

An Enquiry into the Sources of Morals

David Hume

1751

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Larger omissions are reported within square brackets, in normal-sized type.—Hume’s title for this work is *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. In his day a ‘principle’ was often not a kind of •proposition but rather a •‘source of activity’ or •‘activator’ or the like. On page 3 he calls morality an ‘active principle’, and on page 29 he writes that a certain ‘principle still exerts its active energy’—he isn’t talking about the active energy of a *proposition*! This sense of ‘principle’ is what is meant in the title of this work, which on pages 4, 56 and 65 Hume describes as an enquiry into ‘the origin of morals’.

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Section 4. Political society

If everyone were •intelligent and wise enough to perceive at all times how strongly his interests are served by the observance [meaning *his* observance] of justice and equity, and were •strong-minded enough to keep steadily focussed on his over-all *long-term* interests rather than being diverted by the enticements of *present* pleasure and advantage, there would never have been any such thing as government or political society. In the situation as I have described it, each man would have lived in entire peace and harmony with everyone else—doing this in the exercise of his natural liberty, ·with no constraints from governmental laws·. What need is there for man-made laws, when unaided natural justice is a sufficient restraint? If nothing ever goes wrong, why have judges? Why curtail our natural freedom when *all* our uses of it are found to be innocent and beneficial? Obviously, if there no way for government to be in the least useful, it wouldn't exist; the whole basis for the duty of allegiance ·to the government of one's country· is the good that government does for society by preserving peace and order among mankind.

·LAWS OF NATIONS·

When a number of political societies are formed, and they maintain a thick web of interactions amongst themselves, it is immediately found that a new set of rules would be useful in that situation; so such rules come into existence, under the title 'laws of nations'. Examples include

- Ambassadors are not to be harmed in any way.
- Poisoned weapons are not to be used.
- A soldier in battle is not to be immediately killed if he surrenders.

These rules and others of that kind are plainly calculated for the advantage of states and kingdoms in their inter-relations.

The rules of justice that apply among •individuals are not entirely suspended among •political societies. All rulers claim to respect the rights of other rulers, and no doubt *some* of them can say this without hypocrisy. Alliances and treaties are constantly being made between independent states, and this would be a mere waste of parchment if it hadn't been found that treaties etc. have *some* influence and authority. But here is the difference between kingdoms and individuals. •Human nature can't possibly survive without the association of individuals; and that association can exist only if some respect is paid to the laws of equity and justice. Disorder, confusion, the war of all against all, are the inevitable upshot of such licentious conduct ·as would occur if equity and justice had no place·. •Nations, on the other hand, can survive without having relations with one another. They can even survive, to some extent, under a general war. Though respect for justice is useful among states, it isn't as necessary ·or useful· there as it is among individuals; and corresponding to that lessened usefulness is a lessened degree of moral obligation. All politicians and most philosophers will allow that in particular emergencies 'reasons of state' may justify dispensing with the rules of justice, ·unilaterally· invalidating some treaty or alliance the strict observance of which would be very harmful to either of the contracting parties. But it is generally agreed that nothing less than the most extreme necessity can justify individuals in a breach of promise or an invasion of the properties of others.

In a confederated commonwealth, such as the ancient Achaean republic ·in Greece·, or today's Swiss Cantons and United Provinces [= the Netherlands], the league has a

special utility, and so the conditions of union have a special sacredness and authority, and a violation of them would be regarded as being *at least* as criminal as any private injury or injustice.

·CHASTITY·

The long and helpless infancy of a human being requires that the parents work together for the care of their young, and this collaboration requires the virtue of chastity, i.e. fidelity to the marriage bed. You'll agree that if chastity weren't useful in that way it would never have been thought of as a virtue.⁴

Sexual infidelity in marriage is much more harmful in women than in men. That's why the laws of chastity are much stricter over the female sex than over the male.

These rules are all connected with procreation; yet they are supposed to apply to women who are past child-bearing as much as to those in the flower of their youth and beauty. General rules are often extended beyond their original source, and this is true in all matters of taste and sentiment. [The *starred passage* expands what Hume wrote in ways that the ·small dots· convention can't easily indicate.] *It is agreed that our ideas about personal beauty arise very much from ideas of utility. An example might be this: we see a hump-back as ugly, basically because we think of such a hump as an obstacle to activity, to doing well in life—the opposite of useful. Now consider this story that has come out of France: during a stock-market surge in Paris, a hump-backed fellow went every day to the street where the stock-brokers gather, and was well paid for letting them use his hump as a desk on

which to sign their contracts. So *his* hump was thoroughly useful. But would the money that he made in this way turn him into a handsome fellow? No. The imagination is influenced by associations of ideas; and even if a given association initially arose from the judgment—such as the association of *hump-backed* with *ugly*, mediated by the judgment that humped backs are not useful—it isn't easily altered by particular exceptions that we come across. That could explain our hostility to sexual infidelity in women who are past child-bearing age.* There is also something else we can add: if older women were free to be unchaste, their example would be harmful to the younger ones; if women could always look forward to a time when they would be at liberty to indulge themselves in this way, it would be natural for them to bring that time closer, i.e. not to wait, and to think more lightly of this whole duty that is in fact so much needed by society.

·INCEST·

Members of a single family living together have such frequent opportunities for licence of this kind [Hume's exact phrase] that nothing could preserve purity of manners if marriage or any sexual relationship were allowed between people who are closely related to one another. Incest, therefore, being especially harmful in its effects, is regarded as especially wicked and morally ugly. ·And some of the details of the anti-incest morality can also be explained in terms of consequences, as I shall now show·.

Why did the laws of Athens allow a man to marry a half-sister (**1**) who had the same father as he did, but not

⁴ Plato's only answer to objections raised against the community of women that is established in his imaginary commonwealth is this: 'It was a good saying, and still is, that what is useful is fair, what is useless is ugly' (*Republic* 5 457). There can't be any doubt about this where *public* usefulness is concerned—and that was Plato's topic. Indeed, what other point is there to all the ideas of chastity and modesty? Phaedrus writes: 'Unless what we do is useful, the glory of it is nil'. Plutarch writes: 'Nothing that is harmful is beautiful.' The Stoics thought the same. [Hume quotes Sextus Empiricus as reporting this about the Stoics. He quotes Phaedrus in Latin, Sextus in Greek, and Plato and Plutarch in both.]

a half-sister (2) who had the same mother? Plainly for this reason: The manners of the Athenians were so reserved that a man was never allowed to approach the women's part of any house, even the house of a close relative, except when he was paying a visit to his own mother. His step-mother and her children—including the half-sister (1)—were as much shut up from him as the women of any other family, so that there was as little danger of any unlawful sexual relations between him and them as between him and any other women; whereas a half-sister (2) with whom he shared a mother would be someone he had grown up with and seen countless times. For a similar reason, uncles and nieces were allowed to marry at Athens. But the permitted-in-Athens marriages that I have mentioned were not permitted in Rome, where relations between the sexes were more open. Public utility is the cause of all these variations.

·OTHER KINDS OF IMMORAL CONDUCT·

If something that doesn't do a man credit escapes his lips in private conversation, or if he says it in a private letter, it is highly blameworthy to repeat it to anyone else. The free and social interactions of minds would be seriously inhibited if such rules of trustworthiness were not established.

Even in passing on gossip from which we can't foresee any harm resulting, it is regarded as a piece of indiscretion, if not of immorality, to tell whom we got the story from. As these stories are passed from hand to hand they are altered in various ways; and they often reach the persons concerned—the persons they are *about*—and produce animosities and quarrels among people whose intentions were entirely innocent and inoffensive.

To pry into secrets, to open or even read the letters of others, to spy on their words and looks and actions—what practices are more trouble-making in society? What habits, therefore, are more blameable?

This principle [see note on title page] of the well-being of society is also the basis for most of the laws of good *manners*—a kind of lesser morality that aims at the ease of company and conversation. Too much ceremony is blamed; so is too little; and anything that promotes ease, without an indecent familiarity, is useful and praiseworthy.

It is commendable to be constant in one's friendships, attachments and familiarities, and this is needed to support trust and good relations in society. But in places where people come together casually in some pursuit of health and pleasure, public convenience doesn't require such constancy; it is customary to encourage unreserved conversation in such contexts by granting the privilege of then dropping one's casual acquaintance, without this being a breach of civility or good manners.

·THE MORALITY OF LESSER 'SOCIETIES'·

Even in societies with utterly immoral foundations, ones that are the most destructive to the interests of the general society, there have to be certain rules that the members are constrained to observe by a sort of false honour as well as by private self-interest. Robbers and pirates, it has often been remarked, couldn't maintain their harmful confederacy if they didn't establish a new distributive justice among themselves, calling into force among themselves the laws of equity they have violated with the rest of mankind.

I hate a drinking companion, says the Greek proverb, *who never forgets*. The follies of the last drinking spree should be buried in eternal oblivion, so as to give full scope to the follies of the next one! . . .

In any society or club that exists for the purpose of playing some game, there have to be laws governing how the game is played; and these laws are different for different games. The basis for such societies is admittedly frivolous, and the laws are to a great extent (though not entirely)

capricious and arbitrary. That creates an important difference between these laws and the rules of justice, fidelity and loyalty; because the latter are required for there to be general societies of men, which are absolutely requisite for the survival of the species. . . . So there is only a very limited likeness between the rules of games and the moral rules of society at large; all we can learn from it, probably, is that rules are necessary whenever men have *any* kind of relations with each other.

They can't even pass each other on the road without rules. Waggoners, coachmen and mounted couriers have principles governing who gives way to whom, and these are mainly

based on mutual ease and convenience. But some of them are arbitrary, or at least dependent on a kind of capricious analogy like many of the reasonings of lawyers.⁵. . . .

And it goes even further than that: men can't even *murder* each other without rules and maxims and an idea of justice and honour. War has its laws as well as peace; and even the kind of war-for-amusement that is carried on among wrestlers, boxers and gladiators is regulated by fixed principles. The people concerned have some interests in common, and thus a shared notion of what is useful; and from this there inevitably arises a standard of right and wrong among them.

Section 5. Why utility pleases

Part 1

We praise the social virtues because of their utility'—that's such a natural thought that one would expect to meet with it everywhere in moral writers, as the main basis for their reasoning and enquiry. In ordinary everyday life the utility of conduct is always appealed to, and we can't think of any greater eulogy to give to any man than •to display his usefulness to the public, and •list the services he has done

for mankind and society. Even our praise for the regularity and elegance of an inanimate form is conditional on those features' not destroying the thing's fitness for any useful purpose. And what a satisfactory apology we can make for any disproportion or seeming ugliness, if we can show that the feature in question was needed for the intended use! A ship appears more beautiful to an artist, or to anyone moderately skilled in navigation, if its prow is wider

⁵ One such rule is:

- The lighter machine must yield to the heavier, and •in machines of the same kind the empty one must yield to the one that is loaded.

This rule is based on *convenience*. Then there is this rule:

- Those who are going *to* the capital city have precedence over those who are coming *from* it.

This seems to be based on some idea of dignity of the great city, and of the preference for the future over the past (•which, if it is correct, brings this rule under the heading of 'arbitrary and capricious'.)

than its stern than it would if it were built with precise geometrical regularity. . . . If a building's doors and windows were exact squares, it would hurt the eye just because of that squareness, which is ill-adapted to the shape of a human being, for whose use the building was intended.

So it's not surprising that a man whose habits and conduct are harmful to society, and dangerous or harmful to everyone who has any connection with him, should for that reason be an object of disapproval, communicating to every spectator the strongest sentiment or ·feeling· of disgust and hatred.⁶

And yet these effects of usefulness or its contrary have not loomed large in philosophers' systems of ethics, and they have looked elsewhere for explanations of the origin of moral good and evil. Why? Perhaps it's because they found it hard to *account for* our attitude to usefulness. But if we have had experience that confirms the existence of a principle [see note on title page], we shouldn't reject it just because we can't give a satisfactory account of its origin, or show it to be a special case of some more general principle. As for our present topic, if we would just think about it for a little while we would find it easy enough to account for the influence that utility has ·on our feelings·, and to deduce it from ·more general· principles that are the best known, the most thoroughly recognized, in human nature.

·MORALITY'S BASIS IS NATURE, NOT INDOCTRINATION·

Ancient and modern sceptics have inferred from •the appar-

ent usefulness of the social virtues that •all moral distinctions arise from cultural influence, and that •they were first invented and then encouraged by the skill of politicians, so as to make men manageable and to subdue the natural ferocity and selfishness which had made them unfit for society. It's true that this principle of instruction and upbringing has a powerful influence, so that it can often **(1)** make the sentiments of approval or dislike greater or smaller than they would have been if left to nature; and sometimes it can even **(2)** create a new sentiment of approval or dislike, one that owes nothing to any natural principle—which is what happens in all superstitious practices and observances. But surely no thoughtful enquirer would think that *all* moral affection or dislike arises from this origin. If nature hadn't made *any* such distinction, based on the original constitution of the mind, language would not have contained the words 'honourable' and 'shameful', 'lovely' and 'odious', 'noble' and 'despicable'; and if politicians had invented these terms they could never have made them intelligible to anyone. So this paradox of •the sceptics is just very superficial. It isn't hard to fend off the nit-picking of •that sect in the context of politics and morals; it would be good if we deal with them as well in the context of the theoretical and less intelligible sciences of logic and metaphysics! So we have to acknowledge that the social virtues have a *natural* beauty and amiableness, which right from the outset—before any instruction or cultural input—attracts the respect and

⁶ We oughtn't to think that because an inanimate object (·a chair, say·) can be useful as well as a man, it ought to qualify for the label 'virtuous' as a man can. The sentiments aroused by utility are very different in the two cases. In the case of the man, the feelings are mixed with affection, respect, approval and so on, but not in the case of the chair. Similarly, the chair may have good colour and proportions, just as a human figure can. But can we ever be in love with the chair? There are many passions and sentiments of which thinking rational beings are the only proper objects, this being settled by the basic constitution of human nature; and if qualities that would arouse love and affection in a human being were transferred to an inanimate object, they wouldn't arouse the same sentiments. . . . A very small variation in the object, even when the same qualities are preserved, will destroy a sentiment. Thus, the beauty for which a man loves a woman, if transferred to a man, would not arouse an amorous passion except in cases where nature is extremely perverted.

affection of mankind. And because the chief source of the merit of these virtues is their public utility, it follows that the end that they tend to promote must be in some way agreeable to us, taking hold of some natural affection. Public utility must please—either for self-interested reasons or from more generous motives.

·THE SELF-INTEREST THEORY OF MORALITY·

It has often been maintained that because •every man has a strong connection with society, and sees that he can't possibly survive in isolation, he •favours all the habits or principles that promote order in society and give him the quiet possession of this priceless blessing, However much we value our own happiness and welfare, we must to that extent applaud the practice of justice and humanity, which is our only way of maintaining the social confederacy and getting for every man the advantages of mutual protection and assistance. This derivation of morals from a concern for one's own interests is an obvious thought, and it hasn't arisen wholly from the irresponsible teasing attacks of the sceptics. To mention no others, Polybius—one of the gravest and most judicious writers of antiquity, as well as one of the most moral—has traced all our sentiments of virtue to this selfish origin. (This is in Book 6, chapter 6, of his *Histories*.)⁷ But though the solid practical sense of that author, and his dislike of vain subtleties, give him considerable authority on the present subject, this isn't something to be settled by •authority, and the voice of •nature and •experience seems plainly to oppose the selfish theory.

We often praise virtuous actions that were performed long ago and far away, where the utmost subtlety of imagination couldn't discover any appearance of self-interest, or find any way of connecting our present happiness and security with events so widely separated from us.

When an adversary does something generous, brave, noble, we approve his action even if we know that its consequences will go *against* our particular interests.

In any case where •private advantage goes along with our general •affection for virtue, we easily see and acknowledge the mixture of these distinct sentiments, which feel different and have different influences on the mind. We are perhaps quicker to praise generous humane actions that further our own interests; but those interests come nowhere near to explaining the •topics of praise that we insist on [probably meaning 'the •general principles that govern our most intensely felt praise']. And we can try to bring other people over to our sentiments without trying to convince them that *they* get any advantage from the actions that we are presenting for their approval and applause.

If you •describe the model of a praiseworthy character, consisting of all the most lovable moral virtues; and •give examples in which these virtues display themselves in an extraordinary manner; you will easily elicit esteem and approval from all your audience, without their even *asking* when and where this noble person lived. Yet 'when and where' are absolutely crucial to self-love, i.e. the concern for one's own individual happiness. ·Here's an example of what

⁷ Undutifulness to parents is disapproved of by every person 'who reflects on what he sees and, comparing the future with the past, expresses his indignation at this ill-treatment to which he foresees that he also may some day be exposed'. Ingratitude is disapproved of for a similar reason (though Polybius seems here to mix in something more generous): 'Each person is bound to be shocked by ingratitude; through sympathy with the resentment of his neighbour, and from the thought that he may at some time suffer in the same way. And from that arises in the mind of every man a certain sense of the nature and force of duty.' Perhaps he meant only that our sympathy or humanity is more enlivened by our considering the similarity of our case with that of the person suffering; which is a good point.

I mean:

There was a statesman who, in the shock and contest of party-political conflict, managed through his eloquence to get an able adversary banished. He secretly followed the adversary, offering him •money for his support during his exile and •consolation in his misfortunes. 'Alas!' cried the banished statesman, 'how I regret leaving my •friends in this city, where even •enemies are so generous!'. . .

We give this conduct the praise and approval that it deserves; and we don't retract these sentiments when we learn that all this happened in Athens about two thousand years ago, and that the men involved were Eschines and Demosthenes. . . . When pressed by these facts and arguments, a defender of the self-interest theory of morality might say:

We transport ourselves by the force of imagination into distant times and places, and think about the advantage that we *would* have reaped from these characters if we *had been* contemporaries and had been involved in the situation.

This is a dodge, and a weak one at that. It is not conceivable how a *real* sentiment or passion could arise in us from what we know to be an *imaginary* interest; especially when our real interest is still kept in view, and is often acknowledged to be entirely distinct from the imaginary one and sometimes even opposite to it.

A man who is brought to the brink of a precipice can't look down without trembling; and the sentiment of imaginary danger drives him, in opposition to his belief that he is really safe. This may look like a real example of something I have said to be 'inconceivable', but it isn't really, because **(1)** it has a special feature:

In this case the imagination is helped by the presence of a striking object—the cliff-face and the sheer drop;

and also because **(2)** it is really a different phenomenon:

Even the 'striking object' won't have this effect unless it is, for this man, somewhat unusual and unfamiliar. Custom soon reconciles us to heights and precipices, and wears off these false and delusive terrors.

In our estimates of characters and conduct, the reverse is the case: the oftener we engage in careful scrutiny of morals, the *more* delicate is the feeling we acquire of the most minute differences between vice and virtue. Indeed, in everyday life we so *often* express all kinds of moral determinations that nothing of this kind could be new or unusual to us. And no false views or prejudices could hold their ground against experience that is so common and familiar. What mainly forms associations of ideas is experience, so that no association could possibly be established and survive in direct opposition to experience.

Usefulness is agreeable, and elicits our approval. This is a matter of fact, confirmed by daily observation. But, *useful*? For what? For somebody's interest, surely. Whose interest then? Not only our own; for our approval frequently extends beyond our own interests. So it must be the interests of those who benefit from the character or action we approve of; from which we can conclude that the welfare of those people, however far away they are in time or space, is not a matter of total indifference to us. By opening up this principle [see note on title page] we shall discover one great source of moral distinctions.

Part 2

Self-love is such a busily energetic drive in human nature, and the interest of each individual is usually so closely connected with that of the community, that there was an excuse for the philosophers who thought that all our concern

for the public might ultimately come down to a concern for our own happiness and preservation. Here's how they arrived at that thought. They saw every moment instances of approval or blame, satisfaction or displeasure, towards characters and actions. They called the objects of these sentiments 'virtues' or 'vices'. They saw that virtues tended to increase the happiness of mankind, and that vices tended to increase mankind's misery. They asked themselves 'Could it be that we have any *general* concern for society, or any *disinterested* [= 'not *self*-interested'] resentment of the harm that comes to others?' And they found it simpler to regard all these sentiments as special cases of self-love, and discovered an excuse (at least) for this unifying move in the fact that the interests of any individual are so often closely linked to the interests of the public.

Despite this frequent mixing of interests, however, it is easy to perform what natural scientists—following Bacon—call a 'crucial experiment', one that points out the right way in any doubt or ambiguity. We have found cases where someone's private interest was different from—even contrary to—the public interest, and where nevertheless the *moral* sentiment stayed steady, despite this divergence of interests. And whenever these distinct interests are seen to coincide, we always find a noticeable increase in the sentiment, a warmer affection for virtue, a more intense detestation of vice—feelings that are properly called 'gratitude' and 'revenge'. Under pressure from these examples we have to reject the theory that accounts for every moral sentiment in terms of

self-love. We must make room for a more publicaffection, and allow that we have some concern for the interests of society, considered just in itself. Usefulness is only a tendency to lead to a certain result; and it is a contradiction in terms to say 'I am pleased with x as a means to y, though y itself is something I am not concerned with'. Thus, if usefulness is a source of moral sentiment, and if this usefulness is not always thought of in terms of 'useful to *me*', it follows that anything that contributes to the happiness of society recommends itself *directly* to our approval and good-will. Here is a drive within us that accounts in great part for the origin of morality. Why should we look for abstruse and remote systems when such an obvious and natural one lies ready to hand?⁸

·SYMPATHY· [see note on page 6]

Is it hard for us to understand the force of humanity and benevolence? Or to take in that the very look of happiness, joy and prosperity gives pleasure; the very look of pain, suffering and sorrow communicates uneasiness? The Latin poet Horace said that the human countenance borrows smiles or tears from the human countenance—'Human faces laugh with those who laugh, and weep with those who weep'. If you reduce a person to solitude, he will lose almost all enjoyment, because his emotions aren't helped along by corresponding emotions in his fellow-creatures. (I said '*almost* all' because he might still have intellectual pleasures, e.g. from solving a mathematical problem, and sensual

⁸ We needn't push our researches so far as to ask 'Why do we have humanity, i.e. a fellow-feeling with others?' It's enough that we experience this as a force in human nature. Our examination of causes must stop somewhere; and in every science there are some general principles [= 'drives'] that we can't hope to show to be special cases of something even more general. No man is absolutely indifferent to the happiness and misery of others. The first has a natural tendency to give pleasure; the second, pain. You can find this in yourself—so can anyone. It's not likely that these principles can be resolved into simpler and more universal ones, whatever attempts may have been made to do that. And even if it were possible, that wouldn't be part of my present topic. For present purposes we can safely treat these principles as basic, and be well satisfied if we can make all their consequences sufficiently plain and clear! That is, we can ignore any questions about what led to them and focus on what comes from them.

pleasures, ·e.g. feeling warm and well fed·.) Even when the signs of sorrow and mourning are arbitrary [= 'conventional, or at any rate ·not natural'], they still make us sad; and the ·natural symptoms, tears and cries and groans, never fail to create compassion and uneasiness in other people's minds. And if the *effects* of misery affect us in such a lively manner, can we be supposed to be entirely unfeeling or indifferent towards its *causes* when a malicious or treacherous character and conduct are presented to us?

Suppose we enter a convenient, warm, well-designed apartment. We have to get pleasure just from seeing it, because it presents us with the pleasing ideas of ease, satisfaction and enjoyment. The hospitable, good-humoured, humane landlord appears, and this event must surely make the whole even more attractive; and we can't easily forbear reflecting with pleasure on the satisfaction that everyone gets from their dealings with him.

His whole family show their happiness by the freedom, ease, confidence and calm enjoyment expressed in their faces. I have a pleasing sympathy in the prospect of so much joy, and can't think of the source of it without having the most agreeable emotions.

He tells me that an oppressive and powerful neighbour tried to dispossess him of his inheritance, and for years disturbed all his innocent and social pleasures. I feel an immediate indignation arise in me against such violence and injury.

He adds that it isn't surprising that a private wrong should come from a man who has enslaved provinces, depopulated cities, and made the battle-field and the scaffold stream with human blood. I am struck with horror at the prospect of so much misery, and am driven by the strongest hostility towards its author.

Wherever we go, whatever we think or talk about, just about everything presents us with a view of human happiness or misery, and arouses in us a sympathetic surge of pleasure or uneasiness. In our serious occupations, and in our careless amusements, this principle still exerts its active energy.

·SYMPATHY AND THE ARTS·

A man who enters a theatre is immediately impressed by the view of so many people sharing in one common pastime; and he experiences, just from the look of them, a heightening of his disposition to have every sentiment ·or feeling· that his fellow-creatures have.

He notices that the actors are energised by the appearance of a full house, and raised to a level of enthusiasm that they can't command when they are calm and alone.

If the play is skillfully written, every emotion ·represented· on the stage is communicated to the spectators, as though by magic. The spectators weep, tremble, resent, rejoice, and are inflamed with all the variety of passions that drive the characters in the drama.

When an event in the play goes against our wishes and interrupts the happiness of our favourite characters, we are conscious of feeling anxiety and concern. If their sufferings come from the treachery, cruelty or tyranny of an enemy, we experience intense resentment against the enemy. It is regarded as *contrary to the rules of art* to represent a calamity in a cool and indifferent manner. A distant friend or a confidant who has nothing immediately at stake in the catastrophe ought, if possible, to be avoided by the playwright, because such a character might communicate a similar indifference to the audience. . . .

Few species of poetry are more entertaining than the *pastoral*, and we are all aware that the chief source of its

pleasure arises from the images of a gentle and tender tranquillity that it represents in its characters, communicating a similar sentiment to the reader. The Italian poet Sannazaro in his *Piscatory Eclogues* shifted the scene from gentle pleasant meadows to the sea-shore; this let him present the ocean, the most magnificent object in nature, but it is agreed that it was a wrong choice. The idea of the toil, labour and danger suffered by the fishermen is painful to the reader because of the unavoidable sympathy that accompanies every conception of human happiness or misery.

...No passion, when well represented, can be entirely indifferent to us; because every man has within him at least the seeds and first principles [see note on title page] of every passion. It's poetry's business to bring every affection near to us by lively imagery and representation, making it look like truth and reality; which is a certain proof that wherever reality itself is found, our minds are disposed to be strongly affected by it.

Any recent event that affects the fate of states, provinces or many individuals is extremely interesting even to those whose welfare is not directly involved. News of such an event is quickly spread, eagerly heard, and enquired into with attention and concern. On such an occasion the interest of society appears to be to some extent the interest of each individual. The imagination is sure to be affected, though the passions that are aroused may not always be strong and steady enough to have much influence on behaviour.

Reading a history book seems like a calm entertainment; but it wouldn't entertain at all if the reader didn't have feelings corresponding to those that the historian describes.

It's hard to read Thucydides or Guicciardin attentively while one describes trivial clashes between small cities of Greece, and the other describes the harmless wars between Pisa and Florence. Not many people are involved, and the

interest is small, so these passages don't fill our imagination or bring our feelings into play. But the deep distress of the large Athenian army that attacked Syracuse, and the danger that constituted such a strong threat to Venice—these arouse compassion; these move terror and anxiety.

We can become convinced of the cruel depravity of the Roman emperors Nero and Tiberius by the cool uninvolved style of Suetonius as well as by the masterly writings of Tacitus. But what a difference in our feelings! Suetonius coldly relates the facts; whereas Tacitus sets before our eyes the venerable figures of Soranus and Thræsea—two of Nero's innocent victims—who faced their fate bravely, and were moved only by the melting sorrows of their friends and families. What sympathy then touches every human heart! What indignation against the tyrant whose ungrounded fear or unprovoked malice gave rise to such detestable barbarity!

If we shift from plays and history-books, and look at real-life events that we observe for ourselves, powerful concern is aroused, and how much stronger it often is than the narrow attachments of self-love and self-interest! •Popular uprisings, •party zeal, •devoted obedience to leaders of groups—these are some of the most visible effects (though not the most commendable!) of this social sympathy in human nature.

Our feelings are somewhat engaged by anything that carries an image of human sentiment and affection, even when the subject is fairly trivial.

When a person stutters, we sympathize with this trivial uneasiness and suffer for him. And it is a rule in criticism that every combination of syllables or letters that is hard to pronounce sounds harsh and disagreeable to the ear, apparently because of a sort of sympathy. Indeed, when we skim a book with our eye, we notice such unharmonious composition because we still imagine that someone is reading it aloud to us and having a hard time pronouncing these

jarring sounds. So delicate is our sympathy!

·BEAUTY, UTILITY, SYMPATHY·

Relaxed and unconstrained postures and motions are always beautiful. An air of health and vigour is agreeable. •Clothes that warm us without burdening the body—that cover us without imprisoning the limbs—are well-designed. The feelings of the affected person have a role in all our judgments of beauty, communicate to the spectator similar touches of pain or pleasure.⁹ So it's not surprising that we can't make judgments about the characters and conduct of men without considering the likely consequences of their actions, and the happiness or misery they bring to society. What association of ideas could operate if the sympathy principle were totally inactive?¹⁰

·SYMPATHY AND MORALITY·

If a man isn't affected by images of human •happiness or •misery—because he is emotionally cold or narrowly selfish—he must be equally indifferent to the images of •virtue and •vice. And on the other hand we always find that a warm concern for the interests of our species is accompanied by a delicate feeling for all moral distinctions—a strong •resentment of harm done to men, a lively •approval of

their faring well. People can be seen to differ a great deal in this respect; but no-one is so entirely indifferent to the interests of his fellow-creatures that he doesn't have *any* sense of actions as being morally good or bad because of the results they tend to produce. If someone is confronted by two candidates for his moral judgment, •one that is beneficial and •another that is harmful to his species or community, it's not *possible* that he won't prefer the beneficial one (however coolly) and ascribe to it some measure of merit (however small). It is not possible if he *wears a human heart* [Hume's exact phrase]. Let us suppose someone who is ever so selfish, with his own private interests occupying ever so much of his attention; even this man, in cases where his own interests are not affected, must inevitably feel *some* leaning towards the good of mankind as the goal to choose other things being equal. . . . We surely •take into consideration the happiness and misery of others when we are weighing the various motives for action, and •incline to the happiness side when no private concerns draw us to seek our own advantage by harming our fellow-creatures. And if the principles of humanity are capable in many instances of influencing our actions, they must always have some authority over our sentiments [see note on page 1], and give us a general approval

⁹ 'The horse whose flanks are slim is handsomer—and faster. The athlete whose muscles have been well developed by exercise is better to look at—and more likely to win. Outward appearance is never separated from usefulness. Everyone with any sense knows this.' Quintilian, *Institutes* Book 8 ch. 3.

¹⁰ How much good we expect to flow from someone's conduct depends in part on how high his social rank is, and on the quality of the relationships—in private life, in business, in politics etc.—into which he has entered. If he falls short of our expectations, we blame him for not being more useful; and we blame him much more severely if anything positively bad has arisen from his behaviour. When there's a clash of interests between two countries, we judge the merits of a statesman by how much good or bad has resulted *for his own country* from his actions and advice, without regard to their adverse effect on its enemies and rivals. His fellow-citizens are central to our thoughts when we are determining his •moral• character. Nature has implanted in everyone a greater affection for his own country •than for any other•, so we never expect any regard to distant nations when a competition arises. •Another quite different reason for attending primarily to what the statesman achieves for his own country depends not on its being *his own* but on its being *just one country*•. We're aware that the interests of *mankind in general* are better promoted when every man attends to the good of •his own community than they would be if everyone acted on the basis of a loose indeterminate view about the good of •the species. The latter motivation doesn't provide one with a suitably limited object on which to exert oneself; so no good can be expected to come from it.

of what is useful to society, and disapproval of what is dangerous or harmful. The strength of these sentiments in this or that kind of case may be the subject of controversy; but there can't be a viable theory or system that denies their existence.

A creature who is absolutely malicious and spiteful (if there is such a thing in nature) must be worse than merely *indifferent* to the images of vice and virtue. All his sentiments must be inverted, and be directly opposite to the sentiments that prevail in the human species. Anything that contributes to the good of mankind will run contrary to the constant direction of his wishes and desires, and must therefore produce uneasiness and disapproval in him; and on the other hand anything that is a source of disorder and misery in society must for the same reason be regarded by him with pleasure and satisfaction. Timon of Athens was called 'the manhater', probably more because of his depression than because of inveterate malice. One day he embraced Alcibiades with great fondness, saying 'Go on, my boy! Acquire the confidence of the people, then one day I foresee that you'll be the cause of great calamities to them.' (This story is from Plutarch.) If the Manicheans were right in their view that the universe is a battlefield between two principles or gods, one good one and the other evil, these two gods would have to have totally opposite sentiments concerning human actions as well as concerning everything else. Every case of justice and humanity that pleased one of the gods, because of its tendency to do good, would displease the other. All mankind so far resemble the good principle that our natural philanthropy inclines us always to give the happiness of society preference over its misery, and consequently to prefer

virtue to its opposite—except at times when self-interest or revenge or envy has perverted our disposition. It may be that absolute, unprovoked, disinterested malice never finds a place in any human breast; but if it does, it must there pervert all the sentiments of morals as well as the feelings of humanity. If Nero's cruelty had been entirely voluntary, rather than being an effect of constant fear and resentment, it's obvious that his steady and uniform approval would have gone to the cruel, treacherous, self-serving Tigellinus rather than to his two noble advisors Seneca and Burrhus.

A statesman or patriot who serves our own country in our own time will always have a more passionate respect paid to him than one whose beneficial influence operated long ago or in distant countries. That's because the good resulting from the generous humanity of the latter person, being less closely connected with us, is less brightly lit for us and affects us with a less lively sympathy. We may agree that their merit is equally great, although our sentiments are not raised to the same height by both. In a case like this, our judgment corrects the inequalities of our internal emotions and perceptions; just as it preserves us from being misled by the various images presented to our external senses. When the distance from us of an object is doubled, it then throws on the eye a picture half the size of the previous one; but we imagine that it looks the same size in both situations, because we know that its image would expand if we walked towards it, and that this expansion would come not from the object itself but from our position in relation to it. Indeed, without such a correction of appearances—both in internal and external sentiment—we could never think or talk steadily about anything, while our fluctuating situations continually

¹¹ For a similar reason, our moral determinations or general judgments are based on the tendencies or expectable consequences of actions and characters, not on the actual consequences that they happen to have. Though in our real feeling or sentiment we can't help taking a more favourable view of

varied the things we were talking about, throwing them into such different and contrary lights and positions.¹¹

The more we converse with other people and the larger the set of social inter-relations that we maintain, the more familiar we'll become with these general preferences and distinctions, without which we could hardly speak intelligibly to each other. Every man's self-interest is special to himself, and the aversions and desires arising from it can't be supposed to mean as much to anyone else. So general language, which is formed for •general use, has to be moulded on some more •general views; its way of using words expressive of praise or blame have to be made to fit sentiments arising from the •general interests of the community. Granted that in most men these sentiments aren't as strong as the ones concerning private good, still, everyone's feelings—even those of the most depraved and selfish people—must make *some* distinction between what is generally beneficial and what isn't, attaching the notion of *good* to •generally• beneficent conduct and the notion of *evil* to the contrary. Let's admit that

•sympathy is much fainter than our concern for

ourselves, and that

•sympathy with persons far away is much fainter than sympathy with persons nearby.

But for precisely this reason we must, in our calm thinking and speaking about the characters of men, neglect all those differences—•setting aside self/other, near/far, and then/now—•and make our sentiments more public and social. And it's not just that we ourselves often change our situation in one of these respects; in addition to that, we're constantly meeting up with people whose situation is different from ours, people we could never talk with if we remained constantly in the position and point of view that is special to ourselves. So the interplay of sentiments in society and conversation makes us form some general unchanging standard by which we may approve or disapprove of characters and conduct. The heart doesn't entirely adopt those general notions, or regulate all its love and hatred by the universal abstract •moral• differences of vice and virtue, without regard to whether something affects oneself or one's near and dear. Still, these •abstract• moral differences have a lot of influence, and serve well enough for discourse at least,

•someone whose position joined to his virtue makes him really useful to society

than of

•someone who exercises the social virtues only in good intentions and benevolent affections, •because his social position doesn't enable him to do any actual good for society.

It isn't hard—and it is necessary—for us to separate each person's •character from •how things happen to work out for him; and having made this separation we judge these two persons to be morally on a par and give them the same general praise. Our judgment corrects the appearance, or tries to; but it can't entirely prevail over sentiment. Why is this peach-tree said to be better than that one, if not because it produces more or better fruit? And wouldn't we give the same praise to it even if snails or vermin had destroyed the peaches before they were ripe? In morals too, isn't *the tree known by the fruit*? And can't we easily distinguish nature from accident with the man as well as with the tree?

¹² Nature has wisely ordained that private connections should commonly prevail over universal views and considerations; otherwise our affections and actions would be dissipated and lost, for lack of a proper *limited* object. Thus, a small benefit done to ourselves or our near friends arouses more lively sentiments of love and approval than a great benefit done to a distant commonwealth. But still we •know to correct these inequalities by

which means that they serve all our purposes in company, in the pulpit, on the stage, and in the schools.¹²

Thus, in whatever light we take this subject, the merit ascribed to the social virtues still appears to be uniform, and arises chiefly from the concern that the natural sentiment of benevolence gets us to have for the interests of mankind and society. If we consider these drives that are built into the human make-up, as we encounter them in daily experience and observation, we must *a priori* conclude that a creature such as man *can't* be totally indifferent to the well-being or ill-being of his fellow-creatures, and *must* be disposed to pronounce straight off—in a case where nothing gives him any particular bias—that what promotes their happiness is good and what tends to their misery is bad, saying this without any qualifications or ifs or buts. [Strictly, an *a priori* belief owes nothing to experience, whereas this one, Hume says, rests on 'daily experience and observation'. But when on this page he speaks of looking at the matter *a posteriori* (the standard opposite of *a priori*), it seems that the distinction he is making is between **(1)** views about morality that are based on the **prior** facts about human nature from **(2)** views about morality that are based on facts about the consequences of morality, the facts that are **posterior** to it.] Here then are the faint rudiments or outlines, at least, of a *general* distinction between actions; and to the extent that any individual person's humanity intensifies •his connection with those who are injured or benefited and •the liveliness of his conception of their misery or happiness, his consequent censure or approval will become correspondingly more vigorous. A generous action barely mentioned in an old history book or a minor magazine needn't communicate any strong feelings of applause and admiration. When virtue is placed at such a distance, it's like a star: to the eye of reason it appears as

luminous as the sun at noon [i.e. as a matter of theory we think it is that bright], but it's so far away that it doesn't affect the senses with either light or heat. Bring this virtue nearer, by our acquaintance or connection with the people involved or even just by an eloquent description of the case, and then our hearts are immediately caught, our sympathy enlivened, and our cool approval converted into the warmest sentiments of friendship and respect. These seem to be necessary and certain consequences of the general principles of [= 'drives in'] human nature as revealed in common life and practice.

Now let us run all this in the opposite direction. Consider the matter *a posteriori*, thinking about consequences. Doesn't the merit of social virtue come in large measure from the feelings of humanity that such virtue produces in the spectators? It seems to be a plain matter of *fact* •that the utility of something—of *anything*—is a source of praise and approval; that utility is

- constantly appealed to in all moral decisions about the merit or demerit of actions;
- the only source of the high respect paid to justice, fidelity, honour, allegiance, chastity;
- inseparable from all the other social virtues—humanity, generosity, charity, friendliness, mildness, affability, gentleness, mercy and moderation; and, in short,
- a foundation for the chief part of morals, the part concerning mankind as a whole.

It appears also that in our general approval of characters and conduct, the useful tendency of the social virtues doesn't move us through self-interest, but has a much more universal and extensive influence. It appears that a tendency to public good and to the promoting of peace, harmony and

thinking about them, and •retain a general standard of vice and virtue based chiefly on general usefulness. These corrections are like the ones we perform in processing what comes to us through our senses.

order in society always engages us on the side of the social virtues by working on the benevolent forces in the human make-up. And it appears, as an additional confirmation, that these drives of humanity and sympathy enter so deeply into all our sentiments, and have such a powerful influence, that they can arouse the strongest censure and applause. My present theory is the simple result of all these inferences, each of which seems to be based on uniform experience and observation.

If you aren't sure whether there's anything in our nature giving us •humanity or •a concern for others, think about this:

•We see in countless cases that anything tending to promote the interests of society is very highly approved of •by people in general•.

That should teach you that we have a drive to benevolence,

and that it is strong; because nothing could possibly please us as a means to an end if we didn't care in the least about the end. On the other hand, if you aren't sure whether there is implanted in our nature anything making us engage in moral blame and approval, think about this:

•We see in countless cases the influence of humane-ness.

From that you should infer that everything that promotes the interests of society must communicate pleasure, and what is harmful must give uneasiness. But when these different lines of thought come together in establishing the same conclusion, don't they put that conclusion beyond the reach of any doubt or denial?

But I hope to provide further confirmation for this theory when I present other sentiments of admiration and respect that come from the same source or from ones like it.

Section 6: Qualities useful to ourselves

Part 1

It seems clear that when we examine a quality or habit that someone has, if it shows up as being in any respect bad for the person in question, or if it incapacitates him for business and action, we immediately blame it, and count it among his faults and imperfections. Laziness, negligence, lack of order and method, obstinacy, fickleness, rashness, credulity—no-one ever regarded any of these qualities as neutral features of someone's character, let alone praised them as accomplishments or virtues! Their downside imme-

diately strikes our eye, and gives us the sentiment of pain and disapproval.

It's generally agreed that no quality is absolutely either blameable or praiseworthy; •i.e. there's no quality that is blameable whenever it occurs, and none that is praiseworthy whenever it occurs•. The moral status of a given instance of a quality depends on the *degree* to which the quality is present in it. The Aristotelians say that what makes something virtuous is its being appropriately between two extremes; •but that isn't seriously in conflict with my view, because• this *between* position is chiefly determined by usefulness.

Take the example of *speed* in business: if someone isn't fast enough, he'll make no progress in any project; if he goes too fast, he'll act precipitately and won't co-ordinate his doings properly with those of other people. That's the sort of reasoning we use in deciding what is the proper and commendable 'middle' in all moral and prudential contexts; and we never lose sight of the advantages that result from any character or habit. These advantages are enjoyed by the person who *has* the character ·or habit· we are judging; so whatever it is that makes the view of them agreeable to us, the spectators, and prompts our admiration and approval, it can't be self-love. [The *starred* passage expands what Hume wrote in ways that the ·small dots· convention can't easily indicate; it adds nothing to the content.] *Someone might think that it's our self-love that is at work, co-operating with our imagination, thus:

- (1) Our imagination turns us into the other person, makes us imagine that we are him and are getting for *ourselves* the benefit of the valuable qualities that really belong to him.
- (2) Then imagination immediately whips us back into ourselves, and makes us love and esteem the person while seeing him as different from us.

But this can't be right. Our imagination lacks (1) the strength to perform the first operation, and (2) the speed to perform the second.* Views and sentiments that are so opposite to

known truth and to each other could never be held at the same time by the same person. So we can rule out the suspicion that what look like expressions of benevolence are really selfish. What drives our feelings is something quite different, something that gives us a concern for the well-being of the person we are thinking about. When his natural talents and acquired abilities give us the prospect of his rising higher, advancing in his career, acquiring renown, having prosperous success, steadily mastering the mishaps that fate sends his way, and carrying out great or advantageous undertakings, we are impressed by these agreeable images and feel arising in us a satisfaction and respect towards him. The ideas of happiness, joy, triumph and prosperity are connected with every detail of his character, and spread through our minds a pleasing sentiment of sympathy and humanity.¹³

Try this supposition: A person whose fundamental nature is such that he has no kind of concern for his fellow-creatures, and regards the ·choice between· happiness and misery for all sentient beings with utter indifference—even more so than the choice between two colours for a curtain, when he can hardly tell them apart. If he were asked to choose between the prosperity of nations and their ruin, he would stand like the famous philosophical ass—equidistant from two indistinguishable bales of hay—irresolute and undetermined between equal motives; or rather, like the

¹³ We can go so far as to say that there is no human creature to whom the appearance of happiness doesn't give pleasure, and the appearance of misery doesn't give uneasiness (setting aside cases where envy or revenge enter the picture). This seems inseparable from our make-up and constitution. But it's only the more generous minds that are prompted by this to try hard to procure the good of others, and to have a real passion for their welfare. With men of narrow and ungenerous spirits, the sympathy I have been speaking of is nothing more than a slight feeling of the imagination, which serves only to •arouse sentiments of satisfaction or censure, and to •affect what kinds of adjectives they will apply to the person. A clutching miser, for instance, praises industry and frugality extremely highly, even in others, and ranks them above all the other virtues. He knows the good that results from them, and feels that sort of happiness—the 'good will come of this' sort of happiness—with a livelier sympathy than ·he would get from thinking about· any other virtue. Yet it may be that he wouldn't part with a shilling to make the fortune of the industrious man whom he praises so highly.

same ass between two pieces of wood or of marble, with no inclination or leaning to either side. I think it must be granted that the person I have supposed, being absolutely unconcerned for the public good of a community or the private utility of others, would look on every quality, however harmful or beneficial to society or to the person who has it, with the same indifference as he would look on the most common and uninteresting object.

But if instead of this imagined monster we suppose a *man* to form a judgment or make a decision in the case—i.e. the choice between the prosperity of nations and their ruin—there is for him a plain basis for preference, other things being equal; and even if his choice is cool, his heart selfish, and the people concerned remote from him, there must still be for him a choice or distinction between what is useful and what is harmful. Now this useful/harmful distinction is the same in all its parts as the moral distinction whose basis has been so often and so fruitlessly searched for. The sentiment of morals and the sentiment of humanity are favoured by the same endowments of the mind, down to the finest detail; a temperament that is given to intense feelings of either of these kinds will also be given to intense feelings of the other kind. And when the objects come closer or are more closely connected, that enlivens each sentiment to the same degree. By all the rules of science, therefore, we must conclude that these sentiments are basically the same; since in every tiny detail they are governed by the same laws and moved by the same objects.

Why do scientists infer with the greatest certainty that the moon is kept in its orbit by the same force of gravity that makes bodies fall near the surface of the earth? Because when these effects are calculated, they are found to be similar and equal. Shouldn't this argument be as convincing in moral theories as in natural ones? [This occurrence of 'moral'

means 'having to do with human behaviour'. Hume's question is not 'Shouldn't this be as convincing in ethics as it is in empirical science?' and is more like 'Shouldn't this be as convincing in psychology as it is in physics?']

There's no need for me to produce lengthy detailed evidence that any quality that is useful to its possessor is approved of, and that any that's harmful to its possessor is censured. The least reflection on what we experience in everyday life will be sufficient. I'll just provide a few instances, in order to remove all doubt and hesitation—if I can.

·DISCRETION·

The quality that is most needed for carrying out any useful enterprise is *discretion*—being careful in our interrelations with others, attending properly to our own character and to theirs, weighing each detail of the project we are undertaking, and employing the surest and safest means for achieving any end or purpose. To people like Oliver Cromwell and the French churchman and politician and schemer Cardinal de Retz, discretion may appear to be 'an alderman-like virtue' [= 'a virtue suitable for a conscientious town councillor'], as Jonathan Swift calls it; it might really be a fault or imperfection in them, being incompatible with the vast projects to which their courage and ambition prompted them. But in ordinary everyday life no virtue is more needed, not just to succeed but to avoid spectacular failure. For someone who lacks discretion, his having many other virtues and strengths may be fatal to him. . . .

If it weren't *too* perfect for human nature, I would say that the best character is that which is not swayed by moods of any kind, but alternately employs enterprise and caution depending on which is useful for the particular purpose intended. That is the kind of excellence that an historian attributes to Marshal Turenne in his service to Louis XIV.:

The boldness of his military enterprises increased, campaign by campaign, until he reached the age and stage at which, knowing all about war from long experience, he could advance with greater firmness and security along the well-known road. Machiavelli remarks, 'about two military leaders in ancient Rome', that

Fabius was cautious and Scipio enterprising; each succeeded because when he had command the state of affairs in Rome was right for his talents; but both would have failed if the situations had been reversed.

It is good to be in a situation that suits one's frame of mind, but a more excellent person is the one who can suit his frame of mind to any situation.

·INDUSTRIOUSNESS·

What need is there to praise hard work, and to extol its advantages in the acquisition of power and riches? The tortoise, according to the fable, by sheer perseverance won the race against the much faster hare. When a man's time is well husbanded, it is like a cultivated field: a few acres of it produce more useful stuff than do extensive provinces that have the richest soil but are over-run with weeds and brambles. ['Husbanded' means 'managed', with a suggestion of the management of a farm.]

·FRUGALITY AND PRODICALITY ·

[A prodigal is someone who spends extravagantly. The standard label for Jesus's 'parable of the prodigal son' refers not to the son's 'leaving home and then returning but to his 'wasting his substance in riotous living'.] But there's not much chance of succeeding in life, or even of surviving in tolerable conditions, unless one is reasonably frugal. For someone who is not frugal, the heap of his money, instead of increasing, decreases day by day. This leaves him intensely unhappy, because if he couldn't keep his expenses within the confines of a 'large income he

certainly won't be able to live contentedly on a 'small one! Plato writes that the souls of men who are inflamed with impure appetites, when they lose the body that was their only source of satisfaction, 'hover about the earth, 'haunt the places where their bodies are burning, and 'hanker to recover their lost organs of sensation (*Phaedo* 80c-81e). It is like that with worthless prodigals who have spent their fortune in wild debauches. They still have the organs of sensation, because they aren't dead yet; but they have lost the financial means to gratify their appetites, and so they gatecrash well-provided dinners and parties of pleasure, hated even by the dissolute and despised even by fools.

At one extreme of frugality—or, more accurately, of the scale that has frugality near the mid-point—is *miserliness*. This is rightly censured for two reasons: it deprives a man of all use of his riches, and it gets in the way of hospitality and every social enjoyment. At the other end of the scale is *prodigality*, which is commonly more hurtful to the man himself. Which of these extremes is regarded as worse than the other depends on the temperament of the person who is doing the judging. . . .

·VIRTUES WITH COMPLEX MORAL SOURCES·

Qualities often get their merit from complicated sources. *Honesty*, *fidelity* and *truthfulness* are praised because of their immediate tendency to promote the interests of society; but once they have been established on this foundation, these virtues are also regarded as advantageous to the person who has them, and as the source of the trust and confidence that a man must have if he is to get any respect in life. Someone who lacks these three virtues is found to be contemptible because he forgets the duty he owes to himself, and odious because he forgets the duty he owes to society.

This consideration may be one chief source of the intense blame attaching to unchastity in a woman. The greatest

respect that women can get comes from their fidelity; and a woman who fails in this becomes cheap and vulgar, loses her rank, and is exposed to every insult. The smallest failure in this respect is enough to blast her character. She has so many opportunities for secretly indulging her sexual appetites that the only way we can be sure of her is for her to have absolute modesty and reserve; and once the wall has been breached, it can hardly ever be fully repaired. If a **man** behaves with **cowardice** on one occasion, brave conduct on a later occasion will restore his reputation. But if a **woman** once behaves in a **dissolute** fashion, what can she then do to make us sure that she has formed better resolutions and has enough self-control to act on them?

It's agreed that men are equal in their desire, but few succeed in achieving it. One large cause of this is the lack of the *strength of mind* needed to enable a man to resist the temptation of present ease or pleasure, and carry him forward in the search of profit and enjoyment further on in the future. When we look in a general way on the objects of our likes and dislikes, we decide on certain rules of conduct and certain measures of preference for one kind of object over another. These decisions result from our calm passions and inclinations—for what else could declare any object to be desirable or undesirable? And yet they are often said, in a natural misuse of words, to be decisions reached by pure reason and reflection. But when some of these objects

•come nearer to us in time or in space, or •acquire the advantage of being seen in a more flattering light or from a more favourable angle, which catch the heart or imagination,

our general resolutions are frequently defeated, a small enjoyment is preferred, and lasting shame and sorrow are brought down on us. And however much wit and eloquence poets expend in celebrating present pleasure, and rejecting all

long-distance views of fame, health or fortune, it is *obvious* that this practice of favouring the present at the expense of the future is the source of all dissoluteness and disorder, all repentance and misery. A man with a strong and determined mind sticks to his general resolutions, and isn't seduced by the allurements of pleasure or terrified by threats of pain; but keeps his eye steadily on the distant pursuits by which he ensures *both* his happiness *and* his honour.

A certain degree of *self-satisfaction* is an advantage, equally for the fool and for the wise man. But there is no other character-trait, and no other aspect of life, where the fool and the wise man are on an equal footing. Business, books, conversation—a fool is totally unfit for all of these, and remains a useless burden on the earth except for the possibly useful coarse drudgery that he is condemned to by his position in life. That's why we find that men are extremely protective of *this* aspect of their character; there are many examples of men openly and fully declaring their own profligacy and treachery, but there are no examples of men placidly accepting that they are regarded as ignorant and stupid, let alone examples of men loudly declaring their ignorance and stupidity. . . . No affectionate connection is strong enough to survive the disgust arising from this character, i.e. from the belief that some person that one has dealings with is stupid and ignorant. (Actually, there is one exception to what I have just said. It is the affection of parents for their offspring, which is the strongest and most indissoluble bond in nature.) Love itself, which can survive treachery, ingratitude, malice and infidelity, is immediately extinguished by stupidity when it is perceived and acknowledged; the passion of love is not diminished by ugliness and old age more than it is by stupidity. That is a measure of how dreadful we find the ideas of an utter incapacity for any project or undertaking, and of continued

error and misconduct in life.

Think about the questions that can be asked about which of two kinds of understanding is more excellent:

- Quickness or slowness on the uptake? The ability to penetrate far into a subject straight off with no ability to do anything through study, or the opposite character, which has to work everything out through hard concentrated work?
- A clear head or a richly inventive one?
- Profundity of thought or sureness of judgment?

Obviously, we can't answer any of these questions without considering which qualities equip a man best for the world, and carry him furthest in anything he undertakes.

If •refined sense and •exalted sense aren't as useful as •common sense, their rarity and novelty and the nobleness of their objects compensate somewhat for this and make •them the admiration of mankind. In the same way, gold is less serviceable than iron, but is much more valuable than iron because of its scarcity.

•MEMORY•

The defects of judgment can't be made up for by any skills or inventions; but defects of memory can often be made up for in business and in scholarship, by being methodical and hard-working, and by thoroughness in writing everything down. We hardly ever hear 'a short memory' given as a reason for a man's failure in any undertaking. But in ancient times, when no man could rise to prominence without a talent for speaking, and when the audience were too delicate to put up with such crude, undigested harangues as today's impromptu orators offer to public assemblies, the faculty of memory was of the utmost consequence and was accordingly much more valued than it is these days. Almost every great genius who is mentioned in antiquity is celebrated for this talent; and Cicero includes it in his list of the sublime

qualities of Caesar himself: 'He had talent, intelligence, memory, writing skill, attentiveness, reflective judgment, diligence.'

Particular customs and manners make a difference to how useful a personal quality is; they also make a difference to its merit. Particular situations and events have to some extent the same influence. Someone who has the talents and accomplishments that suit his social position and his profession will always be more admired than someone to whom the luck of the draw has assigned a social place that is wrong for him. The private or selfish virtues are in this respect •more arbitrary than the public and social ones. In other respects they may be •less liable to doubt and controversy.

In recent years in Great Britain, men in active life have spouted so much about their public spirit, and theoreticians and scholars have gone on so much about benevolence, that men of the world are apt, without any bad intention, to reveal a sullen incredulity about those moral endowments, and even sometimes to deny that they exist at all. (They have been encouraged in this attitude by the fact that many *false* claims to public spirit or benevolence have been detected.) This seems to me to resemble something that happened in the ancient world: the perpetual cant of the stoics and cynics concerning virtue, their splendid claims to virtue and its small part in their lives made people disgusted •with virtue as well as with them•; and Lucian, a very moral writer (except for being licentious with regard to pleasure), couldn't write about the much-boasted-of virtue without betraying symptoms of bad temper and irony. [Hume has a footnote here, quoting (in Greek) some of Lucian's turns of phrase.] But surely this peevish fault-finding, wherever it comes from, can never be taken so far as to make us deny the existence of every species of merit, and all distinctions of manners

and behaviour. There are character-traits whose very names force one to agree that they have merit—‘discretion’, ‘caution’, ‘enterprise’, ‘industry’, ‘assiduity’, ‘frugality’, ‘economy’, ‘good sense’, ‘prudence’, ‘discernment’; and besides these there are many others to which the most determined scepticism can’t for a moment refuse the tribute of praise and approval. Temperance, sobriety, patience, constancy, perseverance, forethought, considerateness, the ability to keep secrets, orderliness, persuasiveness in speech, presence of mind, quickness of conception, ease of expression—these and a thousand more of the same kind won’t ever be denied by anyone to be excellencies and perfections. Their merit consists in their tendency to serve the person who has them, with no grand claims to public and social merit, and that makes us less grudging in admitting their claims, and we readily put them on the list of praiseworthy qualities. Although we aren’t aware of this at the time, by granting the merit of those characteristics we have paved the way for all the other moral excellences, so that we can’t consistently hesitate any longer about the existence and moral status of disinterested benevolence, patriotism and humanity.

We have before us now **(1)** the self-regarding virtues that I listed earlier, and **(2)** the social virtues of justice and beneficence. You might at first glance think it would be easier to represent **(1)** theoretically as disguised self-love than to represent **(2)** in that way; but the truth turns out to be the exact opposite! To make a case for **(2)**’s being disguised self-love, we need only say that whatever conduct promotes the good of the community is loved, praised and admired by the community because of the good it brings to the community and thus to every member of it. In fact, what’s being talked about here is not *self-love* but *gratitude*, and the distinction between these is pretty obvious; still, a superficial reasoner might overlook it; so those who

are sceptical about **(2)** justice and benevolence have *some* ground to stand on, at least for a moment. In contrast with that, qualities **(1)** that tend only to the advantage of the person who has them, without any reference to us or to the community, are nevertheless admired and valued by us and the community. What theory or system is there that will account for *this* sentiment in terms of self-love, deriving it from that favourite origin? It seems that we *have to* admit that the happiness and misery of others are not matters of entire indifference to us; and that the view of happiness, whether in its causes or its effects, gives us a secret joy and satisfaction comparable with (to take a humdrum example) the satisfaction of seeing sunshine on a well cultivated field; while the appearance of misery affects us in the kind of way in which a dark rain-cloud or a barren landscape throws a melancholy damp over our imagination. And once *this* concession has been made, the difficulty is over; we can hope that, from here on, a natural unforced interpretation of the phenomena of human life will prevail among all those who work on moral theory.

Part 2

I have been discussing the way our sentiments of respect and esteem for a person arise from his **(1)** qualities of mind. It would be a good idea now to examine how these sentiments of ours are influenced by **(2)** a person’s bodily endowments and by **(3)** whatever advantages he has—e.g. inherited wealth—through the luck of the draw. Our aim will be to see whether these phenomena strengthen or weaken my theory. It will naturally be expected—and it was supposed by all the ancient moralists—that **(2)** physical beauty will be similar in some respects to **(1)** beauty of the mind; and that every kind of esteem we have for a man will have something

similar in its origin, whether it arises from his **(1)** mental endowments or from **(3)** his exterior circumstances.

One considerable source of beauty in any animal, obviously, is the advantage it gets from the particular structure of its body—the advantage in the particular way of life that nature has destined the animal for. The best proportions of a horse as described by Xenophon and Virgil are the same ones that are accepted today by our modern horse-dealers, because they have the same foundation, namely experience of what is detrimental or useful in the animal.

Broad shoulders, a lank belly, firm joints, tapering legs—all these are beautiful in *our* species because they are signs of force and vigour. Ideas of usefulness and its opposite, though they don't entirely settle what is handsome or ugly, are clearly the source of a considerable part of our approval or dislike.

In ancient times, bodily strength and dexterity were much more esteemed and valued than they are today, because back then they were much more useful and important in war than they are today. We obviously find this in Homer and the poets; but even the ancient historians mention *bodily strength* among the accomplishments of the heroes they write about. Even the Theban general Epaminondas, whom the

historians acknowledge to be the greatest hero, statesman and general of all the Greeks, was praised for his physical strength.¹⁴

[He gives another example, Pompey as described by Sallust. Then:] This is like what I said about memory: physical strength, like memory, was more importantly useful in ancient times than it is now.

Sexual impotence brings down on a person derision and contempt, from women as well as men. That's because of how very *unuseful* impotence is: the unfortunate sufferer from it is seen as being deprived of an important kind of pleasure and at the same time disabled from giving such pleasure to others. If a woman is barren, that is held against her because barrenness is a kind of *inutility* [= 'a way of *not* being useful'], but our reaction to barrenness is not as intense as our reaction to impotence; and my theory makes very obvious the reason for this, namely that the disadvantages coming from barrenness are less extensive than those that come from impotence.

There is no rule in painting or sculpture more indispensable than that of balancing the figures, and placing them with the greatest exactness on their proper centre of gravity. A figure that isn't balanced properly is ugly, because it gives

¹⁴ To grasp the idea of perfect merit that prevailed in those times, look at what Diodorus Siculus wrote about Epaminondas: 'In other illustrious men you'll observe that each possessed some one shining quality that was the foundation of his fame. But in Epaminondas all the virtues are found united—bodily strength, eloquence of expression, vigour of mind, lack of interest in riches, gentleness of disposition, and—the main thing—courage and conduct in war.'

¹⁵ All men are equally liable to pain and disease and sickness; and may again recover health and ease. Because these circumstances don't distinguish one man from another, they aren't a source of pride or humility, respect or contempt. But comparing our own species to superior ones—such as the angels that theologians tell us about—is a very humbling practice, reminding us that we are all so liable to diseases and infirmities while the angels aren't; and theologians accordingly go on about this in an attempt to lower our self-satisfaction and vanity.

Hume's next sentence: They would have more success, if the common bent of our thoughts were not perpetually turned to compare ourselves with others.

He may have meant: They would have more success in this if we weren't already familiar with that contrast because we have often compared ourselves with others, including angels.

us the disagreeable ideas of *fall*, *harm* and *pain*.¹⁵

A disposition or cast of mind that qualifies a man to rise in the world and advance his fortune is entitled to •esteem and •respect, as I have already explained. So it can naturally be supposed that the actual possession of riches and authority will have a considerable influence over •these sentiments.

If we look for an hypothesis through which we can explain people's respect for the rich and powerful, the only satisfactory one we'll find is the theory that this respect comes from the spectator's enjoyment of the images he gets of prosperity, happiness, ease, plenty, authority, and the gratification of every appetite. There are other theories, of course, but they don't do the job. For example, some philosophers make so much of self-love that they consider it to be the source of every sentiment, but it is clearly inadequate for this purpose. In the absence of any good-will or friendship, it is hard to see what could be our basis for hoping for advantage from the riches of others; yet we naturally respect the rich, even before they reveal any such favourable disposition towards us.

We have these same sentiments even when we are so far out of the person's sphere of activity that we can't even think that he *could* do us any good. In all civilized nations a prisoner of war is treated with a respect appropriate to his social level, and obviously a man's riches go a long way towards settling what his social status is. If •birth and •rank come into this also, that provides yet another argument *for* my thesis. When we call someone 'a man of birth', what do we mean but that he is descended from a long succession of rich and powerful ancestors, so that

we esteem him because of his connection with people we esteem? Thus, his ancestors are respected partly because of their riches, although we can't expect anything from them, because they are dead.

I don't have to go so far as prisoners of war or the dead to find examples of this disinterested [= 'not *self*-interested'] respect for riches. Look carefully at things that happen all the time in ordinary life and conversation. Let's suppose that a man who is reasonably well off is introduced to a company of strangers: he naturally treats them with different degrees of respect, depending on what he is told about their different fortunes and conditions; yet he can't possibly think he will get any monetary advantage from any of them, and perhaps wouldn't accept it even if he *could*. When a traveller is admitted into company, he always meets with a degree of civility that is proportional to what his attendants and his gear indicate about how rich he is. In short, the different social rankings of men are to a large extent regulated by riches, and that holds for superiors as well as inferiors, for strangers as well as people we know.

Why do we want riches for ourselves? Because they are a means of gratifying our present or possible future appetites. Why does someone's being rich create esteem for him in others? What I have been saying seems to force us to the conclusion that the same answer holds: it's because riches are a means of gratifying appetites. This indeed is their very nature or essence: they are directly connected with the commodities, conveniences and pleasures of life. When that connection is broken—as with an IOU from a bankrupt banker, or gold on a desert island—'riches' aren't riches any

Or he may have meant: They'd have more success in this if we paid attention to their contrast between ourselves and angels, rather than busily comparing ourselves with other people.

The infirmities of old age are upsetting because we can compare ourselves with the young. . . .

more. When we approach a man who is, as we say, 'at his ease' [or today, perhaps, 'in comfortable circumstances'], we are presented with the pleasing ideas of abundance, satisfaction, cleanliness, warmth; a cheerful house, elegant furniture, good servants, and whatever is desirable in food, drink and clothing. When a poor man appears, on the other hand, our imagination is immediately struck by disagreeable images of want, poverty, drudgery, dirty furniture, coarse or ragged clothes, disgusting food and nasty drink. What else do we mean by saying that one is 'rich', the other 'poor'? And as respect ·in one case· and contempt ·in the other· is the natural consequence of those different situations in life, it is easy to see that these facts throw light on, and help to confirm, the theory I have presented regarding all moral distinctions.¹⁶

Consider a man who has cured himself of all ridiculous assumptions and is fully, sincerely, and steadily convinced—from experience as well as from philosophy—that the difference of fortune makes less difference in happiness than most people think. This man won't measure out degrees of esteem according to the incomes of the people he knows. He may *outwardly* defer to the great lord more than to the

peasant, because riches are the most convenient (because the most fixed and determinate) source of distinction. But his *inner* sentiments are governed by men's personal characters rather than by the accidental and whimsical favours of fortune.

In most countries of Europe, the chief source of distinction is *family*, i.e. hereditary wealth marked with titles and symbols from the king. In England more respect is paid to *present* opulence and plenty. Each practice has its advantages and disadvantages. The disadvantage of respecting birth is that inactive, spiritless minds remain in haughty idleness, and dream of nothing but pedigrees and genealogies; the advantage is that those who have energies and ambition put them to work in the search for honour and authority, reputation and favour. The disadvantage of focussing respect on riches is that this encourages corruption, bribery, plundering; the advantage is that it encourages arts, manufactures, commerce and agriculture. The 'family' prejudice is more favourable to military virtue, so that it's more suited to monarchies. The 'riches' prejudice is the chief spur to hard work, so that it agrees better with a republican government. . . .

¹⁶ There's something extraordinary and seemingly inexplicable in the way our emotions behave when we consider the fortune and circumstances of others. Very often someone else's advancement and **prosperity** produces •envy, which has a strong mixture of •hatred, and arises chiefly from comparing ourselves with the other person. Yet at the very same time, or at least rapidly alternating with the envy, we may feel the passion of •respect, which is a kind of •affection or •good-will, with a mixture of •humility. On the other hand, the **misfortunes** of our fellows often cause •pity, which has in it a strong mixture of •good-will. This sentiment of pity is closely related to •contempt, which is a kind of •dislike with •pride mixed in. I point out these facts just as interesting to think about for those who are studying the human condition. For my present purposes, all I need is the fact that power and riches commonly cause respect, and poverty and meanness cause contempt, though in particular contexts the emotions of envy and of pity may enter the picture.