimed, takes the view that responsibility is, quite simply, a matter of acting freely (i.e.“voluntarism”) The difficulty for Hume, therefore, is to state accurately what is required for free action.[19] The naturalistic interpretation makes plain that this account of Hume's position is fundamentally misleading and that it fails, in particular, to provide an adequate account of Hume's understanding of the relationship between responsibility and freedom.

What is central to Hume's theory of responsibility is his *descriptive* account of the workings of moral sentiment. Hume's approach to the narrower issue of “free will” can be properly understood only within this wider framework. More specifically, Hume's arguments concerning the relevance of the distinction between the two kinds of “liberty” and the indispensability of “necessity” to ascriptions of responsibility are intimately tied to his descriptive account of the mechanism which generates the moral sentiments. The relevance of his “definitions” of “liberty” and “necessity” must be understood in these terms. It is evident, then, that in the absence of a clear account of the naturalistic elements of Hume's system, it is not possible to grasp why Hume believes that it is “only upon the principles of necessity, that a person acquires any merit or demerit

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from his actions" (T, 411); nor is it possible to explain properly why he believes that liberty of indifference would entirely "subvert" morality (T, 410–11). On Hume's account, therefore, an adequate understanding of the *sort of* freedom that is required for responsibility depends on a *prior* description of the workings of moral sentiment.

Related to this, it is a fundamental insight of Hume's discussion of these matters that issues of responsibility are not *reducible* to the problem of "free will". Action is, of course, especially important because it reveals an agent's will and intention. However, it constitutes just one kind of "sign" of a person's character or mental qualities. Desires and feelings, as well as natural abilities, Hume holds, can also manifest pleasurable or painful qualities of mind, even though they are not (typically) under the control of the agent's will and can, indeed, be expressed involuntarily. We are accountable for these aspects of mind, he maintains, even though they arise involuntarily and may be manifested involuntarily. In this way, according to Hume, we can hold people responsible for qualities of mind that they have no control over and that are indicative of neither their will nor their intentions. Liberty of spontaneity or freedom, therefore, is not always necessary for responsibility. All that is necessary is that the agent manifest (signs of) pleasurable or painful qualities of mind, because these will naturally arouse moral sentiments of the appropriate kind.

The fact that it is moral sentiment, rather than freedom, that is fundamental to Hume's theory of responsibility is especially apparent when we compare Hume and Smith on this subject. Hume and Smith, as I have pointed out, agree on the fundamental principle of the naturalist's position, namely, that responsibility must be interpreted in terms of the working of moral sentiment. There is, moreover, no *disagreement* between Hume and Smith on the subject of free will. The reason for this is that Smith is *silent* on this matter—even though he has a great deal to say about issues of responsibility.[20] Nevertheless, as we have noted, despite the significant affinities between Hume and Smith on this subject, there are a whole range of quite basic differences **(p.178)** between their positions. They differ, for example, about whether it is (beliefs about) particular actions or their underlying character traits that arouse moral sentiment (i.e. the sense of merit or demerit); they disagree about whether the consequences of action, in themselves, affect our moral evaluation of an agent; they disagree about whether a person can be held accountable merely for feelings and desires; and they disagree about the relationship between our moral sentiments and our retributive practices. All of these are matters of fundamental importance. Disagreement on these matters, however, does not reflect any disagreement on the narrower question of free will. The significance of all this is that it shows that a common commitment to the naturalistic approach allows for considerable disagreement and divergence on a wide range of issues that are of basic importance for our understanding of responsibility. It also shows that the conception of freedom, important as it is, does not lie at the heart of the

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naturalistic approach. Indeed, it is possible to agree about the basic principles of the naturalistic approach and nevertheless to disagree about the nature of moral freedom and its relation to responsibility.[21]

We can shed further light on the specific significance of Hume's account of freedom in relation to his (naturalistic) theory of responsibility by comparing Hume's views with those of Hobbes and Schlick. Hume's definition of freedom (T, 407–8; EU, 95) is essentially that of both Hobbes and Schlick (i.e. understood as an absence of external impediments to action). So they are, indeed, generally agreed about what *freedom* (i.e. “liberty”) consists in.[22] Clearly, however, as I have explained in some detail, they are not agreed about wider issues concerning the nature and conditions of responsibility—because neither Hobbes nor Schlick allows for any role for moral sentiment in this sphere. For this reason, although Hume has a similar conception of freedom, his understanding of its *significance* in relation to responsibility is wholly different from the sorts of accounts that Hobbes and Schlick have put forward. More specifically, according to Hume, we cannot explain *why* freedom, so interpreted, is of importance to ascriptions of responsibility—nor why libertarian conceptions must be rejected—until we can explain its relevance to the working of the mechanism that produces the moral sentiments. Freedom, in short, has a quite different *role* to play in the framework of Hume's moral system. This is true even though Hume does not disagree with Hobbes and Schlick about the *nature* of freedom and what it consists in.

Clearly, then, it is a radical mistake to assimilate Hume's theory of moral responsibility with the positions of Hobbes and Schlick simply on the ground that they all have a shared conception of freedom. Unlike Hobbes and Schlick, Hume holds that issues of responsibility must be interpreted in terms of our natural human propensity to entertain moral sentiments toward our fellow human beings. Questions concerning moral freedom—and the general relationship between freedom and moral responsibility—must be considered inside this naturalistic context. Any effort to address the free will problem outside this framework is bound to mislead and perplex us. This is a theme of fundamental importance for Hume's moral philosophy.

The upshot of these (historical) comparisons is evident. The essential feature of Hume's theory of responsibility (i.e. its “naturalism”) is independent of the account of freedom (i.e. liberty of spontaneity). It is possible to embrace the naturalistic aspect of the theory of responsibility without being committed to the suggested account of **(p.179)** freedom (e.g. Smith, Butler), and, similarly, it is possible to embrace Hume's account of freedom without being committed to his naturalistic theory of responsibility (e.g. Hobbes, Schlick). What is distinctive and interesting about Hume's strategy is how he combines these specific

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elements and how he explains their relationship. These aspects of Hume's strategy are wholly obscured by the classical interpretation.

V

My remarks in this chapter make clear that I am broadly sympathetic to Hume's naturalistic approach to responsibility. I am also sympathetic, more specifically, to Hume's general understanding of the place of the free will problem in relation to the wider issue of responsibility. That is to say, I believe Hume is correct in holding that the issue of responsibility is not reducible to the free will problem and that the whole question of free will needs to be addressed within the framework of an account of the workings of moral sentiment. However, beyond this, I have also argued, in various passages of this book, that Hume's naturalistic theory of responsibility suffers from several serious shortcomings, or flaws, and that one of the most important of these is his "thin" account of moral freedom. (See my remarks at the end of chp. 5.) This is a weakness that relates to two other shortcomings in Hume's position: his (inadequate) account of moral capacity and his (mistaken) account of moral virtue.

As I have explained, according to the classical interpretation, Hume's account of freedom is the central feature of his theory of responsibility. Although this claim is, in my view, wholly mistaken, it is nevertheless true that, historically speaking, it is this aspect of Hume's discussion that has been especially influential. This is unfortunate, because (as Stroud notes) Hume's remarks on this matter are not very original, and, more important, they are clearly inadequate.

The freedom to act according to the determinations of our own will is, of course, a necessary capacity for a person to be a moral agent. Indeed, without such a capacity, a person cannot be an *agent* at all. However, such a capacity (i.e. to act according to the determinations of our desires and willings) is possessed by many individuals who are clearly not *moral* agents (e.g. children, animals, the mentally ill). It follows, then, that "liberty of spontaneity" does not suffice to distinguish moral from nonmoral agents—that is, it does not serve to identify individuals we may legitimately regard as objects of moral sentiment. What, then, is missing from Hume's account? The libertarian answer is straightforward: *Moral* agents require a capacity for free will (i.e. liberty of indifference, rather than mere liberty of spontaneity). This response, as we have discussed, has its own well-known difficulties. The question remains, however: How are we to distinguish moral from nonmoral agents if not on the basis of the capacity for free will?

There is, evidently, an intimate link between the issue of moral freedom and moral capacity. Libertarians claim that our distinguishing moral capacity is the capacity of free will (however it may be explained). On any account, therefore, naturalists like Hume require *some* relevant and plausible description of the sorts of capacities that render a person an appropriate object of *moral*

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sentiment. Hume's effort to deal with this matter, I have argued, is not acceptable (chp. 6, sec. 2). That is, Hume holds that what makes a person an object of moral sentiment is that he is judged to possess pleasurable **(p.180)** or painful qualities of mind. Any person who has such qualities is, on this view, an appropriate (i.e. natural) object of moral sentiment. This would render (very young) children, the mentally ill, the mentally disabled, and other such individuals (fully) morally accountable. Beyond this, it is, Hume claims, simply an ultimate fact about human beings that we do not entertain moral sentiments toward (other) animals—even though they, too, might possess pleasurable or painful qualities of mind. Clearly, Hume's account is incapable of drawing required distinctions in this sphere. What is needed, therefore, is an alternative description of the sorts of moral capacities required for the naturalistic theory. Elsewhere in this work, I have sketched what I take to be the basic elements of such an alternative account (chp. 6., sec. 2; chp. 9., sec. 2).

Hume's failure to (properly) describe the sort(s)of capacities required to render a person an appropriate object of moral sentiment is related to his faulty account of moral virtue. According to Hume, a virtue is simply a pleasant quality of mind. To be capable of moral virtue, therefore, requires nothing more than possessing traits or qualities of this kind. Again, as I have argued before, this account will not do—because it is much too wide in scope (chp. 6, sec. 2; chp. 8, sec. 3; chp. 9, sec. 1). Pleasurable and painful qualities of mind do not, as such, constitute moral virtues and vices (although virtues and vices might well be pleasurable or painful). What is essential to the capacity for moral virtue, in very general terms, is that a person be capable of manifesting a particular mode or way of *valuing* the interests and concerns of others, as well as herself; and that the person be capable of becoming aware or self-conscious about these modes of desire and conduct, and aware of how such dispositions influence the moral sentiments of those that she is dealing with. Such an individual requires a capacity for language and, through this, self-understanding and self-criticism. As capacities of this kind develop, a person will become, by degrees, a full member of the moral community and an appropriate object of moral sentiment.[23] Capacities of this general kind seem, at the very minimum, necessary for a person to participate fully in the moral life of the community and to be recognized as an individual who stands in the relevant relations to her fellows.

This sketch suggests that there is a close connexion between Hume's difficulties in respect of his understanding of moral virtue and his lack of any adequate account of moral capacity. Let us return to the issue of the relation between moral capacity and moral freedom. Clearly, it is possible to give a more adequate description of the nature of moral capacities which distinguish responsible from nonresponsible agents without any appeal to the “free will” metaphysics of libertarianism. More specifically, what is required is that we carefully describe the (sophisticated and complex) capacities of moral agents: their capacity to articulate their desires and intentions, to reflect on their character and the

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structure of their will, and to alter or amend them on this basis. This provides us with an account of moral capacity that is entirely consistent with the principles of naturalism and with the metaphysics of determinism. More important, it lays the foundations for a more adequate understanding of moral *freedom*. Within this framework, we can intelligibly consider problems of freedom that extend well beyond mere freedom of *action*. Specifically, this account suggests how agents can find "internal" barriers to their freedom (e.g. in the form of having a will they do not want or do not value). It also explains how we can distinguish human **(p.181)** agents who, although they *act* freely, are incapable of exercising the sort of higher activities required for (full) moral responsibility (e.g. critical self-reflection). These sorts of considerations about the nature of moral capacity suggest that the naturalistic approach Hume recommends requires a much richer description of the nature of moral freedom and that this description must be rooted in a more adequate account of moral capacity. A strategy of this sort will not give libertarians and incompatibilists everything they want, but it will go a long way toward addressing their *legitimate* concerns.

Clearly, then, as many critics of Hume have argued, we do require a more sophisticated account of moral freedom than that of "liberty of spontaneity". Related to this, the naturalistic theory of responsibility requires a more plausible and more substantial account of moral capacity than Hume provides us with. It is, I have argued, possible to provide such an account without any appeal to the (obscure) "free will" metaphysics of libertarianism. These observations plainly suggest that there are serious weaknesses and shortcomings in Hume's system in respect of these issues. However, they do not discredit the very fundamental insights that emerge from Hume's discussion. In particular, the fact that we require a more *elaborate* account of moral freedom and moral capacity does not discredit the view that the problem of freedom is best understood through a naturalistic approach to responsibility. On the contrary, the nature of the problem of freedom is significantly clarified on this approach (although, evidently, more work needs to be done on this). More generally, whatever difficulties remain with Hume's account, he has, nevertheless, provided us with strong reasons for thinking that many philosophers have misconceived the relationship between responsibility and freedom, and that, standardly, they exaggerate the importance of voluntariness and control for moral evaluation.[24]

VI

In a short story entitled "The Metaphysician's Nightmare", Bertrand Russell claims that in Hell there is "a particularly painful chamber inhabited solely by philosophers who have refuted Hume".[25] For many philosophers, the route to that "particularly painful chamber" has begun with the misinterpretation of Hume's views. In this work, it has been my particular concern to show that, in both matters of detail and broad strategy, the classical or received interpretation of Hume on the subject of responsibility and freedom seriously misrepresents his position. What is at stake here is not simply a matter of narrow scholarly debate

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and exegesis. On the contrary, the contemporary interest of Hume's views on this subject lies primarily with that very aspect of his general strategy which the classical interpretation ignores—namely, his naturalism. If we neglect this aspect of his discussion then, I maintain, we will overlook those very elements and features of his discussion then, are particularly illuminating in respect of the ongoing debate concerning responsibility and freedom.

Hume's detailed description of the mechanism of responsibility, and the way in which it depends on both moral sentiment and necessity, serves as the bridge over which he travels from metaphysics to morals, and it does much to bind the various elements of his philosophy into a connected and coherent whole. Moreover, his description of the nature and conditions of moral responsibility serves as the very **(p.182)** foundation on which he builds his secular and scientific account of moral and social life—a project that is of the very essence of his anti-Christian fundamental intentions. Quite simply, then, it is not possible to acquire an adequate appreciation of Hume's overall moral philosophy, nor of his philosophy in general, unless these basic elements are properly understood.

I take the core of Hume's “science” of responsibility to be this. Moral responsibility is a given of human nature. It is constituted by, and takes the form of, moral sentiment. A moral sentiment is a mode of love or hate, or of pride or humility. These sentiments are the chains of our humanity. In the form of love or hate, they may hold us together or pull us apart. In the form of pride or humility, they may carry us through life or weigh down upon us. With every relationship we form, new links in these chains are forged. These are bonds that we can never free ourselves from. Our happiness depends in large measure on how we carry this burden in life. Be this as it may, whether we find the load heavy or light, these chains remain the bonds of our humanity and the indelible mark of our moral accountability. Beyond this, however, these chains do not extend to a future state nor bind us to any superior being. When, finally, we slip loose from all such human ties, we return to the condition from which we arose and are lost, again, in “the immense ocean of matter”(ESY,176[Sceptic]).

Notes:

(1.) See, e.g., the article by Kaufman in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (“Responsibility, Moral and Legal”, vol. 7, 183–84). In a section entitled “Meaning and ‘moral responsibility’ ”, he writes, “Most persons would accept the following form of definition. . .: A person is regarded as morally responsible for some act or occurrence *x* if and only if he is believed (1) to have done *x*, or to have brought *x* about; and (2) to have done it or brought it about freely.” Kaufman goes on to note, however, that “Philosophers have too often supposed that the concept of ‘freedom’ essential to moral responsibility can be fixed independently of what it is to be responsible, and that only after the meaning of

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'freedom' is specified can we determine whether and under what circumstances a person is responsible. But in fact what a person means by 'free,' 'freely,' or 'freedom' will reflect his moral convictions, and especially his views about justice, in the same way and for the same reasons that his conception of 'moral responsibility' will reflect these views".

(2.) In general, there is a fundamental difference between circumstances in which we have, on examination, no coherent and intelligible concept to apply, and circumstances in which we are unable to discover any cases in which the application of the concept would be justified. In the first case, our sceptical doubts are generated at the initial stage of critical reflection on our concepts; in the second case, they are generated when we attempt to "carry our concepts over to the world" and apply them. In the first case, the concept is revealed as empty, because it cannot be articulated—the difficulty lies in the concept itself. In the second case, the concept is revealed as empty, because we discover, on empirical investigation, that there are no objects in the world to which we would be justified in applying the concept. (Cf. Hobbes's remark: "I acknowledge this liberty, that I can do if I will; but to say, I can will if I will I take to be an absurd speech" (*Of Liberty and Necessity*, in Raphael, ed., *British Moralists*, I, 61–62).

(3.) The apparent significance of this task, and the threat the sceptic is taken to pose for it, perhaps explains why these issues arouse such passion and heat. The sceptical challenge in this sphere is viewed—at least by the (philosophical) antisceptic—as one which can affect not just philosophical theory but also, far more importantly, concrete *moral practice*. To this extent the moral sceptic is regarded with a seriousness which few other sceptics receive. Unlike the philosopher who denies the existence of the external world or other minds, the moral sceptic is rarely viewed as a figure of mirth. In this sense, the free will issue is not regarded as "merely verbal" by the philosophical parties concerned. Ironically, however, although it is hotly debated within the philosophical community, the free will debate remains a rather remote and "academic" issue from the perspective of those outside the philosophical community—an observation that is perhaps of some significance.

(4.) In particular, these philosophers have found themselves unable to escape from the clutches of the dilemma of determinism. See chp. 1, sec. 1 in this volume.

(5.) The most influential and extreme version of this is to be found in Kant's system.

(6.) These observations suggest that although the libertarian and compatibilist are pursuing the same fundamental objective (viz. justifying responsibility), they are, nevertheless, in certain important respects, moving in opposite directions. More specifically, whereas libertarians seem to be willing to adapt their

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metaphysics to the requirements of their views on responsibility and freedom, compatibilists are inclined (or compelled) to adapt their views on responsibility and freedom to the requirements of their metaphysics. Historically speaking, this contrast is perfectly intelligible. Libertarians have generally been especially concerned to defend the integrity of our moral life, as they understand it, against what they take to be the illegitimate encroachment of the scientific worldview. By contrast, compatibilists have generally been concerned to push forward the ascendant scientific outlook in the face of what they perceive to be an essentially antiquated and irrational view of our moral life. In both cases, however, those concepts which are articulated first tend to place severe constraints on those deemed to be of secondary importance.

(7.) The force of claiming that these notions are somehow "inadequate" lies in the suggestion that they fail to support our supposition that human beings possess a certain "dignity" in virtue of which they are due "respect". Hence, these inadequacies have fatal consequences for any project which seeks to protect the integrity of our moral life.

(8.) It may be argued that it does not entirely do justice to the classical compatibilist tradition to overlook the empirical features of its strategy and to present it as "rationalistic". Certainly if we compare the classical compatibilist strategy with, for example, Kantian libertarianism—that is, a doctrine which "justifies" responsibility by appealing to the freedom of our noumenal (i.e. nonphenomenal) or rational selves—then there is something to be said for this claim. Nevertheless, in the twentieth century, with the general reorientation of the empiricist tradition from "psychologism" to "logical empiricism", there has been a tendency to place particular emphasis on the logical or conceptual features of the compatibilist strategy. Most important, it is almost always assumed by philosophers in this tradition that the "analysis" of (the concept of) responsibility primarily concerns the problem of free will.

(9.) We should not conclude from this—as Strawson appears to do (FR, 68, 70, 74)—that the sceptical challenge poses no *real* threat to the entire edifice of responsibility (i.e. that we will continue to hold other people responsible *whatever* sceptical arguments are put to us). As Nagel notes, criticisms that are "internal" to the whole superstructure of responsibility (i.e. internal to the "web" of moral sentiment) can *spread* and become comprehensive (*The View from Nowhere*, 125; cf. my "Strawson's Way of Naturalizing Responsibility"). Clearly, then, the naturalistic approach cannot *insulate* us from all forms of sceptical challenge. On the contrary, from any perspective, the sceptical challenge is both "real" and "legitimate"—the question is how to *meet* it.

(10.) It is, of course, ironic that Stroud makes this point—indeed, it constitutes a central theme of his interpretation of Hume's philosophy—given that Stroud

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entirely overlooks these features of Hume's system when it comes to issues of freedom and responsibility.

(11.) MacIntyre, “Hume on ‘Is’ and ‘Ought’ ”, 264. MacIntyre continues, “For the tradition which upholds the autonomy of ethics from Kant to Moore to Hare, moral principles are somehow self-explicable; they are logically independent of any assertion about human nature. Hume has been too often presented recently as an adherent of this tradition”.

(12.) A number of works could be cited as evidence of this “Humean turn”. See, e.g., Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality*, and Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*.

(13.) We may remember Bertrand Russell's observation that if the moralist ignores human nature, then “it is likely that human nature will ignore the claims of the moralist” (*Human Society in Ethics and Politics*, 18).

(14.) Murdoch's expression appears in the following context: “Human nature, as opposed to the nature of other hypothetical spiritual beings, has certain discoverable attributes, and these should be suitably considered in any discussion of morality” (*The Sovereignty of Good*, 78). It is important to note that moralists who are agreed that moral philosophy must be grafted onto an account of human nature might nevertheless be deeply divided about *what sort* of account of human nature is called for. In particular, there is a fundamental divide between those who believe that we require a teleological account of human nature in the Aristotelian tradition and those who demand a “mechanistic”, nonteleological conception of human nature in the tradition of Hobbes, Spinoza, and Hume. (On this subject, see MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, chps. 4–6.)

(15.) Among our own contemporaries, Bernard Williams has probably been the most influential of these critics. Thirty years ago, Williams pointed out that “recent moral philosophy in Britain has not had much to say about the emotions”. He went on to argue that, although emotions play a large part in moral thought, this “has not adequately been mirrored in the recent concerns of moral philosophers” (“Morality and the Emotions”, 207). Clearly, however, this is changing. Along with the greater interest in moral psychology and moral development, more recent work in moral philosophy displays a great deal more understanding of the importance of emotion in moral life.

(16.) It should be noted that MacMurray's discussion is presented from a Christian perspective and is, therefore, in this respect, profoundly *non*-Humean. However, for our purposes, this is of little consequence. MacMurray elaborates on his views on this subject in *Reason and Emotion*, esp. 13–65.

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(17.) The theme MacMurray touches on has, of course, deep roots that stretch beyond Hume to other thinkers, the most important of whom is probably Spinoza. A number of contemporary writers, outside of philosophy, have also commentated on these matters. See, e.g., Saul Bellow's remarks in the opening section of his early novel *Dangling Man*: “this is an era of hardboileddom. . . . Do you have feelings? There are correct and incorrect ways of indicating them. Do you have an inner life? It's nobody's business but your own. Do you have emotions? Strangle them. To a degree, everybody obeys this code. . . . Most serious matters are closed to the hard-boiled. They are unpracticed in introspection, and therefore badly equipped to deal with opponents whom they cannot shoot like big game or outdo in daring”.

(18.) See note 1 above.

(19.) See, e.g., MacNabb, *David Hume*, 201–2, and Ayer, *Hume*, 77–78.

(20.) It is an important aspect of Hume's general account of responsibility to explain why “necessity” and “liberty” (properly understood) are “essential” to ascriptions of responsibility—i.e. to the generation of moral sentiment. Smith does not pursue these specific matters. He provides no account of either necessity or liberty. It is, however, worth nothing that Smith describes the workings of desire, sentiment, and action in the “mechanical” language of “cause” and “effect” (see, e.g., TMS, 18, 67, 79, 82). (Beyond this, see also TMS, 289, where Smith describes “the whole machine of the world” as “that great chain of causes and effects which has no beginning, and which will have no end”. In general, Smith tacitly embraces a necessitarian outlook that is much influenced by Stoic philosophy.)

(21.) I note above, for example (chp. 5, sec. 4), that Hume and Strawson provide rather different accounts of moral freedom—even though their naturalistic approaches to responsibility are very similar. More significant, a moralist like Butler also takes a naturalistic approach to responsibility (see, e.g., “Nature of Virtue”, in Raphael, ed., *British Moralists*, I, 378–86) but adheres to firmly libertarian principles on the matter of free will (*Analogy*, pt. 1, chp. 4).

(22.) Hobbes, *Of Liberty and Necessity*, in Raphael, ed., *British Moralists*, I, 68: “A *free agent* is he that can do if he will, and forbear if he will; and. . .*liberty* is the absence of external impediments”; Schlick, “When Is a Man Responsible?” 59: “A man is *free* if he does not act under *compulsion*, and he is compelled or unfree when he is hindered from without. . . . [A] man will be considered quite free and responsible if no such external compulsion is exerted upon him”.

(23.) It is an interesting feature of moral development in the individual that as a person becomes increasingly able to *understand why* people entertain moral sentiments toward her, so that person becomes an increasingly *appropriate* object of such sentiments. Being legitimately held responsible, therefore,

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depends on the development of our capacity to be aware that we are an object of sentiments of this kind. In other words, we must not only be able to interpret our own desires, feelings, and conduct, but also be able to interpret the sentiments they arouse in others (chp. 6, note 14; chp. 8, sec. 1).

(24.) Compare Nietzsche's interesting and relevant remarks on this general theme (i.e. overcoming the prejudices of traditional morality) in *Beyond Good and Evil*, sec. 32.

(25.) Bertrand Russell, *Nightmares of Eminent Persons*.

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