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## Cosmopolitanism and Hume's General Point of View

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Hume was a cosmopolitan by temperament. "I am a Citizen of the World," he says in a letter, and his diverse friendships and correspondences show that he considered himself part of a European-wide republic of letters.[1] But I propose to argue that cosmopolitanism also plays an important role in his philosophy. Hume's Treatise of Human Nature outlines an original and important theory of how humans make moral judgements, by means of what Hume calls the general point of view – a neutral, disinterested perspective that eliminates the natural biases to which our natural moral sentiments are subject. But I shall suggest that Hume's theory also, apparently inadvertently, points to a limitation to our capacity for moral judgement. His account implies that, while it corrects for certain kinds of biases, the general point of view imports others. Specifically, it brings with it an inherent tendency to parochialism.It is only by looking at the works Hume wrote after the Treatise, works dealing with politics and society, that we can find his solution to this problem. In these works, he makes the case that certain sorts of societies allow their inhabitants to transcend the risk of parochialism that is built into human nature: specifically, those societies with particular kinds of legal and political institutions.

Hume wrote his great philosophical work, The Treatise of Human Nature, as a young man, publishing it when he was only twenty-seven. Remarkably, for the remainder of his life he largely seems to have ignored the issues covered in that book, except to revise their presentation in order to appeal to a wider audience. He devoted the major part of his working years to writing a series of essays on art, politics and society, and to composing his monumental History of England. The multi-volume History and his several collections of essays were all best-sellers, and scholars have always acknowledged them to be dazzling displays of erudition and style. The suspicion has lingered, however, that they lack the kind of philosophical brilliance that Hume deploys in the Treatise, and that they do not develop its ideas in any important ways. As a result, these writings have been relatively neglected. I think this is a shame, both because these later writings offer a theory of law and politics that is interesting and important, and because they contribute to making Hume's moral theory, as presented in the Treatise, more coherent and compelling. It is on their contribution to his moral theory that I wish to focus here.

Hume explains in the Treatise that moral judgements involve a sentiment of approval or disapproval towards certain traits of character – specifically, those that produce actions that tend to be useful or agreeable either to their possessor or to those affected by her actions. Take a case where an agent acts in such a way as to benefit another person. As a spectator, we view certain "effects, and . . . external signs" on the beneficiary of the action, and based on this infer we that the beneficiary feels a certain

passion as a result of the action.[2] Through the mechanism of sympathy, which is innate in all of us, this passion is communicated to us as observers and gives rise to a pleasant or unpleasant sentiment. This sentiment is then associated with one of the so-called conative passions, love or hatred, which move us to approve or disapprove of the trait of character within the agent that we think has given rise to the action.[3] As the mechanism by which passion is communicated from the beneficiary of the action to us as observers, sympathy is both powerful and unreliable. It can be general and extensive, but it can also be partial and limited. It can, for instance, lead us to privilege qualities in others that are not morally salient, such as proximity or resemblance to ourselves. Hume thinks that to compensate for these natural partialities, we learn to govern these reactions in such a way that they accord with those of a competent and detached observer reflecting coolly on the situation. He calls this perspective the general point of view. In order, Hume says, to "arrive at a more stable judgment of things, we fix on some steady and general points of view; and always, in our thoughts, place ourselves in them, whatever may be our present situation."[4]

For Hume, our moral sentiments are, like all our feelings, involuntary. From the perspective of the scientific observer, they appear as a brute, unexplainable fact. As Professor Hardin points out in his book *David Hume, Moral and Political Theorist*, benevolence is a preference like a "desire to enjoy a hike in the hills [or] . . . an opera".[5] We might think that our tendency to assume a general point of view is equally a brute fact about our nature, not subject to further analysis. But Hume says something different about it. He claims that "reason requires such impartial conduct."[6] It is, to say the least, curious to see Hume suggesting that reason somehow imposes an obligation on our passions, given that he has told us, elsewhere in the Treatise, that it is a mere slave to these passions. This is an important theme running through the Treatise – that reason serves only to help guide us towards the ends that are the result of our passionate impulses. Yet here we have him saying explicitly that the general point of view is the result of that "reason which is able to *oppose* our passion."[7] He does concede the passions often win this contest. He says that in trying to take the general point of view "it is seldom we can bring ourselves to it, [as] our passions do not readily follow the determination of our judgment".[8] But clearly we do succeed at least some of the time in making considered moral judgements. So apparently we must conclude that when we do make such judgements, they are the result of some kind of imperative of reason, acting in opposition to our natural sentiments. Hume here seems to take a disturbingly un-Humean, and even proto-Kantian, position.

To rescue Hume from this apparent inconsistency, we need to look more closely at his use of the term "reason". He uses the word in a number of different ways over the course of the Treatise and his other works, but here he tells us explicitly how he intends it to be understood. He calls it "nothing but a general calm determination of the passions, founded on some distant view or reflection."[9] On first blush, this is not especially helpful, since it comes close to being circular. Hume seems to be saying that reason requires us to assume the general point of view because it is that faculty that naturally causes us to assume the general point of view. We can escape this circle if we follow a solution first explored in detail by Tito Magri: that by "reason" Hume means the sort of prudential, practical deliberation that allows us to discern our long-term, considered goals in cases where these conflict with our momentary and ill-considered impulses. Reason

requires the general point of view because its assumption is in the service of these long-term goals. The "distant view or reflection" of which Hume speaks is not just the perspective of some neutral observer; it is also the perspective of a self-interested actor giving due consideration to her interests over the long term.[10]

The natural correspondence of disinterested judgements with those in our long-term interest gives Hume a convenient way of solving the problem, but the equation is far from obvious. It needs justification. The necessary link between self-interest and the general point of view is indicated by a phrase Hume repeatedly uses in discussing moral judgement: "society and conversation". "The intercourse of sentiments . . . in society and conversation," he says, "makes us form some general inalterable standard by which we may approve or disapprove of characters and manners."[11] Similarly, and more expansively, he says: "When we form our judgments of persons merely from the tendency of their characters to our own benefit, or to that of our friends, we find so many contradictions to our sentiments in society and conversation, and such an uncertainty from the incessant changes of our situation, that we seek some other standard of merit and demerit, which may not admit of so great variation."[12] This explains how the general point of view could be both natural and indeed inevitable to self-interested actors such as ourselves. It is part of the process by which we make our way in the world, by trying to resolve the apparent contradictions between our sentiments and those of others, the same way we correct our perceptions of the physical world. "Experience soon teaches us this method of correcting our sentiments," he says, "or at least of correcting our language, where the sentiments are more stubborn and inalterable . . . . Such corrections are common with regard to all the senses; and indeed it were impossible we could ever make use of language, or communicate our sentiments to one another, did we not correct the momentary appearances of things, and overlook our present situation."[13]

Because our moral sentiments are natural and inevitable, moral language is bound to be an integral part of any social vocabulary. Yet because these sentiments are also subjective, they are potentially a barrier to communication and interaction. By correcting them by means of the general point of view, the latter serves as an essential technique by which we integrate ourselves, volatile and impartial creatures that we are, into the larger society in which we live. The obligation to take the general point of view, which reason imposes, is therefore neither mysterious nor Kantian. We are motivated to assume it for the same reason we adhere to the artificial virtues: because we want to reap the rewards of being part of society, as a means to achieving our own interests. We are not as strongly motivated to assume the general point of view as we are to adhere to the artificial virtues – we know that society itself is not at stake in such mundane moral questions. But the same explanatory account applies.

By connecting the general point of view with our prudential investment in society, Hume accomplishes his stated "anatomical" purpose in the Treatise: to explain the observed facts about human behaviour without recourse either to the supernatural or to "reason" as some sort of autonomous faculty. Hume's other writings, however, reveal a concern about the effectiveness of this basic tendency in guaranteeing the kind of true universality that morality seems to require. In the essay "Of the Standard of Taste", he worries about the way in which apparent agreement over moral terms, the desire for which (as we have seen) motivates the assumption of the general point of view, may in fact conceal profound differences of opinion. It is noteworthy that in this essay he does

not mention the general point of view, which is a subjective phenomenon, talking instead of a more objective entity, the moral standard. The problem is that the analogy asserted in the Treatise, between moral terms and those describing material features of the world, is imperfect. The latter tend to have fairly obvious objective referents. This is why in matters of science, Hume says, "an explanation of terms commonly ends the controversy."[14] But the referents for moral language are more elusive. A term such as "good" in itself indicates no more than "whatever is to be praised", and so an apparent consensus – around the fact that good things are worthy of praise – often conceals deep disagreement about the actual referents for such terms. Thus, Hume tells us, when we probe the meaning of moral language, "the difference among men is really greater than at first sight appears."[15] He uses the example of the Koran, where we find the Arabic equivalents of such terms as equity, justice and charity, which we all seem to understand. However, these words are actually given entirely different meanings, and "every action is blamed or praised, so far only as it is beneficial to the believers."[16]

Disagreement over the meaning of such terms could of course merely be the result of an individual somehow failing to make the right sort of moral judgement – that is, of failing to use terms in a way that corresponds to our common experience. Early in the Treatise Hume takes note of our tendency towards prejudice, which is a rule of inference "derived from general rules, which we rashly form to ourselves." Though he intends the point to be taken more broadly, to encompass all sorts of judgements, his examples of prejudice are drawn specifically from the moral realm. "An Irishman cannot have wit," he says, giving examples of common prejudices, "and a Frenchman cannot have solidity; for which reason, though the conversation of the former in any instance be visibly very agreeable, and of the latter very judicious, we have entertained such a prejudice against them, that they must be dunces or fops in spite of sense and reason. Human nature is very subject to errors of this kind."[17] In the "Standard of Taste" essay, he notes how fragile our faculty of judgement is. "Those finer emotions of the mind are of a very tender and delicate nature," he says, "and require the concurrence of many favourable circumstances to make them play with facility and exactness, according to their general and established principles. The least exterior hindrance to such small springs, or the least internal disorder, disturbs their motion, and confounds the operation of the whole machine."[18] In this essay Hume tells us that we can improve our aesthetic judgements through practice. "But though there be naturally a wide difference in point of delicacy between one person and another," he says,

> nothing tends further to encrease and improve this talent, than *practice* in a particular art, and the frequent survey or contemplation of a particular species of beauty. When objects of any kind are first presented to the eye or imagination, the sentiment, which attends them, is obscure and confused; and the mind is, in a great measure, incapable of pronouncing concerning their merits or defects . . . . But allow him to acquire experience in those objects, his feeling becomes more exact and nice: He not only perceives the beauties and defects of each part, but marks the distinguishing species of each quality, and assigns it suitable praise or blame.[19]

I think we can expect an almost identical process takes place with morals. As we spend more time in the company of others, we are forced to consider counter-examples to our prejudices, and we also compare our moral language with theirs in an on-going way, thus

ensuring that our words do in fact mean the same thing. This explains why Hume frequently speaks up in his essays in praise of sociability: if we refine our moral judgements through society and conversation, then the more of this we do, the better we will become at making such judgements. I do not think this is enough, however, to dispel the concern raised by Hume's example of the Koran. I take it from the context that he is worried not just about how the book itself distorts moral language, but about the way it has created a closed community of believers who all speak this same distorted language, and whose judgements are as a result systematically biased. Specifically in this case, and Hume presumably chose it because he saw it as a extreme case of a more general problem, they differentiate between in-group members and out-group members. There is no individual failing here – an individual Muslim would, in following the Koran, be using the terms in just the way the faith prescribes. And long-term prudential reasoning will not lead her to challenge the in-group/out-group dichotomy. The social world of the faithful is large enough to offer Muslims the rewards for which society evolves in the first place: security, companionship, the gains from cooperative enterprise, et cetera. And membership in that society *depends* in fact on them orienting their judgements around the in-group/out-group distinction. If they fail to do so they risk incurring the costs of social exclusion. Increased sociability would thus intensify rather than dispel our commitment to these distorted meanings. Far from being a failure of moral judgement, such parochialism thus seems a natural consequence of the general point of view as laid out in the Treatise, and perfectly consonant with its prudential motivation.

Let us call this sort of systematically-biased moral judgement the parochial point of view: a cool, disinterested perspective we are motivated to take by our desire to be part of society, but which, due to the prejudices built into that society's moral language, causes us to fail to give equal consideration to all human beings. In the Treatise Hume seems little concerned about parochialism, as he is generally about the sources of moral disagreement. He says that "there is such an uniformity in the general sentiments of mankind, as to render such questions [as that of a right or a wrong taste in morals, eloquence, or beauty] of but small importance."[20] I think that it is possible to see Hume's turn in his later works towards history and sociology as motivated at least in part by his realisation that the study of human nature cannot on its own explain how we make truly universal moral judgements. Whatever the biographical facts, it is the case, I believe, that a Humean analysis of moral judgement, based on a prudential account of individual motivation, provides an attractive explanation of the way in which we make moral judgements, but it cannot explain when we do or do not fall victim to the parochial point of view. The problem, as Hume seems to have realised, is that the individual is simply the wrong unit of analysis to answer this question. If we are to determine who will escape the parochial point of view and make truly universal moral judgements, and under what circumstances, we have to look, not to the basic mechanisms of human nature or to the logic of self-interest, but to the empirical facts about an individual's experience and the broader context of the society in which she lives. This is why Hume so frequently makes note of the difference in levels of moral development between different nations and between different eras. He told Horace Walpole: "I beg you . . . to consider the great difference in point of morals between uncultivated and civilized ages."[21] In his essay "Of Refinement in the Arts" he gives the example of the "refined GREEKS and ROMANS," who "justly . . . presumed" that the inhabitants of the "uncivilized ages" that preceded

them, like those of the "barbarous nations" that surrounded them, were "as much inferior to their posterity [i.e. the Greeks and Romans themselves] in honour and humanity, as in taste and science."[22]

The way to escape the parochial point of view is quite simple. We need to come into contact with people outside of our own narrow circle, ideally outside of our home nation, so that we can subject our moral judgements to on-going scrutiny and correction. The way to do this is obviously to travel more and thus to broaden our range of social experience. Hume speaks dismissively of those who "live with their fellow-citizens in that distant manner, which is peculiar to ignorant and barbarous nations."[23] I propose to use the term cosmopolitanism to describe the universal-mindedness that brings us closest to a truly general point of view. It is, however, cosmopolitanism of a particular kind, quite different from that of Kant. It does not stem from an abstract conviction that all human beings form a single moral community. Rather, it is the product of the specific experiences we have, actually meeting and talking to people from cultures different from our own. I call this "engaged cosmopolitanism". Unlike Kantian cosmopolitanism, which is the product of individual thinking and reflexion, engaged cosmopolitanism depends on a certain sort of political and institutional environment, to make these sorts of experiences possible.

Hume often uses the terms "civilised" to describe societies with high levels of moral development. But he also frequently describes such societies as "refined", saying for instance that "the ages of refinement are both the happiest and most virtuous."[24] The link between refinement and moral development is intimate but not analytic. People and societies become less parochial as a *result* of refinement, where this specifically entails the pursuit of certain kinds of intellectual and creative activities – as Hume calls them, "the arts and sciences". This pursuit has the indirect effect of stimulating our sociability and pushing us into wider social circles. "The more [the] refined arts advance," Hume says, to give the full quote from which I excerpted above,

> the more sociable men become: nor is it possible, that, when enriched with science, and possessed of a fund of conversation, they should be contented to remain in solitude, or live with their fellow-citizens in that distant manner, which is peculiar to ignorant and barbarous nations. They flock into cities; love to receive and communicate knowledge; to show their wit or their breeding; their taste in conversation or living, in clothes or furniture.[25]

Note here that Hume tells us specifically that people in refined societies choose to uproot themselves and move out of their home environments so they can "flock into cities" and interact with strangers. This interaction will naturally lead them to transcend the parochial point of view, which explains why Hume says in his History of England that the inhabitants of refined ages are "better men" than those from less enlightened ones.[26]

If Hume is correct that refinement and cosmopolitanism are closely connected, his next task is obviously to establish what factors determine a society's level of refinement. It is thus no surprise that he devotes an entire essay to the factors that determine "The Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences". There he warns that because "those who cultivate the sciences in any state, are always few in number . . . chance . . . or secret and unknown causes, must have a great influence on the rise and progress of all the refined arts."[27] However, he is prepared to make certain generalisations about the conditions that allow such people to thrive. He says that "a share of the same spirit and genius must be

antecedently diffused through the people along whom they arise".[28] And for this to happen, the society must possess certain kinds of institutions. Specifically, Hume emphasises the connexion between refinement and forms of government. "The first growth . . . of the arts and sciences," he says, "can never be expected in despotic governments . . . . Free governments [are] the only proper nursery for the arts and sciences". This is because the growth of refinement requires a climate of "security and law".

Hume is not worried about the way in which monarchs themselves oppress the people directly. Rather, as he explains in this essay, it is the "barbarous policy" of delegating "full power to all inferior magistrates" that undermines law and security, and thereby impedes the society's moral development. Hume is acutely aware about the local theatres of justice undermine the stability of the law, as magistrates render judgements according to their own discretion. He thinks that such magisterial discretion is at best unpredictable, and at worst brutally oppressive. To be truly secure, a society must have a system of what Hume calls "general laws" that restrict such discretion. I have talked more about how general laws offer protection in my book David Hume's Political Theory. Here I would like merely to point out that for Hume there is a tight connexion between the legal system and a state's cultural development. Hume offers only an elliptical explanation in this essay. "From law arises security:" he says, "From security curiosity; And from curiosity knowledge."[29] But in his essay "Of Refinement in the Arts" he provides a fuller explanation. There he argues that the general climate of intellectual discovery – "curiosity" as he puts it – that is a precondition to the arts and sciences results from a certain kind of economic development. Hume thinks the "creative spirit" that fosters knowledge exists symbiotically with the "improving spirit" – that is, the desire to innovate in the sphere of material production, what Hume calls the "mechanical arts". Neither the mechanical nor the liberal arts can, he says,

> be carried to perfection, without being accompanied, in some degree, with the other. The same age, which produces great philosophers and politicians, renowned generals and poets, usually abounds with skilful weavers, and ship-carpenters. We cannot reasonably expect, that a piece of woollen cloth will be wrought to perfection in a nation, which is ignorant of astronomy, or where ethics are neglected. The spirit of the age affects all the arts; and the minds of men, being once roused from their lethargy, and put into a fermentation, turn themselves on all sides, and carry improvements into every art and science.[30]

As he explains, an effective and equitable system of law is in turn the pre-condition to this sort of economic development. People will only be motivated to unleash their "improving spirit" where property is secure, such that they have the freedom to enjoy the material rewards of their industry in comfort. Economic development will refine the society in other ways as well, most notably through the increased contacts with strangers that come with trade. So while general laws can never be sufficient on their own to explain the progress of refinement, they are certainly a sine qua non in creating the right environment for the small number of talented individuals to emerge and thrive, through the general climate of economic development that they make possible.

I cannot here dissect the reasons Hume thinks refinement depends on republican government. I do, however, want to insert a caveat. He thinks that while this thesis has been generally true historically, his own age has produced a phenomenon that is almost

without precedent: the enlightened monarch, who understands the need to restrict the power of his inferior magistrates and rule through an equitable system of general laws. Hume is therefore able to explain what he sees as the dramatic improvements in moral development that had taken place in his own time, even within countries still under monarchies, and he can look forward confidently to such improvements continuing into the future.

I have presented my reading of Hume as a way of interpreting his motivation for turning towards history and society in his later writing. It is meant to allow us to see Hume as a writer who not only addressed an incredibly broad range of topics, but who did so as part of a coherent and interesting philosophical programme. Though I have given evidence for my thesis, it must inevitably remain speculative. For those with no interest in such speculation, my argument can be re-cast in purely philosophical terms. I have argued that, while Hume's doctrine of the general point of view provides an attractive way of understanding the process of moral judgement, the threat of parochialism looms as an inescapable one if the doctrine is pscyhologically accurate. My examination of what I called the engaged cosmopolitanism found in his later works allows us to see that Hume himself possesses the resources to explain how we can, under certain circumstaces, escape such parochialism. As we have seen, this explanation appeals not just to individual moral choices, but also to the crucial role of institutions.

Cosmopolitanism has become a central topic of discussion for political philosophers, and in these discussions Kant's influence is pervasive. Following Kant, cosmopolitan philosophers have sought to provide arguments that make a sense of moral obligation towards all human beings rationally compelling. While I do not want to suggest that such attempts are mis-guided – I believe that on the contrary they are valuable – I think that Hume provides us with another perspective on the issue of cosmopolitanism. He reminds us first of all that for such a sense of universal obligation to truly take hold, it must be rooted in our experiences learning about and encountering people different from ourselves. And secondly, he shows that institutions have a crucial role to play in creating an environment where such engaged cosmopolitanism can thrive.

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[1] Letters 1: 470.

[2] T 2.1.9.4: 317-318.

[3] See T 3.1.2.4: 471; T 3.3.1.3: 574-5.

[4] T 3.3.1.15: 581-2.

[5] Russell Hardin, *David Hume, Moral and Political Theorist* (Oxford, 2007), 62.

[6] T 3.3.1.18: 583.

[7] Ibid, emphasis added.

[8] 3.3.1.18: 583.

[9] Ibid.

[10] See Tito Magri, "Natural Obligation and Normative Motivation in Hume's Treatise", *Hume Studies* 22 (1996): 231-254.

[11] T 3.3.3.3: 603; exactly reprinted in EPM 5.2.27: 228.

[12] T 3.3.1.18: 583.

[13] T 3.3.1.16: 582. Cf: "Besides that we ourselves often change our situation . . . we every day meet with persons who are in a different situation from ourselves, and who could never converse with us on any reasonable terms, were we to remain constantly in that situation and point of view which is peculiar to us." T 3.3.1.16: 582. See also Nicolas Capaldi, "Some Misconceptions About Hume's Moral Theory," *Ethics* 76 (1966) 208-211, at 208; Rachel Cohon, "The Common Point of View in Hume's Ethics," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 57 (1997), 827-850, at 840-2.

[14] Essays, 227.

[15] Essays, 228.

[16] Essays, 229.

[17] T 1.3.13.7: 146.

[18] Essays, 232.

[19] Essays, 237.

[20] T fn. 80: 547; Hume's promise to take up the question "afterwards" presumably refers to the projected sixth book, on "criticism," which never appeared.

[21] Letters 2: 111.

[22] Essays, 278.

[23] Essays, 301

[24] Essays, 269.

[25] Essays, 301.

[26] "It must be acknowledged, in spite of those who declaim so violently against refinement in the arts . . . that, as much as an industrious tradesman is both a better man and a better citizen than one of those idle retainers, who formerly depended on the great families; so much is the life of a modern nobleman more laudable than that of an ancient baron." History 3: 76.

[27] Essays, 113.

[28] Essays, 114.

[29] Essays, 118.

[30] Essays, 270-1.