Virtue and Utility

1. Hume’s ethics is in line with the ‘experimental method’: a natural history of morality founded in human nature. Ethics is grounded in the passions, in particular the indirect passions.

2. Indirect passions have a complex intentional structure: (a) an object, i.e. what the passion is directed at; (b) a cause, i.e. an perception that causes it; (c) a subject, i.e. the thing that has the quality which causes the passion: ‘A man, for instance, is vain of his beautiful house, which belongs to him, or which he has himself built and contriv’d. Here the object of the passion is himself, and the cause is the beautiful house: Which cause again is sub-divided into two parts, viz. the quality, which operates upon the passion, and the subject, in which the quality inheres’ (Treatise 2.1.2.6).

3. Direct passions arise naturally (spontaneously) from pain and pleasure: desire, aversion, hope, fear etc. (T 2.1.1.4).

4. Ideas are associated by resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect (laws of association, cf. EHU 3). Impressions are also associated by phenomenal resemblance or ‘hedonic’ similarity—perhaps a kind of resonance: ‘All resembling impressions are connected together, and no sooner one arises that the rest immediately follow. Grief and disappointment give rise to anger, anger to envy, envy to malice, and malice to grief again, till the whole circle be compleated. In like manner, our temper, when elevated by joy, naturally throws itself into love, generosity, pity, courage, pride, and the other resembling affections’ (T 2.1.4.3).

5. So, pleasurable causes lead to pleasurable passions, and likewise for unpleasurable causes. Combined with the object of passions, this yields this matrix:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>impression is:</th>
<th>pleasant</th>
<th>unpleasant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>self as object</td>
<td>pride</td>
<td>humility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other as object</td>
<td>love</td>
<td>hatred</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Example: eating a nice dish, I have a very pleasurable impression (of sensation). If I cooked the dish, this impression is associated with myself, and I feel pride. If my wife cooked the dish, this impression is associated with her, and I feel love for her.

6. In order to feel pride at all, we must be able to conceive of ourselves as the object to someone else’s approval (T 2.1.6.3): ‘But besides these original causes of pride and humility, there is a secondary one in the opinion of others, which has an equal influence on the affections. Our reputation, our character, our name are considerations of vast weight and importance; and even the other causes of pride; virtue, beauty, and riches; have little influence, when not seconded by the opinions and sentiments of others’ (T 2.1.11.1, see also EPM 8.10–1, 29–30).

7. No Morality Without Sympathy (T 3.3.1). Sympathy at work: (a) I see S in distress (impression), and so form an idea of his state of mind; (b) since the ‘impression of ourselves is always intimately present with us’ (T 2.1.11.4), and since there is a ‘great resemblance among all human creatures’ (T 2.1.11.5), it follows that seeing S in distress leads to the idea of me feeling distressed; (c) this further idea ‘enlives’ the original idea about S’s state of mind; (d) and once this lively and forceful idea becomes an impression, I feel similarly distressed as S. Since
this passion has an unpleasurable cause, someone else’s pain is bad: and thus moral
judgements depend on the possibility of sympathy.

8. **Virtue.** A ‘quality of the mind agreeable to or approved of by every one, who
considers or contemplates it’ (EPM 8n.). This definition has two components: (i) a
mental quality in S, and (ii) a perception (impression) in those who contemplate S.
Both components are necessary and jointly sufficient for virtue. Certain qualities
are made virtues and vices by our approval or condemnation. Virtue is what
grounds a person’s merit, and merit ‘consists altogether in the possession of mental
qualities, useful or agreeable to the person himself or to others’ (EPM 9): (a) Qualities
that are useful to others: benevolence, truthfulness, gratitude, allegiance, etc. (b)
Qualities that are useful to ourselves: caution, temperance, patience, etc. (c) Qualities
immediately agreeable to ourselves: cheerfulness, courage, dignity, poetic
talent etc. (d) Qualities immediately agreeable to others: good manners, wit,
modesty, eloquence etc.

9. But utility should not be understand in terms of 19th-century utilitarianism,
because Hume is not a consequentialist. Utility is good in the sense of promoting
‘the interests of our species and bestow happiness on human society’ (EPM 2.22);
the public good (peace, harmony, order), and ‘principles of humanity’ are consti-
tutive of our attitudes (sentiments’) and thus easily arouse the passions (cf. EPM 5).

10. **Actions** are not bad or good as such (cf. The Sceptic 8). We approve or
disapprove motives that we read off the actions. Motives are signs of, and hence
reveal, our character, and so our personal qualities. So, an action is morally right if
it is done with the right motives (note: not for the right reasons).

11. **Reason** plays a limited role: ‘reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the
passions’ (T 2.3.3.4). Moral claims are not true or false; and neither do we find
objective moral truths by reason. Rather, our moral sentiments, grounded in
passions, ‘gild and stain’ objects and events (EPM App. 1.21). Judgements alone do
not motivate action: “[Y]ou find [Cicero, De fin. IV.46] prove against the Stoics,
that if there be no other Goods but Virtue, tis impossible there can be any Virtue;
because the Mind woud then want all Motives to begin its Actions upon: And tis
on the Goodness or Badness of the Motives that the Virtue of the Action depends.
This proves, that to every virtuous Action there must be a Motive or impelling
Passion distinct from the Virtue, & that Virtue can never be the sole Motive to any
Action. You do not assent to this; tho’ I think there is no Proposition more certain
or important” (Letter to Francis Hutcheson, 17.9.1939, HL I 35).

12. Yet still, things are good or bad because of a history of public or shared approval
of the qualities, which ground these very approvals (cf. Of the Standard of Taste).
But these qualities are not good or bad as such. Consequences for the fact/value
distinction: it is not possible to derive ‘ought’ from ‘is’, or squeeze a prescriptive
claim out of a descriptive one (T 3.1.1.27).

12. Given Hume’s doubts about religion and the power of reason, his main
message is that morality depends on neither of them (see The Stoic, The Platonist).
But moderate or ‘mitigated’ scepticism is not immoral either (see The Sceptic).

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1 Note the anti-Stoic attitude; see Handout 4.