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Vicious Virtues: The Role of Naturalism and Irreligion in Hume's Treatise

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THE ROLE OF NATURALISM AND IRRELIGION IN HUME'S TREATISE

by

SAMUEL ELALOUF

Under the Direction of Eric Entrican Wilson, PhD

ABSTRACT

In his *Treatise of Human Nature*, David Hume offers an elaborate account of the origins of property and suggests modesty has a similar origin. In this paper, I draw on Hume's discussions of modesty and property to extract his account of the origin of modesty. Modesty and property are ultimately regulated by pride and selfishness according to Hume. I argue that these choices of passions, as the grounds of their related virtues, express an intentionally irreligious and anti-Christian approach. Furthermore, I argue that reading Hume in the context of irreligion not only helps understand his own theory, but also explains his different relationships to Shaftesbury and Hutcheson. I conclude that readers of Hume must consider his irreligious motives alongside his skeptical and naturalistic methods if they are to understand him in a historically accurate way, and make sense of how he approaches his project in the *Treatise.*

INDEX WORDS: Hume, Pride, Ethics, Naturalism, Religion, Philosophy

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SAMUEL ELALOUF

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to two people. First, to my mother, Kathryn Elalouf, who showed me the power of selflessness, and has done more for me than I could ever repay; Second, to my father René Elalouf who, like Hume, faced life with "good nature and good humour, tempered with delicacy and modesty, and without even the slightest tincture of malignity" up until the very end.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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1   INTRODUCTION

The gay naturally associate themselves with
 the gay, and the amorous with the amorous:
 But the proud never can endure the proud
-David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*

Some few were Learn'd and Eloquent,
But thousands Hot and Ignorant:
Yet all pass'd Muster that could hide
Their Sloth, Lust, Avarice and Pride;
For which they were as fam'd as Tailors
For Cabbage, or for Brandy Sailors
-Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*

These two quotations represent a trend that developed in moral and political philosophy leading up to the eighteenth century. The quotation from Hume illustrates the tensions arising from the social intermingling of human passions, while Mandeville's verses express the insight that social mechanisms emerge to regulate those passions. Thinkers interested in the social regulation of the passions understood along with Newton that forces are stopped only by opposing forces of a similar kind, and along with Spinoza that "an affect can neither be taken away nor restrained except through an opposite and stronger affect" (Spinoza, Part IV Prop. 7). Motivated by these insights, many thinkers rejected the metaphor of a war between reason and passion, or between divinity and nature, preferring to see the study of morals as an investigation into a civil war of passion against passion. Winning this war came to be seen as the key to progress, and Albert Hirschman has noted: "the idea of engineering social progress by cleverly setting up one passion to fight another became a fairly common intellectual pastime in the course of the eighteenth century" (Hirschman, 26).

Within this context, Hume wrote the *Treatise of Human Nature*, in which he engages with many figures who were involved in the debate over the passions. Consequently, the passions have a fundamental role in Hume's theory of mind and his account of ethics. A salient feature of Hume's account of the civil war amongst the passions is that he attributes similar roles to selfishness and pride in social and moral development. In Book III of the *Treatise* Hume explains, "In like manner… as we establish the laws of nature, in order to secure property in society, and prevent the opposition of self-interest; we establish the rules of good-breeding, in order to prevent the opposition of men's pride, and render conversation agreeable and inoffensive" (T 3.3.2.10). Here Hume indicates a symmetry in how the institutions regulating selfishness and those regulating pride develop; however, he never explains the way norms regulating pride develop as systematically as he does the norms regulating selfishness. In this essay, I outline Hume's position, flesh out the account of modesty and the rules of good-breeding that he only gestures to, and draw out a further exegetical insight that comes from understanding Hume's position and its relation to the Christian tradition.

In particular, Hume argues that respect for property is grounded in selfishness and modesty is grounded in pride, giving ethically central roles to two famously sinful passions. This paper outlines and contextualizes the irreligious aspects of Hume's arguments about selfishness and pride. By 'irreligion' I mean an active hostility towards religious dogma, organized religion, and Christianity in particular. My vocabulary and my position both draw on, and reinforce, Paul Russell's argument in *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise: Skepticism, Naturalism, and Irreligion* that "the irreligious interpretation provides a fundamentally different account of… Hume's aims and intentions in the *Treatise* and thereby alters our understanding of the significance of this work" (Russell, *Riddle of Hume's Treatise,* viii). The term 'irreligion' is more appropriate in this context than related and competing terms such as 'atheist' or 'anti-Christian.' While my focus on Hume here looks at his specifically anti-Christian arguments, those arguments are bound up with a number of instances where Hume criticizes

organized religion in general, which are important to appreciate. There are also problems with the term 'atheist' because Hume's attitude towards theism is more equivocal than his attitude towards religion (see Russell, *Riddle of Hume's Treatise,* 284). Attempts to explain Hume's anti-religious arguments as skeptically motivated fail to capture his hostility towards religion in general, and Christianity in particular. Hume was also, notably, responding to a specific version of Christianity represented most clearly by Samuel Clarke, that dominated the intellectual landscape of his day. Each general label for Hume's argumentative stance is too monolithic, much like the umbrella descriptions of Hume as a 'naturalist' or a 'skeptic.' That said, the irreligious dimension of Hume's work demands integration into a historically conscious reading of it, alongside considerations of his naturalism and his skepticism. Finding Hume's place between these various general philosophical poles allows us to better understand the nuances of his approach.

Ultimately, I argue that Hume's irreligion is fundamental to understanding the account he provides of the passions and morality, and is integral to understanding the *Treatise* as a whole. I extend Russell's argument to Hume's moral theory, which Russell only covers in a single chapter of his book. Extending this reading of Hume through his moral theory promises to be fruitful since moral and social theory were of such clear importance to Christian thinkers of the day, making them prime targets for irreligious writers. Hume leaves the reader a number of clues in the *Treatise* to discern the religiously subversive aspects of his position. Hume's arguments that respect for property is grounded in selfishness and that modesty is grounded in pride are two such clues, both giving unsavory roles to historically sinful passions. Early readers of the *Treatise* were keenly aware of the anti-Christian aspects of Hume's arguments. The structural and textual clues Hume leaves, taken alongside his reception as 'atheistic,' provide support for the project of reading the *Treatise* as bound up with the religious debates of the day. This new reading of Hume illuminates differences between Hume, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson, that have been obscured by previous readings. Without the

addition of the dimension of religion, Hume's tenuous intellectual relationship with Hutcheson, and his more congenial one with Shaftesbury, both remain enigmatic. Distinguishing the different thinkers' theistic, naturalistic, and irreligious approaches to moral sense theory enriches our discussion of sentimentalism, stopping sentimentalists from being misconstrued as a homogenous group of thinkers. At the same time, the irreligious reading of Hume's work illuminates the broader role of secularism and irreligion in the development of modern ethics.

2   JUSTICE, PROPERTY, AND SELFISHNESS

Selfishness, self-love, and self-interest played important roles in the development of ethics and Christian thought, and property rights have historically been at the heart of British moral philosophy. At least since Locke, the association between justice, one of the four cardinal virtues, and private property has been salient in British moral philosophy. For Locke, the "related concepts of justice and of property in a broad sense… have an obvious place in God's plans for us" (Schneewind, 217). Discussions of property and selfishness are also bound up in different views about moral motivation. Paul Russell points out that the debate about "human morality and the motivations lying behind it trades in a series of widely discussed and debated paradoxes" and notes that the "most notorious of these is that virtue and benevolence are in fact motivated by a desire for praise and flattery" (Russell, *Riddle of Hume's Treatise,* 246). The idea that certain virtues could be grounded in forms of selfishness or self-love was a controversial idea, but one that nonetheless gained traction since Mandeville raised it in criticizing Shaftesbury. Similar debates about the selfishness or philanthropy of people's motives extended to discussions of property and justice. Many thinkers, such as Shaftesbury, tried to distance justice from selfish motives, perhaps seeing it as dialectically unsavory to ground one of the cardinal virtues in economic self-interest, which the Christian tradition held to be the "root of all kinds of evil" (*The New Oxford Bible,* 1 Timothy 6:10).

Hume's approach to these debates is to come up with a general psychological theory that he can apply to explain norms like those regulating property. According to Hume, moral norms emerge from social convention rooted in human psychology, or "passions," which also provide the motivation to act. Hume's theory of norms bottoms out in facts about human psychology and convention, eschewing any attempt to ground moral norms in reason. Hume's psychological bent is evident in his claim that "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never

pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them" (T 2.3.3.4). So, when Hume speaks of property laws as "laws of nature" he does so with an eye to their origins. Annette Baier captures this well, explaining that in the *Treatise*, Hume treats us as "an inventive species, whose cultural inventions, while they are real novelties, owe much to our non-self-invented nature" (Baier, 148). On Hume's view, justice is artificial, but artifice is natural.

Applying his general method, Hume aims to explain the development of justice, and the "laws of nature," in terms of relatively simple and uncontroversial aspects of human psychology. Hume sees selfishness as a feature of humans' "natural temper" (T 3.2.2.5) and argues that it is only from "the selfishness and confin'd generosity of men, along with the scanty provision nature has made for his wants, that justice derives its origin" (T 3.2.2.18). Here and elsewhere, Hume ties together scarcity, selfish desire, and sympathy, seeing them as interrelated factors motivating and facilitating the establishment of property laws. In putting forth his account, Hume faces the challenge of figuring out what motivates people to moderate their selfishness in the face of scarcity, rather than steal when it suits them.

One might respond to this challenge by opposing selfishness to reason or a typically positive passion such as benevolence; such approaches would be traditional, pitting reason against passion, or combatting typically vicious passions with typically virtuous ones. Hume rejects such traditional approaches because he believes that a passion can only be controlled by an equally robust and opposed passion (T 2.1.2.3). The problem Hume faces is that it is not clear what passion has enough oppositional force to counteract selfishness; his solution to the problem is an ingenious and now familiar one:

> 'Tis certain, that no affection of the human mind has both a sufficient force, and a proper
>
> direction to… render men fit members of society, by making them abstain from the
>
> possessions of others…. There is no passion, therefore, capable of controlling the interested

affection, but the very affection itself, by an alteration of its direction. Now this alteration must necessarily take place upon the least reflection; since 'tis evident, that the passion is much better satisfy'd by its restraint, than by its liberty, and that by preserving society, we make much greater advances in the acquiring possessions, than by running into the solitary and forlorn condition. (T 3.2.2.13)

According to Hume, selfishness is divided against itself, rather than being enmeshed in a battle against reason or any more typically virtuous passion. The selfish individual must choose between satisfying her short or long term desires, the former more easily and immediately achievable and the latter more socially mediated but with a far greater return. Because the long term desires stemming from the selfish passion are "better satisfy'd by… restraint than liberty," the passion ultimately functions as its own restraint (once the actors involved have become appropriately behaviorally conditioned). Consequently, on this account, a vice such as selfishness is the source of the very virtues that regulate it. Although Hume doesn't use this language, it seems that the consequences of the passions are realized over the course of history, constrained by both scarcity and society until indulgence is (hopefully) borne out of restraint. The passage above captures the broader features of the development of property norms but neglects certain finer details.

Hume does not attribute the ability to make long-term utilitarian calculations to the involved agents. The account Hume provides is subtler, focusing on gradual developments over time by way of behavioral conditioning. This subtlety is illustrated in the metaphor he uses of two rowers on a boat:

Two men, who pull the oars of a boat, do it by an agreement or convention, tho' they have never given promises to each other. Nor is the rule concerning the stability of possession the less deriv'd from human conventions, that it arises gradually, and acquires force by a slow progression, and by our repeated experience of the inconveniences of transgressing it.

(T 3.2.2.10)

In this masterful example, each time a rower ceases to row she experiences the negative consequences and "repeated experience of the inconvenience of transgressing" the implicit norm and is thereby motivated to promote the increasing uniformity of the convention. Likewise, one could imagine two families of humans gradually and similarly developing a convention regarding property; each family, motivated by its selfishness, would at first steal from the other family whenever the opportunity arose. The other family would retaliate or reciprocate the theft, in turn, going against the first family's interests, which motivated the original case of theft. As more "repeated experiences of the inconvenience of transgressing" the implicit property norm accrue, the laws of justice take shape and begin to bind the families to the norm. It's important to realize that while it is possible to talk about this development in terms of implicit norms being made explicit, one of Hume's points is that the implicit norms themselves arise out of entirely non-normative transactions. This development is gradual and unintentional, bearing a closer analogy to common law than contract law in that it develops implicitly in various practices. Furthermore, the features of human psychology motivating this development are primarily sentient, rather than sapient, based in pleasure, pain, and passion, more than reason.

People's initiation into the convention of respecting property is an important part of Hume's story. Even if adhering to certain social conventions helps one reap greater rewards, what motivates one to participate in the convention or learn of its benefits in the first place? Hume acknowledges of humans that "'tis impossible, in their wild uncultivated state, that by study and reflection alone, they shou'd ever be able to attain this knowledge," but then he reassuringly explains, "Most fortunately, therefore, there is conjoin'd to those necessities, whose remedies are remote and obscure, another necessity, which having a present and more obvious remedy, may justly be regarded as the first and original principle of human society. This necessity is no other than that natural appetite betwixt the

sexes" (T 3.2.2.4). Hume believes that initiation into a family provides individuals with their first experience of the utility of passionate self-regulation in a social context and such initiation results naturally from the simple and uncontroversial instinct for sexual attraction. By basing convention in the universal relation of kinship, and making its initial motivation the basic and non-controversial sex instinct, Hume avoids attributing any complex process of calculation to the members of the imagined primitive society; furthermore, this extends Hume's project of tracing the origins of social practice to sentience rather than sapience.

It may seem here that Hume is grounding all morality in self-interest, but he sees another key factor playing into moral practice. For Hume, sympathy is one of the most fundamental sources of moral approbation. He explains that although selfishness motivates the development of social institutions, it is sympathy that leads to the higher moral pleasures and pains, which motivate senses of obligation:

> To the imposition then, and observance of these rules… they are at first mov'd only by a regard to interest. But when society… encreas'd to a tribe or nation, this interest is more remote…. The general rule reaches beyond those instances, from which it arose…. Thus self-interest is the original motive to the establishment of justice: But a sympathy with public interest is the source of the moral approbation, which attends that virtue. (T 3.2.2.24)

Members of society act like mirrors, reflecting and intensifying prevailing sentiments, which spread ever wider (T 2.2.5.21). Norms develop as people pursue pleasure and avoid pain, and those norms become recognized by members of society; sympathy ultimately leads me to care about the protection of others by the emergent laws, regardless of the benefits I stand to gain. Hume demystifies (or at least attempts to demystify) people's sense of obligation by grounding morality in social practice. Hume further grounds social practice in individual experience, holding that "without the appropriate feelings there would be no such things as moral judgments" and that "our moral

judgments, like our causal judgments, are 'projections'" (Stroud, 184-185). On Hume's account, "without the appropriate feelings there would be no such things as moral judgments" and without the establishment of the rules of justice "there are no rights, duties, or obligations at all" (Stroud, 184 & 203); it is only after the establishment of justice, motivated by selfishness, that sympathy, solidarity, and society (in the proper sense of the word) are possible. But in the end, it is sympathy that specifically grounds those peculiar moral obligations we feel towards one another and, for us, sympathy is as real as any factor motivating us to act.

Stepping back one can see how these emergent norms function like a kind of secularized providence; Hume writes, "as the self-love of one person is naturally contrary to that of another, these several interested passions are oblig'd to adjust themselves after such a manner as to concur in some system of conduct and behaviour. This system, therefore, comprehending the interest of each individual, is of course advantageous to the public; tho' it be not intended for that purpose by the inventors" (T 3.2.6.6). Passages like these make Hume's account appear more as a characterization of the expression of passion in society than of the development of rational social institutions. The characteristics of property laws, outlined above, namely, the self-regulation of selfishness, the psychological motivation for justice, the gradual emergence of institutions, and the initiation into convention, are essential for understanding the analogy between norms governing property and those governing modesty. It is important to realize that the rules of justice emerge gradually out of social interactions that incentivize self-interest's self-regulation. This ultimately means that, through self-regulation, the passion once seen to be the "root of all kinds of evil" is now characterized as the most fundamental motivation people have to adopt actions in line with the cardinal virtue of justice.

3   VIRTUE, MODESTY, AND PRIDE

If modesty is developmentally analogous to private property then it will be grounded in the passion it regulates, namely pride; this makes sense because pride is to the rules of good breeding as selfishness is to the laws of nature or property. If this feature of the analogy holds, it will further support the view that Hume attempts an irreligious polemic against the Christian tradition, a tradition that condemns pride, construing it as the greatest of all sins and the passion that lead to Lucifer's rebellion. Saying that pride, the greatest of the seven deadly sins, serves as the underlying motivation for modesty is a starkly irreligious move. It is unlikely that Hume would have been unaware of the irreligious connotations of his account.

We cannot understand Hume's account of the "rules of good breeding" and modesty without first understanding his treatment of pride because, as in the case of selfishness, pride ultimately grounds the virtue that regulates it. In the *Treatise*, Hume provides a complex account of pride that considers it in a variety of contexts. In Book II, Hume considers the purely psychological features of pride. In that section his conception of pride is broad, and he opens it by explaining that the status of pride as one of the "simple and uniform impressions" precludes it from being given a "just definition" (T 2.1.2.1); nonetheless one can describe features of pride and stipulate a broad definition of it as a pleasant, self-directed, passion (T 2.1.2.2). While the object of pride is the self, the cause of pride can focus on a "vast variety of *subjects*" including, amongst other things: "wit, good-sense, learning, courage…. beauty, strength, agility, good mien, address in dancing…. Our country, family, children, relations, riches, house, gardens, horses, dogs," etc. (T 2.1.2.5). The simplicity of Hume's description of pride is what allows him to apply it to such a wide variety of cases. When Hume considers this simple psychological conception of pride in a social context, he makes a number of interesting observations about its role in moral practice.

In Book III of the *Treatise*, Hume considers the complex manifestations of pride in the context of morality, extending his treatment of pride from its psychological role to its societal one. Hume sees pride as serving important purposes in moral practice, recognizing that it "capacitates us for business, and, at the same time, gives us an immediate satisfaction," but he goes on to point out that pride sometimes "goes beyond its just bounds" and becomes a source of discord (T 3.3.2.14). A number of factors determine the moral status of an expression, or manifestation, of pride. *First*, there are the social and individual forms of pleasure or pain caused by the manifestation of pride. *Second*, there is the relationship between the person manifesting pride and the person observing and evaluating that manifestation.[1] In certain situations the evaluator will sympathize with the proud individual, causing her to experience a pleasant sensation similar to that experienced by the subject (T 3.3.2.3); an example of this is when a parent feels pride for the accomplishments of her child. On the other hand, in some situations the evaluator compares (or more accurately, contrasts) herself with the proud individual and feels the painful twinge of humility (T 3.3.2.5). *Third,* Hume considers people's ability to discriminate between well and poorly justified expressions of pride. The problem of justification stems from the epistemic constraints on individuals' ability to evaluate their own expressions of pride; this complexity impacts the moral practices that develop to regulate pride.

Manifestations of pride are grounded in a series of beliefs and attitudes bound up in a complex causal process; thus, one's understanding of these various factors is limited in many cases. This complexity in grounds allows for the possibility that the "grounds may be open to criticism: the relevant belief may be false or unreasonable, or the general attitude may be based in turn on unwarranted beliefs, or an injudicious weighing of considerations…. Pride is open to criticism, then, but the criticism must concern the whole constellation of belief and attitude that is its direct source"

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[1] Hume's account of these dynamics is vague, but this vagueness is unproblematic if one considers his account a general one that serves as a basis for further inquiry.

(Davidson, 753); for example, someone may be proud of his or her wealth, but this pride may be dampened (or even eradicated) if it is pointed out that the wealth was inherited rather than earned. Hume notes that when someone manifests pride that is "ill-grounded," others will be more critical of them; but the grounds of pride are complex and, "No one can well distinguish in himself betwixt the vice and virtue, or be certain, that his esteem of his own merit is well-founded," and consequently "all direct expressions of this passion are condemn'd" (T 3.3.2.10). The epistemic limitations to evaluating one's own pride, paired with the universal propensity people have to feel proud of themselves, leads to a general treatment of each other's expressions of pride as unjustified and therefore vicious. In other words, the propensity people have towards self-bias motivates a general suspicion regarding self-directed approbation, which leads to a culture that values modesty. This point is important, because Hume uses it both to explain how pride could self-regulate and to explain why pride is demonized in the first place, furthering his project of psychologically explaining moral practices. It is important to realize that the various psychological and social factors that Hume identifies will often be in tension with each other and that ethical practices will function as means to equilibrium among the different pains and pleasures associated with the different factors.

The rules of good breeding are one such means to emotional equilibrium. Just as the "laws of nature" are best understood through their origin in selfishness, so too are the rules of good breeding best understood in terms of their origins in pride. Turning back to the quotation guiding this paper, Hume writes, "In like manner, therefore, as we establish the laws of nature, in order to secure property in society, and prevent the opposition of self-interest; we establish the rules of good-breeding, in order to prevent the opposition of men's pride, and render conversation agreeable and inoffensive" (T 3.3.2.10). The two points of analogy that Hume states are the regulation of opposing passions and the protection of various conventions; but the analogy runs deeper than Hume makes clear, extending beyond the functions and establishment, and into the developmental structure of

both sets of norms. Hume never provides the same in-depth account of the development of the "rules of good breeding" as he does for the "laws of nature" but he provides a number of remarks that can be used alongside various passages in the latter account to reconstruct his position on the origins of modesty.

As in other cases, Hume explores the operations of pride in various settings and contexts, always with an eye to pain and pleasure. This approach makes sense because Hume sees the rules of good breeding as artificial like justice, seeing both sets of norms as "mere human contrivances for the interest of society" (T 3.3.1.9). He starts out by explaining that pride has, at different times, both virtuous and vicious qualities determined by its surrounding circumstances:

> The merit of pride or self-esteem is deriv'd from two circumstances, viz. its utility and its agreeableness to ourselves; by which it capacitates us for business, and, at the same time, gives us an immediate satisfaction. When it goes beyond its just bounds, it loses the first advantage, and even becomes prejudicial. (T 3.3.2.14)

So, pride can be seen both as a source of personal feelings of agreeableness and as a means to effective business dealings. This clarifies that Hume divides pride, like selfishness, into individually and socially evaluative categories that can reinforce and oppose each other in various contexts; this similarity is one of those Hume suggests. Our interactions in society require that we moderate our pride to avoid causing offense and disagreement, and this moderation requires some force or motivation behind it. This account of pride elucidates a position held by Hume in both cases; namely, that a given passion is rarely virtuous or vicious in itself, and that its moral status is largely situational. With selfishness Hume rejected the methods of pitting reason against passion, and pitting opposed passions against each other, favoring an account of a passion's battle against itself instead. With respect to pride, it can be asked: which of the methods does Hume employ here?

In what he describes as a 'trite observation,' Hume gives a possible answer to the question of what motivates the regulation of pride:

> 'Tis a trite observation in philosophy... that 'tis our own pride, which makes us so much displeas'd with the pride of other people; and that vanity becomes insupportable to us merely because we are vain.... As we are, all of us, proud in some degree, pride is universally blam'd and condemn'd by all mankind. (T 3.3.2.7)

Just as selfishness regulates itself, for the sake of the goods acquirable through society and protection by norms concerning property, so too does pride motivate the norms regulating itself; this is another relevant similarity between the two accounts. This makes sense given the universal propensity towards both passions that Hume attributes to human beings. The force and universality of pride and selfishness make them the best candidates for motivating their own regulation, or so Hume argues. Peoples' desire for others to act modestly, and conceal their pride, stems from their own feelings of pride, and many desires wouldn't draw motivational force without the activity of that passion. Humans naturally want to express their pride, but "were we always to give vent to our [proud] sentiments... we shou'd mutually cause the greatest indignation in each other" thereby destroying the socially and individually beneficial aspects of pride and hurting our own pride in the process (T 3.3.2.10). This motivates the realization that "if we observe these rules [of good breeding and modest composure] in our conduct, men will have more indulgence for our secret sentiments, when we discover them in an oblique manner" (T 3.3.2.10).

Consider an example: Imagine two colleagues, Andy and Maria, of similarly high merit. Both Andy and Maria believe themselves to be good at their jobs and take pride in that. Both of them also realize that their self-evaluation could be wrong, understanding that people have a bias in favor of themselves. As a result, both of them avoid robust displays of pride, instead expressing modesty. If Andy or Maria expresses pride directly, the other will likely see grounds for undermining that pride

or at least be bothered that someone would not constrain their expressions of pride in the face of general self-oriented bias. If Andy expresses proud self-approbation, then Maria will be lead to conclude (by means of self-comparison) that the expression is unwarranted; this will lead Maria to react negatively, hurting Andy's pride. On the other hand, if Andy presents himself modestly, and reveals his talents obliquely, then Maria will likely sympathize with him and enjoy his talents without considering their display an act of vanity. So one's pride is best expressed and satisfied through modesty. If people could be blatantly self-congratulatory, then many would. People refrain from displaying pride because it often does hurt their pride to express it, just as people might lose their property if they let their selfishness motivate them to steal and undermine norms of property.

While this example depicts Andy and Maria making rational calculations, their reason is only functioning instrumentally, as a slave to the proud passion motivating them. Ultimately it is pride that prompts the emergence of the norm, and provides the motivational force necessary to put it into practice, and reason merely makes the cost-benefit analysis to determine the best course of action. Important for our analogy is the fact that Andy and Maria only follow this norm, and make this analysis, because of a long history of behavioral conditioning to it. If we are imagining early humans instituting the norms, they would have been more driven by trial and error than by calculation. In either event, as the rules of good breeding emerge and ossify, the "repeated experience of the inconveniences of transgressing" them motivates their adoption. One is led to act modestly as a means of appeasing one's pride. But as in the case of selfishness, norms that begin as a series of self-interested strategies soon decouple from their motivational origins and, by way of sympathy, take on a life of their own.

The only part of the analogy not covered thus far is the initiation into the conventions that allow one to become aware of the benefits of the rules of good breeding. This is in some respects the most straightforward similarity between the two sets of norms simply because it is likely identical

in both cases. The "appetite betwixt' the sexes" initiates one into a social setting in which all artificial conventions naturally emerge and one need not appeal to more causes of initiation than one must. The sexual appetite leads individuals from solitude to society, introducing the selfish to the selfish and the proud to the proud, bringing with socialization the necessity for norms governing human passions and interests so that they do not give rise to conflict and instability. Through adaptation and adjustment, the norms governing modesty gradually emerge, and pride begins to cloak itself in modesty.

This account of the rules of good breeding mirrors that of the origins of property, as Hume claims it does: pride is to modesty as selfishness is to respect for property, pride and selfishness being the passions that ground the very norms governing them. Both are motivated by people's gradual and unconscious discovery that their passions will be better satisfied through restraint. In the case of good breeding, transgressions are met with indignation and scorn, but modesty and humility are met with praise and exaltation. Regarding property, transgressions of the emergent norm lead to counter-transgressions from others who steal in retaliation, while respect for the norm results in economic stability. In both cases, the passions being regulated have both positive and negative roles to play. Both sets of norms emerge in social settings that people are driven into by their sexual instinct, and this social setting motivates the establishment of families or tribes. The entire process is driven by a number of features of human sentience: (1) sexual desire, (2) selfishness and greed, (3) pride and love of praise, and (4) the pursuit of pleasure. The role of reason in both cases is minor and primarily instrumental. This clarifies the many ways in which the two sets of norms develop and function "in a like manner" with respect to their origins, purposes, and efficient causes. Furthermore, and relevant to my broader point about irreligion, both sets of norms are grounded in passions historically demonized by the Christian tradition.

4   EXEGESIS AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Both justice and modesty, as Hume describes them, bear some interestingly vicious features. Interpreters of Hume often neglect the irreligious dimensions of his work. Paul Russell points out that interpretations of the *Treatise* almost unilaterally are presented within the context of a battle between rationalist, naturalist, and skeptical positions. Russell, who makes the case I am elaborating upon, argues that "the issue of religion adds a dimension of depth that is absent in the original three-cornered framework" (Russell, *Riddle of Hume's Treatise,* 247). Interpreting the *Treatise* as an irreligious polemic will help us understand it better both *historically* and *internally*. Hume's irreligious choice of passions is not coincidental, both supporting and being supported by the broader irreligious reading. These two families of exegetical benefits can be seen when one considers Hume's rich historical context.

Hume's position not only stands in stark contrast to the rationalism of thinkers like Samuel Clarke, for instance, but also to their religiosity. Contrary to the Christian tradition, which holds that one should "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit" (*The New Oxford Bible,* Philippians 2:3-4) and that "where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind" (*The New Oxford Bible,* James 3:16), Hume argues that selfish ambition and vain conceit are *at the very heart* of order and moral practice.[2] In fact, pride and selfishness are included in both of the often confused lists of cardinal and deadly sins, and have been central to them since their appearance around roughly 100 B.C. (Bloomfield, 44). In the history of the cardinal sins pride and selfishness (avarice, cupidity, etc.) are the two that regularly are seen to be foundational, or "root,"

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[2] In Jaqueline Taylor's *Deadly Vices*, she opens the section on pride by noting Hume's curious inclusion of pride in his list of virtues as an exception to the tradition.

sins (Bloomfield, 88). The struggle for priority between the two eventually calms when pride

assumes dominance as time goes on (Bloomfield, 75, 106, 110, & 183). In England, literary

treatments of the cardinal sins placed pride at their heart since before 1200 (Bloomfield, 108-109).

John Wycliffe continued the exploration of the cardinal sins; writing in the 1300s, he saw pride as

the greatest of the sins (Bloomfield, 188). In the 1400s, in the religious encyclopedia *Jacob's Well*,

pride was still held to be the "root of all sins" (Bloomfield, 222-223). Even up through Milton,

whom Hume describes as too heavily "occupied in the great disputes of Religion, Politics, and

Philosophy" (Hume, *Moral Philosophy*, 324), saw pride as fundamental; in *Paradise Lost*, Milton argues

that the first cause of sin was the devil's "Pride" which "cast him out from Heaven, with all his host

Of Rebel Angels, by whose aid aspiring To set himself in glory above his peers, He trusted to have

equaled the most high, If he opposed; and with ambitious aim Against the throne and monarchy of

God Raised impious war in Heav'n and battle proud With vain attempt" (ln 37-44). So in the

Christian tradition as a whole, and its manifestations in England, pride and selfishness stand out as

some of the most demonized and vicious passions, with pride being widely acknowledged as the

greatest of all sins.

    In order to understand Hume's theory in its context, highlighting the dimension of irreligion

that pervades it is integral. Hume's moral theory, and the *Treatise* as a whole, is best understood

within the context of a debate set in motion by Thomas Hobbes. In his *Leviathan* and elsewhere

Hobbes presents a thoroughly materialistic and anti-rationalist account of human nature and ethics

(*Leviathan* 1:6:7 & 1:8:16). One of the most virulent critics of Hobbes' account was the rationalist

Christian thinker Samuel Clarke. In his *Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God*, Clarke argues

that there are eternal and immutable moral obligations. He saw morals as accessed by way of reason

and went so far as to claim that "the true ground and foundation of all eternal moral obligations is...

[the ability of reasons to] determine the will of all... intelligent beings" (Clarke, 89-90). He also sees

moral obligations as intrinsically motivational once discerned, saying that "intelligence… wholly separate from any power of will and choice" is "in respect of any excellency and perfection, or indeed to any common sense, is the very same thing as no intelligence at all" (Clarke, 38). For Clarke moral motivations are rationally discovered and categorically motivating; a position which Clarke explicitly notes is "directly contradictory to Mr. Hobbes's" (Clarke in Raphael 228). There were, however, a number of neo-Hobbists and naturalists who presented alternatives to Clarke's rationalism, and who were influential in Hume's development.

One alternative to Clarke's rationalism was the naturalistic moral sense theory espoused by Anthony Cooper III, the Earl of Shaftesbury, and developed by Francis Hutcheson. Shaftesbury provided a thoroughly naturalistic account, according to which the "affection of a creature towards the good of the species or common nature, is as proper and natural to him, as it is to any organ, part or member of an animal body, or mere vegetable, to work its known course, and regular way of growth" (Shaftesbury, 54). Humans are motivated to act morally by a "reflected Sense" that evaluates the actions and affections of others (Shaftesbury, 45). Shaftesbury rejects rationalism, grounding morality in human sentience rather than sapience. Despite his anti-rationalist views, Shaftesbury also rejects Hobbist egoism by making the species (rather than the individual) the domain in relation to which moral rules are determined. Paul Russell has argued that it is because of these very "anti-Hobbist features of Shaftesbury's system" that "many Christian moralists found his principles attractive and were able to set aside the irreligious elements in his writings" (Russell, *Riddle of Hume's Treatise,* 245). So, Shaftesbury's moral sense theory provides a naturalistic explanation of why people perceive moral qualities in the world. At the same time, it reinforces the rejection of a rationalistic account of morals by grounding them in sentience. Like Hume's account, Shaftesbury's gives sympathy a central role in moral motivation. His rejection of Hobbist egoism and reductionism

made Shaftesbury's account more palatable to his Christian readers and colleagues, some of whom he heavily influenced.

Francis Hutcheson was influenced by Shaftesbury, and in turn, Hutcheson influenced Hume. Hutcheson agreed with Hobbes and Shaftesbury that morals were sensed rather than reasoned out and that instinct rather than reason motivated moral conduct. Hutcheson writes, "the same Cause which determines us to pursue Happiness for ourselves, determines us both to Esteem and Benevolence on their proper Occasions" namely "the very Frame of our Nature, or a generous instinct" (Hutcheson in Selby-Bigge 92). Expanding upon Shaftesbury, Hutcheson asserts that "the Author of Nature has.... given us a Moral Sense, to direct our Actions, and to give us still nobler Pleasures.... We are not to imagine, that this moral Sense, more than the other Senses, supposes any innate Ideas, Knowledge, or Practical Proposition" (Hutcheson in Selby-Bigge 89). This position contrasts with Clarke's, but it also ultimately grounds the moral sense in God rather than in the human organism, contrary to the positions of both Hobbes and Shaftesbury.

Leaving out the religious dimension makes it hard to distinguish key differences between Hutcheson and Shaftesbury, as well as Hume's relation to them; for instance, Hutcheson sees our moral sense as a gift from the "Author of Nature" and ultimately grounds sentience in divinity, where Shaftesbury makes no such move. In their own time, this was a difference that sparked controversy; Russell notes that "Shaftesbury's reputation as an anti-Christian freethinker certainly posed problems for his more orthodox Scottish followers. This is especially apparent in the case of Hutcheson, who found it necessary to repudiate explicitly (i.e., in print) Shaftesbury's 'prejudices against Christianity'" (Russell, *Riddle of Hume's Treatise,* 245).

Hume noticed Hutcheson's more religious approach and criticized him for it in a letter he wrote to Hutcheson in March 1740. In that letter, Hume raised a number of problems facing the attempt to ground sentimentalism in religion. There he indicates his belief that "our understanding

of human moral life leaves us without any relevant understanding of how we can relate to God as members of a shared moral community," and as Russell notes, "It is a short step from this position to the conclusion that religious morality, insofar as it is based on language that we use to describe and interpret human moral life, is simply unintelligible" (Russell, *Riddle of Hume's Treatise,* 260). Hutcheson found aspects of Shaftesbury disquieting but Hume prefers Shaftesbury's naturalistic optimism to Hutcheson's religiosity, as is evident in his analogical argument that, "The anatomist ought never to emulate the painter; nor in his accurate dissections and portraitures of the smaller parts of the human body, pretend to give his figures any graceful and engaging attitude or expression" (T 3.3.6.6). Hume explains that even if it displeases our religious or aesthetic sentiments, we should continue in our naturalistic inquiries in ethics. So, both for his predecessors, as well as Hume's understanding of them, the presence or absence of irreligion was considered a crucial and substantive aspect of their position that was intimately related to their other philosophical and methodological commitments. It is important to note that the addition of this new religious dimension is meant to clarify Hume's naturalism, distinguishing him from other naturalists of the day, rather than to stand as an alternative to naturalistic readings. For example, Hume's relation to Shaftesbury and Hutcheson shows that, for Hume's contemporaries, their naturalism and empiricism were circumscribed by their views of religion.

These insights motivate adding a religious dimension to our understanding of Hume's dialectical situation, thereby enriching the exegetical framework through which we read Hume and his predecessors. The new framework treats irreligion as both a historically important and a philosophically substantive feature of positions in ethics, thereby adding depth to debates about early modern ethics. From this perspective "the moral sense school divides between thinkers such as Shaftesbury and those more like Hutcheson. Shaftesbury was careful to argue for the autonomy of morals and the possibility of virtuous atheism. Hutcheson expresses explicit discomfort about these

'prejudices against Christianity'" (Russell, *Riddle of Hume's Treatise,* 248). Russell explains that adding the religious dimension changes us from using the framework in figure 1.1 to that in figure 1.2. This provides a richer and more dynamic scheme for interpreting Hume's arguments, and *prima facie* supports the methodological assumption that his positions in the *Treatise* are bound up with his positions on the Christian religion.
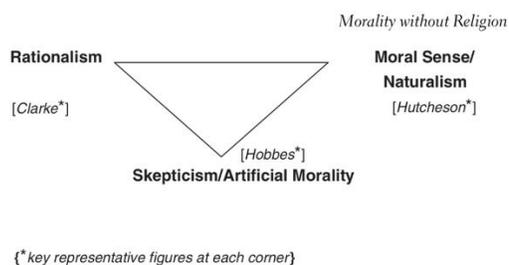

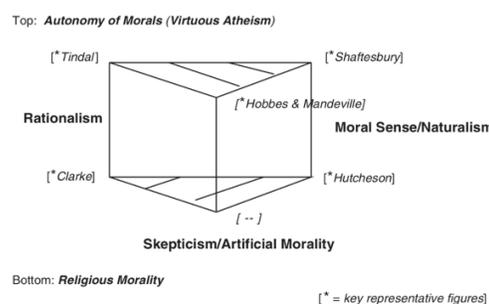*Figure 1. The traditional framework for interpreting Hume's moral theory*

Figure 2. The irreligious framework for assessing Hume's moral theory

Perhaps, at this point, one might respond that while these points are historically interesting and perhaps relevant to Hume's work on religion, it seems a stretch to try and interpret the *Treatise* as an irreligious text. Such an interlocutor might point out that the subtitle of the work describes it as an "Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects," leading the reader to understand it as a purely naturalistic or neo-Newtonian project. Such naturalist readings of Hume have dominated Hume scholarship since Norman Kemp Smith emphasized those aspects of Hume's work. But many of the contemporaries of Hume discussed so far were self-styled Newtonians or Naturalists (Clarke for instance), yet provided accounts at odds with Hume's. To take an example, a reader of Hume as a mere naturalist might argue that Hume's reduction of moral norms to the passions they regulate is simply an applied case of his belief that "a few principles produce all that variety we observe in the universe," and argue that this is what leads him to

characterize the passions in terms of self-regulation (T 3.1.2.6). But Hume expressly rejects taking this principle too far in accounting for moral practices when he criticizes the reduction of moral motivation to self-love, saying that such "fruitless" attempts "proceeded entirely, from that love of simplicity, which has been the source of much false reasoning in philosophy" (Hume, *Moral Philosophy,* 277). Hume indicates that simplicity cannot be one's only methodological principle, and for Hume irreligion provides guidance when simplicity and natural method alone do not suffice. Furthermore, Hume famously undermined both the religious and the naturalistic ontologies of the day with his arguments about causation. In this sense, Hume's irreligion helps us understand the limits of his naturalism as well as the topics he interrogates using that method.

The support for the irreligious reading extends beyond these points about method, and Hume leaves the reader a number of clues in the *Treatise* to discern the theologically subversive aspects of his position. The first clues are structural, some of them appearing in the title page and table of contents of the work. Paul Russell has identified a number of these pointing out that the "*Treatise* shares its title with a relevant and well-known work by Hobbes" and "the epigram of the title page... taken from Tacitus, also serves as the title of the final chapter of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*" two of the "most influential representatives of 'atheistic' or anti-Christian philosophy" (Russell, "'Atheism' and the Title Page of Hume's Treatise," 408-423). In the content of the work, Hume adopts a number of positions that directly oppose Locke, Newton, and Clarke, for instance: anti-realism about causes, the immateriality of the soul, and the possibility of a vacuum. These anti-religious aspects were all recognized by the early readers and critics of the *Treatise*, one of whom noted that it "utterly demolished" the "Argument a Priori for the Existence of God" (cited in Russell, *Riddle of Hume's Treatise,* 15-16). This was among a number of charges Hume responds to in his "Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Edinburgh," which included:

"Universal Scepticism," "Principles leading to downright Atheism," "Errors concerning the very Being and Existence of a God," "Errors concerning God's being the first Cause, and prime Mover of the Universe," "denying the Immateriality of the Soul," and "sapping the Foundations of Morality." (Hume, *Letter to Edinburgh*, 115-116)

This reveals that what appear to us as deeply hidden clues may have been more obvious to Hume's contemporaries who shared his historical context.[3] The structural and textual clues Hume leaves, taken alongside his reception as "atheistic," provide support for the project of reading the *Treatise* as bound up with the religious debates of the day.

Russell's work supports the irreligious reading of the *Treatise*, but less than a fifth of his book on the subject (only one chapter) focuses on the sections of the *Treatise* dealing with morality. The relative rarity of moral theory in Russell's book is problematic for two reasons. First, ideas about morality and society were clearly bound up in the Christianity of Hume's time, making them prime targets for irreligious writers. Second, Russell distinguishes the irreligious reading by contrasting it with previous readings, which claimed that although he has occasional irreligious moments, Hume "never wrote on this topic in [a] systematic" way (Streminger 1989 277).[4] Extending this reading to Hume's moral theory further reveals the systematicity of Hume's approach. Looking for the religious or irreligious aspects of Hume's ethical theory makes sense if one appreciates Jerome Schneewind's point that the ethical analogue to general theories in the sciences is not "philosophical theories of ethics" but "rather the general world outlook— typically a religious outlook, or a non-religious world-view still conscious of its non-religiousness—in which a morality is embedded" (Schneewind 2010 11). Noticing Hume's irreligious choices of passionate grounds for morality

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[3] It is worth noting here that Hume hoped to take Hutcheson's chair of philosophy later in life but never got the job. Instead, it was given to Hume's less irreligious colleague Adam Smith.

[4] See note 86 on Russell, *Riddle of Hume's Treatise,* 384.

constitutes one more discovery in the excavation of irreligion from Hume's writing on ethics. The grounding of justice in selfishness and modesty in pride appear as obviously irreligious moves once one considers that dimension. An understanding of the context Hume operated in, as well as his philosophical lineage, would make the absence of irreligious elements in and motivations for the *Treatise* a historical curiosity, and lends credence to the interpretation of Hume's accounts of property and modesty I have provided.

In the context of this broader, religiously charged debate, Hume's explanations of property and modesty as grounded in pride and selfishness read as Hume's attempt to follow Shaftesbury's advice and "speak in parables, and with double meaning, that the enemy may be amused, and they only who have ears to hear may hear" (Shaftesbury, *Characteristics,* quoted in Russell, *Riddle of Hume's Treatise,* 70). This interpretation is strengthened by the numerous clues Hume leaves throughout the *Treatise* alerting an attentive reader to his underlying intentions. Hume's relationship to certain thinkers of the day lends support to the irreligious reading, given that such relationships are most clearly understood when Hume's distinction as a naturalist and skeptic is enriched by the irreligious dimension of his rhetorical approach. My contribution to Russell's argument helps extend it to cover more closely those portions of the *Treatise* dealing with ethics, further justifying the irreligious reading. There are substantive barriers to reading Hume either as an arch-sceptic or as a dogmatic Newtonian naturalist. I've suggested that irreligion can be seen as integral to understanding both of those aspects of Hume's thought. Applying the irreligious lens helps us understand Hume better, but it also helps us to understand better the role of secularism in the birth of modern ethics. Hume tried to construct a moral theory that anticipated the coming death of God, but the void in our understanding of moral life left by God's death is not so easily filled. Even if we today reject some of Hume's secular and ultimately naturalistic accounts of knowledge and morality, the attempt to engage in such projects still grips us. We can be more historically self-aware if we realize that

Hume's initiation of that project was rooted in a fundamental antagonism towards the Christianity of his day.

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