

**Rachel Cohon**

*Hume's Morality: Feeling and Fabrication.*

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One can find several positions in contemporary philosophical disciplines, from metaphysics to ethics, identified by the label ‘Humean’. But should one attempt to justify the label by taking a closer look at Hume’s relevant texts, more often than not one will find that the platitudes with which ‘Humean positions’ are defined just do not fit with what Hume actually says. Most of the time Hume’s texts simply do not lend the necessary support for this label ‘Humean’.

In this book Rachel Cohon faces this problem squarely. Her aim is to provide a coherent account of Hume’s position, to explain away various conflicting or disturbing bits in his theory by relying on a principle of charity, i.e. to interpret Hume’s theory as maximally coherent. With this project in mind she challenges three central theses of what are commonly taken to be the marks of a ‘Humean moral philosophy’: 1) belief is motivationally inert, 2) moral judgments are not truth-apt, as they are not cognitive states but expressions of feeling, and 3) evaluations cannot be inferred from facts. Though widely accepted, these theses should be dismissed precisely on the ground that their acceptance would entail unsolvable inconsistencies in Hume’s position. So, the alternatives to these theses that emerge from Cohon’s reading are: 1\*) beliefs play a role in the formation of passions, and not merely in directing existing passions; 2\*) Hume is an anti-realist cognitivist, as for him moral judgments are cognitive and can be true or false, but moral properties are not in the world independently of our perception of them; 3\*) Hume does not think there is a gap between facts and values, only that ‘moral facts cannot be deduced from certain other sorts of fact’ (26).

Cohon reads Hume’s metaethics as being focused on moral epistemology, on the question of how we discern moral good and evil. She develops her reconstruction in two stages. First, she analyses Hume’s moral theory as rooted in moral feelings, the process we come to have them, and their motivational power. She also explores the metaphysical consequences of Hume’s account. Second, she turns to artificial virtues, focusing on their emergence as well as their moral and motivational status. Cohon’s reconstruction succeeds in clearing up the confusions surrounding the central concepts of Hume’s moral theory, and it also succeeds in presenting it as a coherent vision of human morality and sociability.

The picture we eventually get is that of Hume as a natural historian of the processes responsible for making us moral beings. Cohon draws a detailed picture of how reason, sympathy and moral sense work and interact. She characterizes them as *processes*

(e.g. 67ff, *passim*) in the mind, and suggests that Hume's talk about faculties should be understood this way. This is perfectly legitimate, as faculties within the Humean framework cannot be identified independently of the role they play. However, I am inclined to think that Cohon should not exclude talk about faculties just because they are identifiable only functionally. Hume's project is to search for (causal) principles of human nature, and he needs them to explain why perceptions follow one another in the order they do and how actions spring from them. It is thus not merely a project of describing processes; rather it is an exploration of the causal potentials the human mind exhibits via exploring and classifying its characteristic activities. Thus, it seems perfectly in order to allow for functionally identified faculties exerting active influence on perceptions, and it fits the textual evidence better. However, the introduction of such faculties would challenge another dogma of the established image of Hume, namely, that there is nothing more to the mind than perceptions.

The backbone of Cohon's reading is 'the *moral sensing view*' which she very convincingly ascribes to Hume. Moral sense is just a special source of perception based on our ability to sympathize with others—an active process or faculty. What we can perceive by it makes us able to represent agents as moral beings. Moral sensing is the process that provides us with the relevant impressions for moral ideas whose truth consists in their agreement with the impression they copied. Reason is just the process of discovering truth and falsehood by comparing perceptions (ideas with ideas, and ideas with impressions), so the truth of moral ideas consists in their accurate representation of the impressions supplied by our moral sense. A moral belief (which is just a lively idea) can thus be as true or as false as the belief that the tomato in front of me is red. Given this competence of reason, it alone cannot supply moral judgments, nor can it produce motivation for action; but it does have a role to play in both processes by discovering truth or falsity. In order to have moral judgments and moral motivation we need something else: a moral sentiment, which is a feeling supplied by moral sense.

Humean moral evaluation is directed at actions when traced back to a character trait, which is a stable disposition or motivation to action. Moral judgments worthy of their name are made from the *common point of view*, and not from a partial perspective. For moral judgment, as Cohon argues (141), we need to detach ourselves from our personal outlook, and from the 'situated sentiment' it supplies. A situated sentiment is still under influence of our personal interests and biases, one on which moral judgment cannot be based; in order to reach that, we need to correct or replace this sentiment from the common point of view. This provides an impartial perspective that we can enter into by using our imagination: judging from the common point of view means entertaining by sympathy the relevant sentiments of those involved. Sympathy is thus a crucial bit in moral evaluation, a process by which we form ideas about the feelings of others on the basis of their behavior, and then transform these ideas into their corresponding impressions. This is how this process, by taking into consideration the consequences of a character trait on those effected, results in a disinterested—albeit not objective, but at

least intersubjective—evaluation.

Moral evaluation is a natural process of the human mind, and moral approbation arises from character traits being useful or agreeable to others or those who possess them. Some of our virtues are natural, i.e. character traits that are supplied by our natural constitution. They fall into three main categories: ‘the virtues of greatness of mind, the virtues of goodness or benevolence, and the natural abilities’ (163). Natural virtues provide non-moral motives for action, i.e. motives that are distinct from the sense of duty or obligation.

But not all virtues are like that. Due to the pressure to live under social conditions human beings are prompted to develop some *artificial* virtues. On the one hand, my myopic self interest urges me to get my hands on everything I want, but this leads to permanent conflict over material goods. On the other hand, due to my physical weakness I can live and benefit only from cooperation and in a community; therefore my self-interest needs to be redirected. So, given that I am better off if I respect your property and keep my promises, etc., then provided that everyone else does the same these rules emerge as conventions whose violation is easily sanctioned in small communities. In more populous groups, i.e. in larger societies, redirected self-interest is just not enough to overcome our selfishness and to maintain conformity to the conventions. And as government in itself is weaker than those governed, character traits and moral sense must also be configured accordingly so that people *feel* what they and others ought to do—to act from a sense of duty. This work is done by custom and education, which foster the relevant character traits and moral sensitivity. Consequently, Hume’s dictum that virtuous action must arise from some non-moral motive holds only for natural virtues, not for artificial ones (171, 197). In the latter case we have no non-moral motive to act virtuously, only our inculcated sense of duty.

Although Hume’s moral enterprise is primarily descriptive, aiming at a ‘detailed natural history of the moral sentiments’ (239), it is not without normative implications, and he ‘believes that the traits on his list really are virtues’ (241). This poses the question: What is the source of *normativity* in Hume? Cohon convincingly argues that this source cannot be utility. She points out that agreeableness as a source of moral approval can conflict with utility, and also that making utility the source of normativity would entail pointing out reason as the source of moral judgment, which would conflict with Hume’s sentimentalism. Besides, utility would detach moral evaluations from psychological reactions, and it would commit Hume to moral realism. The source of normativity is, instead, the evaluation of the virtues themselves from the common point of view: moral sensitivity gives us a list of virtues, but it can be turned onto itself, and then we can ask whether we should approve the virtues we in fact approve. This reflexivity produces a second-order moral sentiment about the virtue itself, and it can be turned into a good Humean source of normativity.

This is a very rich book, only some central aspects of which I could mention here. It makes for a very good read and is written with exemplary clarity, and the ways in which Cohen suggests we read Hume are very plausible. Cohen presents a sympathetic account of Hume's morality, which seems to fit fairly well with various other aspects of Humean human nature. The end product of this interpretation is, indeed, a clear and coherent Hume, an anatomist of human nature whose descriptive and explanatory project testifies to his deep concern over moral matters.

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