

# Hume's Theory of Morality A Philosophical Exploration

Neelufar Khan

Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy  
Vidyasagar College

---

## Abstract

---

Moral Philosophy or ethics is that branch of philosophy which investigates the nature of good and bad, right and wrong, and how human beings ought to live. Each moral theory provides certain moral standard and principle in order to ascertain the moral worth of an individual's action. One such ethical theory is that of 18<sup>th</sup> century moralist David Hume.

*David Hume* is an eminent Scottish philosopher in the history of Western Philosophy, known for his empiricist theory of knowledge and philosophical scepticism. But he has also made important contribution to moral philosophy. Hume's moral philosophy is primarily found in Book 3 of *The Treatise of Human Nature* and his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. Hume's moral theory was mostly influenced by the Scottish thinkers, such as - Francis Hutcheson and Third Earl of Shaftesbury; who have also emphasised the role of emotion in morality. He rejects the rationalist conception of morality which claims that through reason alone, human beings make moral evaluations and understand right and wrong. While influenced by his predecessors, Hume developed his moral theory which is primarily rooted in moral sentimentalism. He contends that morality is primarily based on 'sentiments' or 'feelings' rather than on universal reason. This is so because, for him, human beings in addition to our faculty of reason, have the requisite emotional capacities, which help us to determine that some action is ethically right or wrong, or a person has a virtuous moral character. This view of Hume is in contrast with Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy, who bases morality on reason and universal duty. Thus, Hume's ethical thought basically deals with the questions about the role of sentiments in thought, action and morality, intimate relationship between human sentiments and morality and the nature of moral evaluation.

The object of this paper is to give a short account of Hume's moral theory by analysing Hume's sentimentalism and the instrumental role of reason, and the consequences of his moral theory. In conclusion it seems to us that in spite of some objections raised against his moral theory, yet Hume's moral theory has its own relevance.

**Keywords :** Moral philosophy, Empiricism, Sentiments, Reason, Morality.

## Hume's Theory of Morality A Philosophical Exploration

Many philosophical problems are very much relevant to human concerns and they are so complex in their ramifications; that in one form or another they are perennially present. Although in due course they become a part of philosophical inquiry, yet in each age they need to be rethinking in the light of scientific knowledge and ethical theories. One such philosophical inquiry is the question of morality, which is very much significant in human being's life. "Every human being thinks about how to live a good life – how to make the right sorts of decisions, and what sorts of conditions contribute to morally good life. This naturally leads to thoughts about the following questions: What should we do in order to be good?" (Driver 1) In the history of ethics, there are many moral theories which explores various responses to these questions and are advocated and formulated by different moral philosophers belonging to different ages. Each of these moral theories made a significant contribution by enriching the field of moral philosophy and also guiding human beings to lead a virtuous social life. Each moral theory provides a certain moral standard and principle in order to ascertain the moral worth of an individual's action. As Peter Singer opines that – "[T]he justification of an ethical principle cannot be in terms of any partial or sectional group ... Ethics requires us to go beyond "I" and "you" to the universal law, the universalizable judgment, the standpoint of the impartial spectator or ideal observer, or whatever we choose to call it." (Singer 11) Since, it is not

possible here to discuss each moral theory, so I shall confine my discussion to David Hume's moral theory.

This paper consists of three sections. The first section deals with the positive account of Hume's moral theory and his rejection of rationalist theory of ethics. In the second section Hume's view about the role of reason in guiding human action is explained. In the concluding section some objections against Hume's moral theory have been stated and the importance of Hume's moral theory in spite of its drawback has been emphasized.

### I

#### Positive Account of Hume's Theory of Morality

David Hume (1711-1776) was a Scottish philosopher and though one of the major figures of his century well known for his profound philosophical scepticism, yet he made significant contributions to moral philosophy. He is often considered as a 'father' or a leading proponent of empiricism because as he was influenced by the work of an empiricist philosopher John Locke, the former developed his naturalistic system of knowledge grounded entirely in experience. His philosophical work basically consists of a rigorous empirical approach and scepticism, which is evident in his examinations of limitation of human

understanding and of human nature. Later on, he has built his moral philosophy based upon his empiricist theory of mind where he asserts that, all human knowledge is derived from sensory experience (impressions) and then transformed into ideas, which is primarily derived through our senses. Among many of his essays and notable works, “*A Treatise of Human Nature*” and “*An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*,” challenges the notion of personal identity, causality; which gradually paves the way for secular thinking and empirical enquiry; while “*An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*,” published in 1751, is significant for the exploration human behavior and ethical theory, particularly emphasizing the role of sentiments in moral judgements.

At the very outset of our discussion it is extremely important to note: What is meant by morality? The word ‘morality’ is derived from the Latin word ‘moralis,’ which means manners or a set of ideas about right or wrong, good or bad. Being a part of philosophical study, which is ethics, it focuses on existing set of values adopted by human beings and whether their action is in accordance to those values or violates them in any way. As implied by Socrates “morality fosters or even calls for the use of reason and for a kind of autonomy on the part of the individual, asking him, when matured and normal, to make his own decisions, though possibly with someone’s advice, and even stimulating him to think out the principles or goals in the light of which he is to make his decisions.” (Frankena 7)

David Hume inherits several controversial issues about ethics from his predecessors. Firstly, the question regarding moral epistemology, as to how do human beings acquire knowledge about right and wrong, good and evil.? The answer to this is multifarious. According to some ethical theorists of that period, moral good and evil are discovered - a) by reason (Clarke, Hobbes, Locke), b) by a moral sense (Shaftsbury and Hutcheson), c) by divine revelation (Filmer), or d) by reflection or conscience on one’s impulses (Butler). Secondly, what is the ground of moral obligation.? In reply to this, Samuel Clarke a moral rationalist claimed that moral principles are the requirements of reason.

With an attempt to find solution of these ethical issues, as to what is the foundation of moral philosophy, Hume in his book “*An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*,” embarks on a profound exploration of the foundation of moral philosophy, with the primary objective to discover and clarify the underlying principles which guide the ethical behavior and moral judgments of human beings. In doing so, he basically focuses and investigates the humane and practical aspects of morality. So, “Hume does not believe that there are any absolutely eternal and immutable principles of morality knowable by intuition and demonstration.” (Wright 213) Rather, he seeks to ground his moral philosophy in the lived experiences and sentiments of individuals, and he does so because his ultimate aim is to provide a coherent understanding of what constitutes the moral behavior of human beings. He knew very well the importance of his enquiry for understanding human nature and so, he begins by examining the basis of moral judgments. He claims moral philosophy should be concerned with the principles that lead to

virtuous conduct, and also these principles are deeply interlinked with emotions and sentiments of human beings. Therefore, two central assertions of Hume regarding the foundation of morality are: *Firstly* – The content of our duties is not determined by reason (Moral distinctions are not derived from reason), and *Secondly* – Reason cannot motivate the will (Reason can never be a sole motive of any type of action of the will.) And so, a question arises, if according to Hume, ‘reason’ cannot be the basis of morality, then how does he account for practice of morality by human beings?

Now in similarity with earlier empiricist moral philosophers, most prominently Francis Hutcheson, Hume explains human beings capacity to act morally primarily according to the feelings of pleasure and pain and also their capacity to judge morally. Therefore, in reply to the above question regarding as to how human beings make moral distinctions, that is, questions regarding the difference between virtuous and vicious actions or characters, Hume sets forth his own moral theory.

Hume claims that ‘feelings’ or ‘sentiments’ of pleasure and pain which arise in contemplating actions and characters of human beings, other than reason help us to make moral judgment. Precisely, his ethical theory is primarily rooted in moral sentimentalism, and so he advocates that morality is based on emotions or passions or sentiments and natural inclinations rather than reason. It is noteworthy, that for Hume not all types of pleasing and painful sensations are moral feelings. For him, the moral judgments of human beings arise from emotions and sentiments, rather than logical deductions. That is to say, human beings’ moral sense is intrinsically connected with their emotions and feelings, and so, when they make moral judgments, they do not just process logical propositions but instead respond to their sentiments. And so, “Morality, therefore, is more properly felt than judged of; though this feeling or sentiment is commonly so soft and gentle that we are apt to confound it with an idea, according to our common custom of taking all things for the same, which have any near resemblance to each other.” (Hume 245) Moreover, for Hume, “feelings of pleasure and pain can alone activate our desires (our ‘sensuous’ or ‘pathological’ desires, as Kant calls them); and it is our desires, so produced, that always provide the *motivating force* for action.” (Ward 143) Thus, based on his empiricist theory Hume explains the way judgments of virtue or vice can motivate us, so to say, while making moral distinctions particular sentiments are intrinsically involved and these sentiments further produce corresponding desires, and these desires then lead to appropriate action.

It is worth mentioning here, that the above stance of Hume is the clear rejection of traditional rationalist theory which claims that reason is the basis of morality, and particularly in contrast with German philosopher Immanuel Kant’s Moral theory, according to which morality is based on reason and universal duty. And so, the fundamental point of disagreement between Humean and Kantian moral theory centers around the role of emotion and reason in guiding moral actions.

Hume claims that human beings are sensual beings, so they are motivated to act

only because of their desires and sentiments of pleasure or displeasure for certain types of actions and character traits. So morality is basically rooted in emotions and human nature, particularly it is the feeling of sympathy or moral sentiment. Psychological capacities of human beings, such as – sympathy along with the sentiments of pleasure or displeasure, provide the foundation for moral distinctions. Moral distinctions accompanied by virtue produces agreeable feelings, while moral distinctions accompanied by vice produce disagreeable feelings. That is, human beings only approve those character traits and actions which are useful and agreeable to us and others, while they disapprove only those actions and character traits which are useless and disagreeable to us and others, and this sentiment of approval and disapproval confers moral value. Therefore, for Hume, moral judgment is not a cold rational calculation, rather it is a matter of ‘feeling’. So it is not *Reason*, rather the *Feeling of Sympathy*, which enable us to understand and share the feelings of pleasure and pain of others, and also crucial for forming and guiding our moral judgments. And so, the core concept of Hume’s moral theory is the concept of ‘personal merit’ which is centered on virtuous and character traits. Again, the notion of duty is not central to his philosophy, rather it is characterized by the responses of fellow human beings of our society. It is noteworthy, that Hume’s method of investigation is basically empirical, observational and naturalistic in nature, so for him ‘morality’ is a subject of ‘moral science’ which can be explained by studying human behavior and psychology. And it is this morality which describes how human beings act. Thus, Hume’s philosophy being characterized by empirical, systematic and scientific approach for understanding human nature, places him within the realm of naturalistic philosophy.

## II

### Role of Reason in Hume’s Theory of Morality

In the history of Western Philosophy, according to many philosophers ‘the ability of reasoning’ marks a separation between the natural world and the human being. This sort of views can be found in the writings of the thinkers such as – Aquinos, Plato, Aristotle, Descartes and Kant. Hume attacks this traditional conception, and this is one of the radical aspects of Hume’s moral theory. Again, in the seventeenth and eighteenth century the prominent topic of debate regarding the nature of morality was the relationship between reason and moral evaluation. The moral rationalists such as – Ralph Cudworth, Samuel Clarke and John Balguy, advocate that ethical evaluations are made solely on the basis of reason, without the influence of feelings or passions. Hume also rejects the position of moral rationalism. Furthermore, he also contends that ‘reason’ is subordinate to passions, the former by itself is powerless and that it needs the assistance of passions or emotions to be effective. So, we see that throughout Hume’s moral writing ‘sentiment’ is the basis of moral action, and it is this feeling of approval which indicates that an action is right. Further, in the *Treatise*, Hume claims that moral sentiment which approves human being’s action does not arise from reason, rather,

it stems out from a non-rational sympathetic process which is between the sentiment approving an action and the impression or idea of an action. And so, a very pertinent question arises; does Reason, have no role to play in Hume's moral theory?

Some commentators have interpreted Hume by saying that, reason plays no role in the making of moral judgments. But Hume answers the above mentioned question by saying that, although human being's actions does not arise from reason, yet reason certainly plays two significant roles in the process which gives rise to their actions. They are - **Firstly**, reason can show us the consequences of human being's ways of life or their certain actions; and so reason does play a fundamental role in helping us to determine the content of our objectives and ends which satisfy our desires and passions. **Secondly**, reason needs to be employed in order to give instructions or means obtaining what is being determined.

Thus, according to Hume, as reason can never be practical, and so, it can never motivate the will. In fact in the moral arena, motivation is basically the work of our non-rational nature, that is, it is the work of desires and feelings which are naturally produced. Perhaps, to emphasize the relative role of reason, the most famous passage in Hume's Treatise we find him saying – "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them." (Hume 415) This means that reason alone cannot motivate action, rather instincts, passions and emotions are the primary motivators of morals and human action, while reason merely helps to find the most effective way for achieving those goals, which are set by our passions or emotions. Also, no mere idea or fact can motivate human beings to do or want to do anything. Therefore, Hume claims, "At most, reason may be called in to deliberate the *means* to get what we want; it cannot (as Aristotle, for example, believed) establish our *ends*." (Solomon 189) So, Hume does not entirely diminish the value of reason, because he does acknowledge its role in morality. Rather, for Hume, reason primary function is a supportive role to sentiment for assisting in the refinement of moral principles by supplying sentiments with relevant facts and providing context for judgments; and also, in its practical application. And so, reason has only instrumental or practical role to play, in order to serve the passions by analyzing facts, perceiving relationships and thereby drawing conclusions for achieving ends set by our desires. Furthermore, reason also helps human beings to discern the consequences of their actions, for influencing their sentiments by emphasizing which actions are detrimental or conducive to the well-being of others. Precisely, the passions of human beings such as, anger, love or desire provide the 'why' of our actions, whereas reasons provide the 'how' of actions. The above dictum is the foundation of Hume's moral theory, and these further entails two important points, such as – a) Moral distinctions cannot be derived from reason, and b) Ought cannot be derived from Is.

From our above analysis of Hume's moral theory, we can draw certain consequences which are as follows :

*Firstly*, there can be no moral principle which is a necessary requirement of all human beings, and also that all the possible rational creatures will act on that principle. To put Hume's view in Kant's terminology, there can be no moral principle possessing an essential characteristic of necessity and strict universality. Rather, we can only say that, as a matter of fact, all human beings possess same type of sentiments which originate by the similar type of circumstances; and so there exists a contingent agreement among these sentiments regarding what morally ought to be done. There is no ground to accept that, there exists a moral principle which necessarily binds all human being without exception.

*Secondly*, from the first consequence follows the second. Even if we assume that all human beings possess the same type of sentiments, yet these sentiments are subjective in nature. And because of this subjectivity, they vary in their strengths not only between individuals but also within the same individual at different times. One need to accept the element of luck in man's life, in order to enquire whether a particular individual's moral sentiment is unwavering and strong enough which motivates his will on appropriate occasions.

*Thirdly*, the ground of motivation for all the duties and moral obligations of the human beings is their own happiness and pleasure, and so, they are self-interested.

*Fourthly*, as moral principles are rooted in human passion and sentiment, not in reason, it does not require any divine command or appeal to God. So Hume's theory eventually leads to naturalistic ethics based on feelings of pleasure and pain. It also shifts the focus for understanding the psychological origins and the role of moral sentiments in society. Again, Hume's understanding of morality fosters a debate on whether moral beliefs can be justified by mere expressions of feeling (moral non-cognitivism) or by reason (moral cognitivism).

Now, Andrew Ward thinks (Ward 145) that Hume might have acknowledged the first and the second consequences, but he would not accept the third consequence which Kant draws from his empiricist theory of morality. In fact, despite the passages which suggest Hume's contrary view, that 'ought' cannot be derived from 'is,' yet whether this view is accepted is a matter of great controversy.

### III

#### Objections to Hume's Theory of Morality

Hume's moral theory faces many objections, some of which are stated below, in brief: The main criticism of his moral theory is that, as he grounds the foundation of morality on feelings and sentiments, rather than on universal reason, this leads to ethical relativism, potentially undermining the objectivity and universality of moral principles. So, to say, the way he focuses on 'sentiments' raises concerns that moral values could be subjective, and thus morality could vary between cultures, time, human beings and even within same individual in due time, and this eventually makes it difficult to account for the objective wrongness of actions like

murder or theft. Thus, Hume's ethical thought challenges the idea that moral principles are universal laws or based on reason, and so, Immanuel Kant interprets Hume's moral theory as demeaning morality because it lacks elements which are essential for a consistent ethical system. Critics also argue whether sympathy which is central to his theory, is capable enough for establishing justice in the society or there is a gap between duties and sentiments. The foundation of Hume's entire philosophy is empiricism, but critics question this foundation on the following grounds. How is it possible to ground a normative theory in an empirical theory, as virtue and the vice are not observable facts which can be perceived like physical objects. How can it explain the concept of 'ought' in moral judgments and also how could feelings and sentiments can be a basis of universal morality.? It is evident that sentiments play a fundamental role in Hume's philosophy than reason, but some thinkers argue that the extent to which Hume discounts reason in the making of moral judgments is not clear. Nonetheless, according to some philosophers Hume's writings are complex categorization, consisting of many theories, such as - empiricism, scepticism, virtue ethics and so on, so this blending makes it difficult to extract from his work, a coherent, singular normative ethical theory.

Nonetheless, it seems to us, that despite the criticisms which are levelled against his moral philosophy, his exploration of moral principle is significant because his distinctive approach gives more importance to human sentiments rather than abstract rationality. Moreover, Hume's moral philosophy is significant for being a foundational work of moral sentimentalism. He was in search of establishing a moral framework which reflects human nature, and also acknowledges the powerful role of emotions in guiding man's ethical behavior. In fact, these ideas profoundly influenced later ethical theories. He moved away from abstract metaphysical systems and instead established a framework for understanding morality as a product of human psychology and social conditions.

And so, it was through this enquiry, that Hume aimed to provide a more realistic and comprehensive understanding of morality, which is primarily rooted in the common feelings and experiences shared by all individuals. In this way, by emphasizing the intimate relation between morality and sentiment Hume lays the groundwork for a moral philosophy which is both humane and practical in nature, and the one which resonates with the everyday experiences of human beings. As a prominent intellectual of his time, his books and essays are the source of radical innovative theories regarding moral practice, religion, political theory, human understanding and knowledge. Thus, Hume is recognized as the forerunner of contemporary cognitive science, a thorough going exponent of philosophical naturalism, and as the true inspiration for many different types of ethical theory which later developed in contemporary society.

### Work Cited

1. Driver, Julia. *Ethics : The Fundamentals*. UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2007. Print.
2. Singer, Peter. *Practical Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979. Print.
3. Frankena, William K. *Ethics*. New Delhi: Prentice-Hall of India Private Limited, 2005. Print.
4. Wright, William K. *A History of Modern Philosophy*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941. Print.
5. Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Ed. Lewis Amherst Selby-Bigge. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896. Print.
6. Ward, Andrew. *Kant : The Three Critiques*. United Kingdom: Polity Press, 2006. Print.
7. ---. *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*. Ed. Lewis Amherst Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch. Third. Book II Part iii Section 3. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975. Print.
8. Solomon, Robert C. *Morality And The Good Life: An Introduction to Ethics Through Classical Sources*. Boston: McGraw-Hill Book Company. Print.
9. Ward further emphasized “Hume might have”.