

# JUSTICE AS AN ARTIFICIAL VIRTUE: SELFISHNESS AND HUMAN NATURE IN THE MORAL AND POLITICAL THOUGHT OF DAVID HUME

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**Abstract.** David Hume's moral theory states that our moral decisions are based on sentiments, and that the possibility of such sentiments that can effectively motivate our decisions is based on our benevolent nature. Stating that benevolence is part of our nature, however, does not mean that we are generally selfless. I will argue that Hume not only accepts our selfishness but states that it is our strongest motivational force; and that justice conceived as an artificial virtue is in accord with the political realist canon that takes human nature to be essentially imperfect.

**Keywords:** David Hume, justice, artificial virtues, political realism, human nature

## Introduction

The ethical theory of David Hume aimed to prove that rationalistic and egoistic explanations of moral phenomena are fundamentally misrepresenting human nature. He sided instead with the moral sense theorists<sup>1</sup> and claimed that our decisions, moral and non-moral as well, are based on sentiments, while those denying it are overestimating the role of reasoning in our behavior. Reason cannot force our will, since considered in isolation, it has no motivational force according to Hume. Reason plays an important role in showing us the consequences of an act or the means to achieve something, but it cannot be the sole source of our actions. This limited role he claims reason has also means that on Hume's account, every moral theory that equates virtuosity with being reasonable is fundamentally wrong.

Hume argued not just against an entirely rational view of human behavior, but against every philosophical theory that detaches itself from human nature, more specifically from human nature as we experience it in our everyday lives.<sup>2</sup> If we examined people as they behave in everyday situations, it could be proved that in reality we tend to act based on our sentiments and not on reasoning alone. Emphasizing this pivotal role of our sentiments, however, does not mean that we could single out one particular sentiment as the sole motivational force behind our actions, be it selfishness or something more noble than that.<sup>3</sup> Should we carefully examine human actions, we could definitely find acts that are based on the selfish nature of the agent, while we could also identify ones that are not. There are actions

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that by no means could be interpreted as selfish, consequently the philosophers who argue that every human act is ultimately selfish are wrong.

The most obvious objection to the selfish hypothesis is, that, as it is contrary to common feeling and our most unprejudiced notions, there is required the highest stretch of philosophy to establish so extraordinary a paradox.<sup>4</sup>

We can find countless cases of people acting selflessly, even if we only consider our own personal experiences. Human beings are obviously very concerned about their interests, but it is also fundamental to human nature to care about other people's needs. "The degrees of these sentiments may be the subject of controversy; but the reality of their existence, one should think, must be admitted in every theory or system."<sup>5</sup>

Hume's main opponent in this debate is Mandeville, and he not only wants to disprove Mandeville's argument about the degree of human selfishness, he also wishes to show that Mandeville is wrong when he claims that the rules of a civilized society were posited by the self-interested machinations of "great" legislators. In this paper I will argue that the rejection of the selfish claim is only true when Hume establishes the origin of the moral sentiments, but in the case of everyday situations he explicitly states that self-interest is the strongest motivational force. The fact that we are capable of being selfless does not mean that we are not ultimately selfish – hence the need for a virtue in order to "regulate" our selfishness, and the need for a government based on such a virtue to regulate a community.

### **Moral decisions are not derived from self-interest**

Moral decisions are based on sentiments and not reasoning, because these decisions have to evoke actions, and reason on its own is not capable of doing that. As Hume famously put it: "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."<sup>6</sup>

Hume is aware of the difficulties that follow such a statement. If we reject reason as the basis of morality and argue that our passions are playing this role instead, we have to be able to prove that it is still possible for a moral decision to be objective, even though our sentiments are on many occasions misleading; or they make it easy for us to let our feelings compromise our decisions. Hume argues that we are capable of correcting these problems if we make our decisions based on the situations themselves, regardless of the connections that we might have with any of the parties involved.

In order to arrive at a correct moral conclusion we (1) have to always judge the character trait which functioned as the cause of the action, (2) this trait has to be an integral part of the agent's character,<sup>7</sup> but it also has to be either blameworthy or praiseworthy on its own, and (3) we have to arrive at a correct analysis of the situation. Hume refers to these three steps as judging the situation from the "common point of view". Moral evaluations are spontaneous emotional reactions to a situation at first: they are special forms of praise or blame. When these sentiments are

reoccurring, we recognize the similarities of these feelings, and this recognition of resemblance leads us to create the concepts of virtue and vice. Having these concepts allows us to judge complex moral situations correctly. Moral sentiments are typically calm feelings, and although we have to always try to distance ourselves from the situations as much as possible, this does not automatically mean that our judgments are not based on our actual feelings.<sup>8</sup>

In *A Treatise of Human Nature* (henceforth *Treatise*), Hume states that the key to a correct moral decision is to identify all the relevant aspects of the situation, and we have to have an understanding of the process of *how* the mind creates these decisions. In *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (henceforth *Enquiry*), it is more important for him to explain *why* we praise or blame a certain trait. According to Hume, we judge something morally right because we recognize its usefulness. Something being useful means that it is a means to an end, and if we praise something for being useful it means that the end in itself is praiseworthy.

This statement about the usefulness of virtues is not the equivalent of Mandeville's statement about the role that virtue plays in a social setting. Mandeville argues that the sole purpose of our virtues is to help the government control people. Hume argues that it is wrong to interpret virtues as nothing more than tools for a government, because you can only force moral behavior if the people are capable of acting according to its principles. We have to have some form of a moral rule implanted in us in order for this control to be effective. Education has an important role in shaping our moral character, but it cannot create it all by itself. We are inherently moral beings, and as such we praise those traits that are useful for the agents themselves or for the society in which they carry out their actions. The emphasis placed on this usefulness does not mean that virtues are means to satisfy our selfish needs, but rather that they are praised based on the effect they have on society, regardless of our personal preferences. Notice, however, that failing to equate the purpose of our virtues with the needs of a functioning government does not amount to the denial of any kind of connections between virtues and governance: as it will be shown later, social settings do require the cultivation of certain virtues that would not manifest themselves naturally, and they do play a part in successful governance. What Hume is opposed to regarding Mandeville's account is the *exclusivity* of such an assertion: besides being helpful concerning the workings of a political machinery, virtues have other important characteristics as well. "[W]e must renounce the theory, which accounts for every moral sentiment by the principle of self-love. We must adopt a more public affection, and allow, that the interests of society are not, even on their own account, entirely indifferent to us."<sup>9</sup>

All mankind so far resemble the good principle, that, where interest or revenge or envy perverts not our disposition, we are always inclined, from our natural philanthropy, to give the preference to the happiness of society, and consequently to virtue above its opposite.<sup>10</sup>

Human nature is naturally philanthropic, and some degree of concern for the interest of a society is a part of us. "The degrees of these sentiments may be the

subject of controversy; but the reality of their existence, one should think, must be admitted in every theory or system.”<sup>11</sup> According to Hume, benevolence is a basic human quality and as such it cannot be denied. Philosophers who try to argue against this can be easily disproved based on our experiences. Even though Hume, especially in the second *Enquiry*, urges us to give more credit to human nature and accept its good qualities together with the bad ones, this does not mean that he had been overly optimistic about the strength of such feelings. It can be argued that despite the fact that he denied that all our actions could be explained based on self-interested motives, he also accepted that self-interest is the strongest motivational force of human nature – and was not blind to the implications of such a statement regarding the coexistence of a large number of people in a social setting.

### **The relation between selfishness and altruism**

In order to understand Hume's point of view about the selfish human nature that he emphasizes, we have to take a closer look at his theory about justice as an artificial virtue and the way he explains the origins of government. The rules of justice are particularly important in this case, because, as we will see, Hume explains their existence entirely from an egoistic point of view. It is worth noting here that this statement is only true if we are considering justice as a combination of rules that regulate the institute of ownership, and not as a virtue. This distinction was made by Hume himself in order to explain the origins of such a virtue.

Hume famously argues that justice is an artificial virtue, by which he means that justice is only important to us because we live in a society, not merely because we are humans. The existence of this virtue makes it possible for a large number of people to live in relatively peaceful communities, and it is important solely for this reason. If we changed the human conditions, we would end up modifying the need for justice as well. Justice is artificial because its existence depends on the specific circumstances that humans face, and also because its usefulness for the society is the sole reason for its approval. There is no independent quality in human nature that would explain why we praise people who behave justly.<sup>12</sup> Justice only exists because at some point we realized that in order to keep the peace in an ever growing community, we have to have rules that secure ownership. According to Hume, unregulated ownership is the biggest threat for a society, because there are not enough goods available for everybody, and people have an overwhelming desire for possessions. If we could create rules that ensure the security of ownership, we could find the solution to keep the community growing. Without the rules of justice, a society cannot continue to exist, and even though Hume states that we care about the interests of our society, this concern is not a strong enough reason to explain why we approve the existence of these rules. These rules are much too complex to be completely legitimized based on our natural ability to care for others.

Our goodwill is limited, which is also the case with the goods that are available for us. People care for one another, although only in a very limited sense of the word, and this care is usually reserved for only those people whom we actually know. These two conditions are the biggest threats a peaceful society has to face, and there is only one of them that could in any way be changed. It is impossible to make

everything that is valued in a community available to everybody. Consequently it is pointless or even dangerous<sup>13</sup> to try to solve this problem. But if we concentrate on a difficulty that arises because of our selfish nature, there might be something that could be done to improve our condition.

We have seen above that Hume argued against egoism being taken to be the main characteristic of human nature, but this does not mean that he was not concerned about the overwhelming number of cases when people do act selfishly. He goes as far as to state that there is no other sentiment that can oppose the sheer motivational force of this one:

It is certain, that no affection of the human mind has both a sufficient force, and a proper direction to counterbalance the love of gain, and render men fit members of society, by making them abstain from the possessions of others. Benevolence to strangers is too weak for this purpose; and as to the other passions, they rather inflame this avidity, when we observe, that the larger our possessions are, the more ability we have of gratifying all our appetites. There is no passion, therefore, capable of controlling the interested affection.<sup>14</sup>

Our selfishness motivates us to acquire as much fortune as possible. We cannot see past the need to have everything that we desire. At the same time, we are also rational beings capable of recognizing that we cannot hold on to what we have all by ourselves, because everybody else wants to have and hold on to the same things. A system where everybody's main purpose is to constantly acquire more goods cannot be sustained. This realization leads us to consider limiting or controlling our desires in order to satisfy them. It would serve our desires better if we could safely and securely have what we want for a long period of time – instead of accumulating possessions that we ultimately cannot keep.

The rules of justice are the ones that make the secure ownership of goods possible.<sup>15</sup> If we were able to focus on our long-term needs instead of our “momentary” desires, we could realize how important these rules are. Thus, we create rules that may very well limit our ability to have everything that we want, but ones that at the same time make it safer for us to enjoy what we have. That is the reason why we start to appreciate these rules and praise the ones who act according to them.

In this explanation Hume shows us how our selfishness changes directions and steers us towards acting according to the rules of justice. If we could recognize and keep in mind what our true needs are, we would end up wanting to have these rules, simply because we could serve our own interests better with their help. Hume argues that our selfishness cannot be controlled, for it is too strong – it can, however, be directed towards our long-term needs, in order for us to harness its power. That way, our selfishness will ultimately end up controlling itself.

There is no passion, therefore, capable of controlling the interested affection, but the very affection itself, by an alteration of its direction. Now this alteration must necessarily take place upon the least

reflection; since it is evident, that the passion is much better satisfied by its restraint, than by its liberty, and that in preserving society, we make much greater advances in the acquiring possessions, than in the solitary and forlorn condition, which must follow upon violence and an universal licence. [...] For whether the passion of self-interest be esteemed vicious or virtuous, it is all a case; since itself alone restrains it: So that if it be virtuous, men become social by their virtue; if vicious, their vice has the same effect. <sup>16</sup>

The motivational force behind the existence of justice is our selfishness. If we could somehow be more concerned with other people's needs, or the availability of goods would be different, we would not need to have a virtue like this. Considering who we are and also the circumstances we are in, we have to find a way to control our selfish nature. The only way to do so is to shift its focus to take our long-term needs into account. This kind of “shift” is completely natural to us, because we have always been a part of some form of community. Our original community is our family, and as a member of our family we have been brought up with a sense of community and we have learned to appreciate what this community can do for us. Ever since we were born, we have been constantly reminded of how beneficial it is for us to have a group of people around us.

When the community is small, it is easy to recognize the usefulness of justice, but the growth of the community is threatening from this aspect, since it makes it harder to realize why these rules should be beneficial for the individual. If we act unjustly, the effect of such an action is immediate and easily recognizable in small communities. But as a society grows, it becomes more and more difficult to see the negative consequences that our actions might bring about. In an original (small) community, it is easy to make people realize that it is in their interest to act according to the rules of justice, and this recognition is strong enough to motivate us. In a complex society, the rules of justice can become less powerful, since their motivational power comes from a realization that it is in our interest to act according to them – a realization much harder to arrive at when a community's interests are less immediately taken to reflect our own. We lose the connection between the rule-following behavior and the interests of the society.

But when society has become numerous, and has increased to a tribe or nation, this interest is more remote; nor do men so readily perceive, that disorder and confusion follow upon every breach of these rules, as in a more narrow and contracted society.<sup>17</sup>

Without this connection, or the acknowledgement of it, we cannot live together. We have to be able to see how important these rules are for the whole community, and we have to obey them exactly for this reason, even in cases when we feel that it would be better to simply do whatever it is we want to do. A government, if it were to successfully lead a larger group of people, should take all of the above into consideration – since basing governance on how people *do* act in their everyday

lives, and what kind of virtues *actually* motivate their actions is better than anchoring it to an idealistic view of how they *should* act based on an imperfect concept of human nature.

It is very important to note at this point that this reconstruction of the origins of justice is concerned with the rules of justice and not the virtue of it. Hume makes a clear distinction between the two, although this distinction is more pronounced in the *Treatise*. There, when he talks about the rules of justice and how they emerge through history, he gives a rather egoistic explanation. It is arguable that if we take a closer look at what he says about human nature in the *Treatise*, we get a more pessimistic description of it as opposed to the one we can find in the second *Enquiry*.<sup>18</sup> This statement is true if we are only considering justice as a set of rules, but in the case of justice as a virtue, both books state that we praise the virtue of justice because it is beneficial for a society as a whole. Justice does not necessarily help us satisfy our individual needs, but the whole system is beneficial for the continued existence of society – and because of that, it is beneficial for us.

This distinction between “justice as a set of rules” and “justice as a virtue” shows us how Hume can claim that we are selfish to the point where this characteristic can only be controlled by itself, and at the same time also accentuate that we have the ability to care for other people. Hume says that there was a time (or maybe it is more correct to say that it is possible that there was a time) when the whole system was working correctly because we were able to see how it served our interests.<sup>19</sup>

Problems arise when we are no longer in the possession of such knowledge. This happens when the community gets to the point where the consequences of any wrongdoing do not occur immediately. Hume argues that this is the point where the egoistic explanation fails, because we can prove that we still act justly even though it is not directly beneficial for us, or sometimes it runs even contrary to our interests. Considering justice as a virtue, it is no longer a difficulty to explain why we are praising such actions. It is clear at this point that when we are in the territory of morals, Hume leaves the egoistic explanation behind.

Thus self-interest is the original motive to the establishment of justice: but a sympathy with public interest is the source of the moral approbation, which attends that virtue.<sup>20</sup>

Considering that Hume states that selfish explanations cannot be held, since it is not possible to explain every single situation based on them, it seems curious why he opts to begin his explanation emphasizing our selfishness. In order to answer this question we have to consider that although Hume says that we are capable of caring for other people or for the society in general, we are fundamentally selfish. The notion of rational self-interest is the evidence of that.

The only way to control this self-interest is to rationalize it: to make it focus on our long-term needs. Stating that there is no other possibility to avoid the difficulties that are caused by this quality has to mean that human nature cannot be saved from or cured of this selfishness. Selfishness can only be directed towards a

more acceptable goal, but it cannot be vanquished altogether. Hume even asserts that it is impossible to change anything significant in human nature, lending even more weight to his argument.

Men are not able radically to cure, either in themselves or others, that narrowness of soul, which makes them prefer the present to the remote. They cannot change their natures;<sup>21</sup>

And indeed, did the success of their designs depend upon their success in correcting the selfishness and ingratitude of men, they would never make any progress, unless aided by omnipotence, which is alone able to new-mould the human mind, and change its character in such fundamental articles. All they can pretend to, is, to give a new direction to those natural passions.<sup>22</sup>

We are self-centered, and there is only a limited number of occasions when we put somebody else's needs first. We do not create the rules of justice in order to help others, but for the sake of our own interests, and because of that they cannot be portrayed as proofs of our moral evolution. Hume denies that we can find in ourselves a strong enough interest in other people's needs to overcome our selfishness, and, even stronger than that, he also denies that this level of care could ever be achieved. That is the only way to explain why rational self-interest is the motivational force behind obeying the rules of justice. Considering how Hume holds that only a well-informed selfishness can be strong enough to control itself, we have to conclude that Hume does not think it possible for our benevolent nature to overcome our selfishness on its own.

It is worth noting that this strongly egoistic interpretation of human nature is only evident based on the *Treatise*, while Hume's later writings on the topic are more optimistic. The fact that he only emphasizes the distinction between the rules and the virtue of justice in the *Treatise* and not in the second *Enquiry* could be the explanation for this distinction. The *Enquiry* was supposed to be the essay-version of the third book of the *Treatise*, and there should have been no significant differences between the two. Regardless of Hume's original intentions,<sup>23</sup> there are alterations in the later text, one of which concerns the source of moral sentiments regarding justice as a virtue.

The original source of praise for justice in the *Enquiry* is the fact that it is useful to act in such a way. Praising something for being useful means two things: (1) it is the suitable means to an end, and (2) the end could be praiseworthy on its own. We evaluate the virtue of justice as morally right because it is useful for the society as a whole, and we as humans cannot help but feel joy if we see the community flourish.

We must renounce the theory, which accounts for every moral sentiment by the principle of self-love. We must adopt a more public affection, and allow, that the interests of society are not, even on their own account, entirely indifferent to us. Usefulness is only a tendency



to a certain end; and it is a contradiction in terms, that anything pleases as means to an end, where the end itself no wise affects us. If usefulness, therefore, be a source of moral sentiment, and if this usefulness be not always considered with a reference to self; it follows, that everything, which contributes to the happiness of society, recommends itself directly to our approbation and goodwill.<sup>24</sup>

Hume argues that we do not praise justice because it is useful for us, but because it is useful for the society, even though he explicitly denied the existence of such public affections in the *Treatise*, which was exactly the reason why he claimed that the original source of praising justice is rational self-interest. This difference between the two texts leads to the conclusion that Hume is more pessimistic about human nature in his early writings than he is in his later texts. It can be argued that the only reason why this shift is so apparent is because Hume is much more concerned with dismissing the egoistic explanation of the origins of morals in the second *Enquiry*, and to prove that our natural benevolence is much stronger than the egoistic explanation might lead us to believe.<sup>25</sup> Those who try to argue that this shift towards benevolence from selfishness is not as significant as it seems generally argue that there is proof of the existence of this level of care for other people in the *Treatise* as well.<sup>26</sup>

Even if we take into consideration that the egoistic explanation is only true when Hume talks about the origins of the rules of justice, and that even in the *Treatise* he states that the virtue of justice cannot be explained by egoistic means, it seems that our selfishness cannot be ignored. This is evident in the *Treatise*, but considering what he says about the origins of government in the second *Enquiry*, we can find more ways to argue for the strength of egoism that Hume allows us to have.

It seems that the benevolence in our nature is very moderate: it exists but is not strong enough in itself. In the *Treatise*, it cannot ever be stronger than our selfishness, and even in the second *Enquiry*, where it is much more apparent, it can persuade our will on only very few occasions, and it is much more likely that we ignore it altogether. This is especially true if we live in a larger society, for in that case, the temptations are too strong for us to ignore our interests and we cannot see the true consequences of our actions. Our care for the interests of the society is not strong enough to hold our selfish impulses back: we know what we should do, but it is very difficult for us to constantly keep in mind what our true interests are.

Had every man sufficient SAGACITY to perceive, at all times, the strong interest which binds him to the observance of justice and equity, and STRENGTH OF MIND sufficient to persevere in a steady adherence to a general and a distant interest, in opposition to the allurements of present pleasure and advantage; there had never, in that case, been any such thing as government or political society, but each man, following his natural liberty, had lived in entire peace and harmony with all others.<sup>27</sup>

### Selfish theory in politics

The fact that our natural benevolence and care for other people's needs is not strong enough is precisely the reason why we need a government, why we need to appoint specific people to always put the needs of the society first. In the second *Enquiry*, it is very important for Hume to argue for the existence of benevolence in our nature, but this does not mean that he no longer thinks that this benevolence is limited. He speaks about this benevolence being undeniable,<sup>28</sup> and the fact that this emotion cannot be denied is enough for him to argue against the egoistic view of morals. When it comes to everyday situations, however, he is much more careful, and accepts the fact that our self-interest is stronger than our care for the interests of other people in most cases.

One may venture to affirm, that there is no human nature, to whom the appearance of happiness (where envy or revenge has no place) does not give pleasure, that of misery, uneasiness. This seems inseparable from our make and constitution. But they are only more generous minds, that are thence prompted to seek zealously the good of others, and to have a real passion for their welfare.<sup>29</sup>

The limited role that benevolence *de facto* plays in our lives is the reason why we need political government: to help people always keep in mind what the right thing to do actually is. This is not only evident in the *Treatise*, but as we have seen, it is also spelled out in the second *Enquiry* as well. Taking a look at Hume's essays about political government enables us to find more evidence for the limited role he reserves for benevolence: "But much more frequently, he is seduced from his great and important, but distant interests, by the allurements of present, though often very frivolous temptations. This great weakness is incurable in human nature."<sup>30</sup>

Political writers have established it as a maxim, that, in contriving any system of government, and fixing the several checks and controuls of the constitution, every man ought to be supposed a knave, and to have no other end, in all his actions, than private interest. By this interest we must govern him [...] It is, therefore, a just political maxim, that every man must be supposed a knave: Though at the same time, it appears somewhat strange, that a maxim should be true in politics, which is false in fact.<sup>31</sup>

Sovereigns must take mankind as they find them, and cannot pretend to introduce any violent change in their principles and ways of thinking. [...] It is his best policy to comply with the common bent of mankind, and give it all the improvements of which it is susceptible.<sup>32</sup>

The fact that our benevolence is limited does not weaken Hume's attack against the egoistic explanation of moral decisions. In order to refuse the conclusion

of egoism he only has to prove that this emotion exists, and the fact that we do not always act according to this benevolence does not affect his conclusion. If every single one of us is capable of acting selflessly at least on one occasion, then it does not matter how many other times we put our interests first. Having the potential to act selflessly is much more important for Hume than the number of occasions when we actually do so.

This explains his egoistic tendencies in his political writings, where he is not necessarily concerned with giving an accurate depiction of human nature – he wishes instead to base his theory on how we actually behave. The fact that our benevolence is limited is the reason why laws in general should be created – based on the assumption that our interests will ultimately determine our behavior. It is much more reasonable to create policies based on such an anthropological standpoint,<sup>33</sup> because if we consider self-interest to be our strongest motivational force, human behavior becomes predictable as well as reliable. If we always assumed that goodwill and benevolence are our main guiding forces, we would be more likely to face almost constant disappointment.

Stating that it is acceptable for politicians to expect the worst of people confirms that Hume is much more pessimistic about human nature than it may seem based on his dismissal of the egoistic explanation of morality. We have seen earlier how he states that our selfishness cannot be “cured,” that it can only be steered towards a more amiable direction, which is the reason why he identifies rational self-interest as the original motivational force behind the emergence of the virtue of justice. Even if the argument loses some of its force if we take what he says in the second *Enquiry* into consideration as well, we can still find limitations in his account regarding what we could accomplish based on our benevolence. There are no selfish reasons for the praise of justice as a virtue, because we ultimately praise it for its usefulness in the maintenance of societal bonds. This usefulness, however, also means that we need to have this virtue especially for the reason that our natural benevolence is limited in its scope. If that would not be the case, if benevolence would be stronger than our self-interest, we would not need to have such a virtue at all.

## Conclusion

This depiction of human nature, and of the sentiments that motivate our actions and ultimately give rise to our moral virtues is very much in accord with how political realism pictures us as agents and subjects. Summarizing a thoroughly realist view of human nature, Spegele (1996) writes that “the excessive quantity of sheer self-concern which permeates all human relationships points up the overriding need for social organizations – and in particular the state;”<sup>34</sup> the need to establish supra-individual forces in order to overpower the individual ones. Most 20th century realists (most notably, Hans Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr)<sup>35</sup> would certainly agree that self-preservation and self-interest are the basic driving factors that prompt us to act, and that any anthropology that paints a picture of humanity as a collective comprised of intrinsically altruistic beings is inescapably idealistic. The usual point of reference in British intellectual history concerning such ideas, however, is the body of work of Thomas Hobbes, not of David Hume.

Hume, being generally dismissive of both overwhelmingly egoistic explanations of morality and of social-contract theories, is certainly not the advocate of radical pessimism concerning human nature, but his treatment of analyzing justice as an *artificial* virtue elegantly lends itself to realist interpretations. Human nature, after all, need not be the receptacle of exclusively negative characteristics in order to contrast it with its idealistic “counter-concept:” just as it was enough for Hume to show the *possibility* of benevolent acts to argue against egoistic explanations, it is enough to point out how his insistence on our selfishness and potential blindness to the needs of others successfully undermines the idealistic view of human nature.<sup>36</sup> And although his account is more optimistic than that of Machiavelli’s or Hobbes’s, his depiction of the genesis of justice as our most important artificial virtue is very much in line with realist thought in political theory.

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## References

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- 2 “Let us suppose such a person ever so selfish; let private interest have ingrossed ever so much his attention; yet in instances, where that is not concerned, he must unavoidably feel SOME propensity to the good of mankind,” Hume, D., *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. T. L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), section 5. part II.24.
- 3 The fact that it is not possible to single out one sentiment as a source of morality lead Gill to argue that Hume's theory about human nature is progressive and, according to this interpretation, both the moral sense theorists, such as Francis Hutcheson and Lord Shaftesbury, and the egoists equally rely on an oversimplifying definition of human nature. Gill, M. B., “Hume's Progressive View of Human Nature”, *Hume Studies* 26 (2000): 87-108.
- 4 Hume, D., (1998), appendix 2.
- 5 Hume, D., (1998), section 5. part II. 24
- 6 Hume, D., (2000), II/III/3, 4.
- 7 Hume not only argues that we have to base our judgments on the agent's trait but he also says that, in order to determine whether this trait actually correctly represents the agent, we have to consider the opinion of the agent's social circle. C. M. Korsgaard argues that this addition is needed in order to guarantee that we are able to judge the situation correctly. Korsgaard, C. M., “The General Point of View: Love and Moral Approval in Hume's Ethics”, *Hume Studies* 25 (1999): 3-41, 25.
- 8 About the defense of moral judgments as actual feelings see Cohon, R., “The Common Point of View in Hume's Ethics”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 57 (1997): 827-850.
- 9 Hume, D., (1998), section 5. part II. 2.
- 10 Hume, D., (1998), section 5. part II. 25.
- 11 Hume, D., (1998), section 5. part II. 24.
- 12 According to several interpretations the fact that Hume denies the existence of such a quality means more than stating that justice is artificial: it actually means that it is not a virtue. See Harrison, J., *Hume's Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981); Cohon, R., *Hume's Morality. Feeling and Fabrication* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Stroud, B., *Hume* (London: Routledge, 1977); Snare, F., *Morals, Motivation and Convention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

- 13 “But historians, and even common sense, may inform us, that, however specious these ideas of PERFECT equality may seem, they are really, at bottom, IMPRACTICABLE; and were they not so, would be extremely PERNICIOUS to human society.” Hume, D., (1998), section 3. part II. 5.
- 14 Hume, D., (2000), III/II/2. 12.
- 15 G.J Postema argues that this definition of justice as an instrument to secure ownership is influenced by the legal system of ancient Rome. See Postema, G. J., “Whence Avidity? Hume's Psychology and the Origins of Justice”, *Synthese* 152 (2006): 371-391.
- 16 Hume, D., (2000), III/II/2. 12-13.
- 17 Hume, D., (2000), III/II/2 24.
- 18 One of the reasons why Hume slightly changed his theory was the negative response he had received after the *Treatise* was first published. See Wright, J. P., “The *Treatise*: Composition, Reception and Response”, in *The Blackwell Guide to Hume's Treatise*, ed. S. Traiger (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 5-25.
- 19 “The same self-love, therefore, which renders men so incommodious to each other, taking a new and more convenient direction, produces the rules of justice, and is the *first* motive of their observance.” Hume, D., (2000), III/II/8. 5., italics added.
- 20 Hume, D., (2000), III/II/2. 23.
- 21 Hume, D., (2000), III/II/7. 6.
- 22 Hume, D., (2000), III/II/65. 9.
- 23 Greig, J. Y. T., (ed.), *Letters of David Hume Volume 2* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 158.
- 24 Hume, D., (1998), section 5. part II. 2.
- 25 Similarly argued by Taylor, J., “Hume's Later Moral Philosophy”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, ed. D. F. Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 316. According to her interpretation, the only reason why this change seems so significant is because of the editorial differences between the two texts.
- 26 See Debes, R., “Humanity, Sympathy and the Puzzle of Hume's Second Enquiry”, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 15 (2007): 27-57; Vitz, R., “Hume and the Limits of Benevolence”, *Hume Studies* 28 (2002): 271-295.
- 27 Hume, D., (1998), section 4. 1.
- 28 “Let us suppose such a person ever so selfish; let private interest have ingrossed ever so much his attention; yet in instances, where that is not concerned, he must unavoidably feel SOME propensity to the good of mankind,” Hume, D., (1998), section 5. part II.24.
- 29 Hume, D., (1998), section 6. fn. 1.
- 30 Hume, D., *Essays: Moral, Political, Literary*, ed. E. F. Miller (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund Press, 1985), 37.
- 31 Hume, D., (1985), 42.
- 32 Hume, D., (1985), 260.
- 33 Östbring, B., “David Hume and Contemporary Realism in Political Theory” (2012), [Online] Available via <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2147689>, cited 11.03.2016.; and Church, J., “Selfish and Moral Politics: David Hume on Stability and Cohesion in the Modern State”, *Journal of Politics* 69/1 (2007): 169-181.
- 34 Spegele, R. D., *Political Realism in International Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 128.
- 35 See, for example, Morgenthau, H. J., *The Concept of the Political*, eds. H. Behr, F. Rösch (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Niebuhr, R., *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1932).
- 36 Some have argued for a more thoroughly realist assessment of Hume's thought – besides Östbring, B., (2012), Whelan's account of juxtaposing Machiavellian and Humean insights is

worth mentioning here. See Whelan, F. G., *Hume and Machiavelli. Political Realism and Liberal Thought* (Boulder: Lexington Press, 2004).