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Innocent Preferences in Hume's Morality

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by

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ABSTRACT

Hume believes it is common and natural for people to have preferences for character traits similar to their own, but he remains silent on how to separate the innocent preferences from the blameworthy ones. This paper looks to Hume's morality to answer this question, ultimately arguing for two jointly sufficient criteria: 1) a preference is innocent so long as it doesn't prevent one from adopting the general point of view and 2) a preference is innocent so long as it is not met with disapproval from a spectator viewing it from the general point of view. I argue that these criteria leave most preferences unscathed, and this result highlights a distinctive pluralism in Hume. I consider the ramifications for this pluralism and argue that it gives Hume's morality an appeal over more rigid moral theories. I conclude by considering the challenge of factionalism that arises from my interpretation.

INDEX WORDS: Hume, Morality, Preferences, Pluralism

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this paper to my mom Samina, for all her warmth and kindness, my father Masood, for his dependability and foresight, and my partner Claire, for her positive attitude and supportiveness.

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1   INTRODUCTION

In both his aesthetic and moral theory, Hume writes that it is the approval or disapproval from the properly situated judge which demarcates beauty from deformity, and virtue from vice. In both domains, the properly situated judge will have to rid themselves of certain biases, gain enough experience to properly evaluate art or character traits respectively, be guided by good sense, and meet other criteria. Yet, the criteria that one must meet to be a good judge do not exhaust all the factors involved in evaluation (aesthetic or moral). Hume acknowledges in "Of the Standard of Taste" that there is still room for "innocent preferences" in aesthetics that arise from one's dispositions and historical context (SOT 30; Hackett 357).[1] For example, it is innocent for me to gravitate towards drama over comedy so long as this preference isn't born out of prejudice. A passage in the *Treatise of Human Nature* describes how we also have natural preferences for *character traits* like our own and how these preferences will change our conception of the perfectly virtuous agent (T 3.3.3.4; Hackett 172).[2] It is this passage, along with the absence of literature on Humean preferences, which inspires this paper.[3] The central question I will attempt to answer is this: How would Hume draw the line between innocent and blameworthy preferences for character traits? I argue for the following two criteria: 1) A preference is innocent so long as it does not prevent its possessor from adopting the general point of view, and 2) When considered from the general point of view, a preference is innocent so long as it is not met with disapproval.[4] Following that, I will argue that these two criteria leave plenty of natural preferences unscathed, and so we should understand Hume's morality as one that can accommodate many different preferences and

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[1] Hume, David. "Essay VI: Of the Standard of Taste." *Moral Philosophy*, edited by Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, by David Hume, Hackett Pub. Co., 2006, pp. 345–360.
[2] Hume, David. *A Treatise Concerning Human Nature*. *Moral Philosophy*, edited by Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, by David Hume, Hackett Pub. Co., 2006, pp. 13-184.
[3] Much has been said about Hume's thoughts on economic preferences, but my query has come up empty when searching for secondary literature regarding his thoughts on *moral* preferences.
[4] The phrase "general point of view" will be defined in section III.

lifestyles. The final section of this paper explores the advantages and disadvantages of the resulting

Humean position on preferences.

2   NATURAL AESTHETIC PREFERENCES

Before discussing what "innocent preferences" are, it is important to understand Hume's general theory of aesthetics. In SOT, Hume gives a "Standard of Taste", which he describes as "a rule, by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled; at least, a decision, afforded, confirming one sentiment, and condemning another" (SOT 6; Hackett 347). He identifies the standard of taste as the "joint verdict" of "true judges" (SOT 23; Hackett 355). What is it to be a true judge? Hume describes such a character as possessing "strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice" (SOT 23; Hackett 355). So, it is the collective verdict of those who possess a "sense" that has been refined thusly that demarcates beauty and deformity. A preference for a work of art that is caused by someone's lacking one or more of these refinements of taste can be thought of as a condemnable preference (SOT 6; Hackett 347). For example, if I prefer jazz music over rock music on the basis of thinking "Rock music is produced and listened to exclusively by uncultured morons", then my preference is clearly one that is prejudiced.

However, Hume does not think that all differences in preference can be understood through the preceding criterion. He writes, "But where there is such a diversity in the internal frame or external situation as is entirely blameless on both sides, and leaves no room to give one the preference above the other; in that case a certain degree of diversity in judgement is unavoidable, and we seek in vain for a standard, by which we can reconcile the contrary sentiments" (SOT 28; Hackett 357). By "diversity in the internal frame" Hume means things like differences in personality or age. It would be futile to try to "divest ourselves from those propensities, which are natural to us" (Ibid). The discussion continues and Hume presents the idea of an innocent preference directly. He writes,

It is plainly an error in a critic, to confine his approbation to one species or style of writing, and condemn all the rest. But it is almost impossible not to feel a predilection for that which suits our particular turn and disposition. Such preferences are *innocent and unavoidable*, and can never reasonably be the object of dispute, because there is no standard, by which they can be decided (SOT 30; Hackett 357, my emphasis).

Hume does not define "innocence". However, a sensible reading is to understand innocence as implying that we cannot reasonably disapprove of such preferences since they do not betray a deficiency of the kind that is apparent in cases like my prejudiced view of rock. When a disagreement is born purely out of the difference between two people's preferences, it is senseless to try and adjudicate whose taste is superior.[5] In the next section, I look at a passage from the *Treatise Concerning Human Nature* that discusses preferences for character traits.

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[5] The sheer diversity of genres in both the visual arts and music makes this claim by Hume have a lot more weight than it had when he wrote SOT. The degree of innocence involved in people staying in narrow genre bubbles due to their natural preference is something that is worth exploring more.

3   HUME'S MORALITY AND NATURAL PREFERENCES FOR CHARACTER TRAITS

Hume makes a claim in book III of the *Treatise* that is strikingly similar to his discussion of innocent preferences in SOT. He writes,

Men naturally, without reflection, approve of that character, which is most like their own. The man of a mild disposition and tender affections, in forming a notion of the most perfect virtue, mixes in it more of benevolence and humanity, than the man of courage and enterprize, who naturally looks upon a certain elevation of mind as the most accomplish'd character (T 3.3.3.4; Hackett 172).

Notice that Hume does not regard these preferences as innocent, but only as natural. The question then is, which of these natural preferences for characters like our own are innocent, and when do they become blameworthy? I argue that we can extrapolate from the rest of Hume's moral work two criteria which separate innocent from blameworthy preferences:

1) A preference is blameworthy if it prevents its possessor from adopting the general point of view.

2) A preference is blameworthy if it is met with disapproval from a properly situated moral spectator.

To properly explicate these criteria, I will first give a general overview of Hume's morality, especially the "general point of view".

Hume privileges sentiments, and not reason, as central to morality. He writes "Morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions. Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular. The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason" (T 3.1.1; Hackett 68). I take Hume's point here to be that reason, by itself, lacks *motivational* force, and morals, whatever they are, seem to excite passions. Hume locates this force in the sentiments, or the

feelings.[6] But it isn't our personal ambitions or desires that form morality, for morality is a communal enterprise. Hume, therefore, places the sentiments we receive from one another *through our capacity for sympathetic response* at the front and center of his moral theory. It is our ability to be affected by one another's sentiments that makes morality possible. "One man's ambition is not another's ambition, nor will the same event or object satisfy both; but the humanity of one man is the humanity of every one, and the same object touches this passion in all human creatures" (EPM 9.1; Hackett 260).[7] Virtues, for Hume, are to be identified as those traits which spur a sentiment of approval from the sympathetic moral spectator. Vices meanwhile are those traits which spur a sentiment of disapprobation (T.3.1.2; Hackett 79).

Notice the problems that immediately arise if morality does centrally depend on sentiments. Our sentiments are engaged much more intensely when it comes to the people in close proximity, but it seems moral judgment is not prone to the same degree of relativity. We give moral praise and criticism to character traits of those far away from us in both time and space, yet we are most enlivened by those nearest us. Hume's explanation of this discrepancy is that morality does not depend on just any sentiments, but those sentiments which arise from a *general* survey (ibid). The same point is made in the *Enquiry* when Hume states, "a small benefit done to ourselves, or our near friends, excites more lively sentiments of approbation than a great benefit done to a distant commonwealth: But still we know here, as in all the senses, to correct these inequalities by reflection, and retain a *general* standard of vice and virtue, founded chiefly on *general* usefulness" (EPM 5.42; Hackett 230 fn. 9, emphasis mine). We step back from our particular situation and

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[6] For a good summary and analysis of the difference between the British rationalists and sentimentalists, see Gill's 2007 paper: "Moral Rationalism vs. Moral Sentimentalism: Is Morality More Like Math or Beauty?" *Philosophy Compass* 2/1 (2007): 16–30.

[7] Hume, David. *An Enquirty Concerning the Principles of Morals*. *Moral Philosophy*, edited by Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, by David Hume, Hackett Pub. Co., 2006, pp. 187-310.

analyze a character trait's effect on their possessor and those closest to them. Still, this simple act of stepping back will not always result in everyone who takes the general survey having the same sentimental response.

To properly take the general point of view, our judgments must be based on more than our actual sentiments. We must use our imagination to suppose what will result from the character trait in question. Will the trait tend to be useful and/or agreeable to the possessor or those closest to her, or will it be pernicious and/or disagreeable (EPM 9.1.13; Hackett 263)? It is these questions which give rise to the general point of view, and the answers determine a character trait as a virtue or a vice respectively. Through this methodology, Hume is able to explain why moral judgments remain steady despite the volatility and favoritism of sentiments. To summarize what has been said, Hume's sentimentalist morality states we form moral judgments by adopting a general point of view through which we suppose what kind of effects the character trait we are analyzing will have on their possessor and those closest to them. We then feel approval or disapproval in response to these considerations. A trait is virtuous if it is deemed useful or agreeable to the possessor or those nearest them, and a trait is vicious if it is deemed pernicious or disagreeable to the possessor or those nearest them.

4   THE TWO CRITERIA

Now that the general point of view has been unpacked, we can return to my first criterion. A preference is blameworthy if it prevents its possessor from adopting the general point of view. If a preference overpowers one's ability to fairly evaluate the usefulness/agreeableness of a trait, then this preference is blameworthy. A preference this strong prevents proper moral evaluation. Let's suppose (counterfactually) I'm someone who is very industrious, and so I look very favorably towards others who share this trait. My preference goes from being innocent to blameworthy when I am blind to the harms caused by other's industriousness. If I can't see that the industriousness of a corporate tycoon has contributed to other entrepreneurs being taken advantage of in an unfair way, then my preference has gone too far. If I can't see that the family members of the highly industrious lawyer are being neglected in her myopic pursuit of career success, then my preference is blameworthy. Recall the two corrections involved in adopting the general point of view. First, we step back from our own situation and consider a character trait's usefulness and agreeableness. Next, we make a judgment that is based on how we feel given this new imagined vantage point and in so doing we attempt to leave behind any biased residue left behind from our previous perspective.

The reason I think Hume would endorse this criterion is that the adoption of the general point of view is crucial to our moral practice. Our ability to intelligibly communicate moral ideas with one another depends on us all accessing a similar vantage point when we morally evaluate. The general point of view fulfills this role by having us consider a trait through its usefulness and agreeability, considerations that both involve removing bias while still retaining accessibility. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord argues the general point of view is the only vantage point that will allow

us to resolve moral conflict appropriately.[8] He writes, "introducing moral thought and the general point of view that goes with it, is absolutely crucial to a harmonious social life" (215).[9] Without such a point of view, we would be faced with what Hume calls "contradictions", which Sayre-McCord rightly notes are not propositional in nature, but attitudinal (216). We need a stable point of view that controls for the distortion of perspective, for without it, we would lack a common ground in our evaluations. Moreover, this point of view must also be accessible to us all. The general point of view, by asking what effects a character trait tends to have on its possessor and those closest to her, accomplishes this. We can all use our faculty of imagination to suppose what the likely effects of a character trait will be, and in so doing, we will find a common ground from which to evaluate, making our moral evaluations more intelligible to each other, thus creating more stability than if we approached evaluations through disparate vantage points. Preferences which inhibit our ability to adopt the general point of view are blameworthy, then, because they inhibit our ability to set up a stable moral community that features members intelligibly communicating and resolving conflict with one another.

Notice the parallel between preferences for character traits and preferences for physical traits. It is a common occurrence for us to prefer certain physical traits, and it is common for people possessing those traits to enjoy certain privileges. However, we rightly criticize someone whose preference for any physical trait prevents them from properly perceiving the more substantive traits of a person. If a friend of mine is dating someone attractive who is no good for them, and they do not give proper weight to the mistreatment they suffer at their hands because of their attractiveness,

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[8] One could accuse Sayre-McCord of potentially overstating the case here. It may be better to think of the general point of view as a very good candidate while leaving the possibility open that there may be other suitable vantage points from which to ground moral evaluation.
[9] Sayre-McCord, Geoffry. "On Why Hume's 'General Point of View' Isn't Ideal – and Shouldn't Be," *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 2009

then it is appropriate to label their preference for whatever physical traits they possess as overpowering and blameworthy. Preferences which prevent proper perception are in general going to be blameworthy. I now turn to the second criterion.

The second criterion has a lot of connection with the first. A preference is blameworthy if it is met with disapproval from a properly situated moral spectator. In other words, a preference is blameworthy when it is met with disapproval from a spectator evaluating it from the general point of view. This criterion is borrowed from Hume's own account of vice, only the domain is preferences for character traits instead of character traits themselves in this case. This means that the preference is either pernicious or disagreeable to either its possessor or those closest to her. This can be because the preference is for a vicious character trait, or because it is a preference that is overpowering. This criterion is best explained through example. Imagine a shopkeeper, Gordon, who is by nature very orderly and clean. Gordon's nature leads him to favorably evaluate others when they display these same qualities. Consider that Gordon has a different conception of the perfectly virtuous character than someone who does not privilege cleanliness and orderliness to the same extent. Gordon also has a low tolerance for people who lack orderliness or cleanliness. Should a properly situated moral spectator view Gordon's preference with approval, disapproval, or indifference? Again, it will depend on if the preference is agreeable or useful to Gordon himself and those around him. Gordon, by hiring employees who have a similar propensity for these traits, will certainly keep an orderly shop. Imagine, though, that Gordon decides not to hire someone because during the job interview, he notices the candidate has a small stain on their shirt, and he finds this really irritating. It seems plausible to say that Gordon's natural preference has gone too far and is now becoming disagreeable to others and pernicious to himself. He might have turned

down a very capable employee and hurt his business, and moreover, his high expectations for cleanliness will likely stress out his other employees from time to time.

The case of Gordon makes two considerations salient, both of which are related to the second criterion. The first is that the strength of a preference matters. When a natural preference is extremely strong, it can prove detrimental to a person and those around them, and so this preference will be met with disapproval from the properly situated moral spectator. Someone with a less extreme preference for cleanliness would not be met with disapproval (or at least, not to the same degree of it), and so their preference could plausibly count as innocent. The second is that not all virtues have the same importance. Gordon's preference is for a relatively trivial virtue, and when the strength of his preference for this trivial virtue is such as to crowd out other more substantial virtues (like prudence, or kindness say), it is more obviously a blameworthy preference. When it comes to preferences for more substantial virtues crowding out other substantial virtues (benevolence over justice, for example), it is much harder to calculate the effects and so the innocence/blameworthiness, and this is likely part of the reason Hume rarely compares the value of different virtues directly.

Hume is not always silent on this issue, though, as there is some textual evidence to make the case that certain preferences for virtues will be met with disapproval from a moral spectator because they crowd out other virtues. Let's start with a comparison between two people, one with a preference for courage over benevolence, and one with the reverse preference. Benevolence gets more attention from Hume than almost any other virtue (justice is its only rival). Not only are virtues of benevolence useful and agreeable in themselves, but they also enhance the usefulness of other virtues. Hume writes, "A propensity to the tender passions makes a man agreeable and useful in all parts of life; and gives a just direction to all his other qualities, which otherwise may become

prejudicial to society. Courage and ambition, when not regulated by benevolence, are fit only to make a tyrant and public robber" (T 3.3.4.3; Hackett 172). Without some benevolence, in other words, someone's propensity to ambition or courage could be disastrous for society. Consider a ruthless leader whose biggest motivator is power and status. They clearly are not lacking in ambition, and yet without benevolence, their character will be looked at with much disapproval for the devastating effects it has on those around them. Given what Hume says here, it seems that he thinks some virtues have a relationship of asymmetrical dependence with one another. Benevolence does not depend on courage in the way that courage does benevolence. A very strong natural preference for courage paired with a diminished sense of benevolence, then, conceivably can be seen as an example of a preference that would be met with disapproval, whereas the reverse preference would be innocent and maybe even admirable. This is one specific case of "virtue conflict" that Hume addresses, but in general, he shies away from ordering the virtues.[10]

The relationship between the two criteria is interesting. If a preference fails the first criterion, then it is almost certainly going to fail the second. That is, if a preference prevents someone from adopting the general point of view, then it is also going to be met with disapproval from someone viewing it from the general point of view.[11] This is for the same reasons that justify the first criterion in the first place. A preference strong enough to prevent someone from entering the general point of view is going to jeopardize that person's taking part in the enterprise of morality, and if enough people have preferences of this sort, then the enterprise of morality itself is jeopardized. The relationship between the two criteria is not perfectly bidirectional though, as

[10] Michael Gill, in "Humean moral pluralism" argues that there is no ranking among the moral foundations in Hume (agreeable to self/others, and usefulness to self/others), and some of his textual support applies well for thinking Hume shouldn't endorse a ranking of virtues either.
[11] The case of Gordon fits the bill here. Part of the reason a properly situated moral spectator will disapprove of Gordon's preference for cleanliness is that Gordon himself is unable to properly evaluate others' characters because of this preference.

failing the second criterion does not imply failing the first. A preference can be met with disapproval simply because it is a preference for a vicious trait. If someone prefers a certain degree of ruthlessness, this need not mean that the possessor is unable to adopt the general point of view. They may still be able to set this preference aside when it comes time to make a moral judgment. Yet, this preference is still going to be met with disapproval from the properly situated moral spectator since it is a preference for a generally disagreeable trait.

5   INNOCENT PREFERENCES

I've now presented the two criteria which I think Hume would endorse for demarcating a preference as blameworthy. In this section, I will argue that Hume must accept that these criteria leave many of our preferences for virtues unscathed/innocent. My argument can be summarized as follows:

1) If our preferences for character traits similar to our own were mostly blameworthy preferences, then our moral evaluations would be largely incommunicable and unstable.

2) Hume believes our moral evaluations have a great deal of communicability and stability. Therefore,

C) Hume must believe that natural preferences are not frequently strong enough to prevent us from adopting the general point of view.

I call this the *argument from moral stability.* I defend each premise in turn. Premise 1 follows because these preferences for traits similar to our own are described by Hume as something natural and unavoidable—in other words, they are quite common, an observation vindicated by everyday experience. It is a more or less ubiquitous trait of people that we feel a certain fondness towards those with similar dispositions, interests, and worldviews. Since these preferences are so common, it would follow that they would make our moral evaluations unstable if they were blameworthy (i.e., if they prevented us from adopting the general point of view). Moral evaluations being incommunicable would mean that two people making evaluations would not be able to properly understand what the other person means when they use moral language like "benevolent" or "closed-minded". Of course, some "slippage" in language is inevitable, but I take it a state of incommunicability would involve far more chaos. When Hume talks of instability in moral evaluation, I take it he means a combination of fickleness and intense disagreement. Premise 2 has

much textual support. Hume emphasizes that the general point of view is something accessible for almost everyone. Without it, he thinks our moral communication would be futile, as we would only speak through our present situations. He writes, "'[T]were impossible we cou'd 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" (T 3.3.1.16; Hackett 157). The general point of view does the job of this correction by giving an accessible viewpoint- one where we imagine the *likely* effects of a character trait on someone's *narrow* circle. Sayre-McCord's paper on this topic points out that narrowing the scope of consideration to *likely* effects creates a more accessible point of view, since we do not have to actually find out what the effects of a character trait are in any given manifestation (which would involve a level of omniscience that is untenable) (225).[12] Narrowing the scope of concern to the *narrow* circle also makes the viewpoint more accessible since it is hard for us to calculate the effects of a character trait on people remote in space and time (ibid). The resulting standard after applying these two narrowing qualifications is that the general point of view offers a standard that balances out accessibility with a certain degree of robustness. The general point of view is something (almost) all of us can access, and yet it controls for our specific desires, situations, and sentiments. If we accept the premise that the general point of view is an accessible standard, and we also accept that natural preferences for virtues like our own are common, then it seems to follow that Hume does not believe that these natural preferences are frequently strong enough to prevent us from adopting the general point of view. If they were, then we would be unable to adopt the general point of view in the first place.

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[12] It should be pointed out that while the general point of view gives more stability to moral evaluation, the idiosyncrasy of different people's imagination as they consider the likely effects of a person's traits still can and will lead to different evaluations. This will be given more consideration further in the paper, but it is always important to keep the modesty of Hume's moral theory in mind—the general point of view is meant to contribute towards stability, it is not meant to be sufficient for it.

This isn't just a view ascribable to Hume, though—it also matches up with common observation. Almost everyone has preferences for character traits similar to their own, but most are yet able to praise those with different sets of characteristics. The reserved individual doesn't only praise likeminded people, but also can dole out praise for someone's exuberance. The hardworking and anxious individual sees the benefit of having a frame of mind more like their relaxed, easygoing friend. In general, those with contrary qualities reveal to us the benefits of different ways of living compared to our own. The sympathy which Hume puts so much focus on helps explain why it is we do this—it is part of human nature to notice the positive effects of other's virtues, even when those virtues aren't ones we find in ourselves. This view also finds added plausibility when we consider the social nature of moral judgment. If our preferences for character traits like our own is leading to an inability to properly evaluate, we will often find out this is the case when someone observes this tendency in us. If I'm disposed towards a certain degree of callousness and also surround myself with callous people, not noticing the pernicious effects of this trait on both our close circles, then it won't be long before someone points these effects out to me and thus gives me an opportunity to reflect on them and potentially change.

In summary, the *accessibility* of the general point of view is what leads me to ascribe to Hume the belief that most of our preferences for virtues like our own will pass the first criterion. Moreover, there is no reason a preference for a virtue would be met with disapproval from someone spectating from the general point of view (the second criteria), so long as it is not a strong enough preference to overpower the possessor's evaluative capabilities. Notice that I'm limiting this claim to preferences for virtues, and not preferences for character traits generally. This is because a preference for a vicious character trait would clearly be met with disapproval. This leaves preferences for traits like self-centeredness, vanity, illiberality, and any other vice out of the realm

of innocent preferences since they would fail to meet the second criterion. Potential counterexamples may be preferences for mild amounts of vice in others. Say I'm someone who is prone to over-analysis of situations that don't really benefit from over-analysis. If I notice someone else with this tendency, I may relate to them and have a "soft spot" for this character trait. It strikes me as plausible that preferences for mild "vices" like these are not significantly blameworthy. When we have such a "soft spot", it isn't usually the case that we positively evaluate the person with the similar trait, but rather that we don't hold it against them to the same degree as others might.

6   EVALUATING HUME ON PREFERENCES

My goal has been to use the schematics of Hume's moral theory and apply them to the specific question of preferences for character traits. This has led to the view that, for Hume, most of our preferences for character traits like our own must be innocent since he is committed to thinking they do not compromise our ability to adopt the general point of view. In what follows, I will discuss the advantages and disadvantages of this picture of preferences. I begin with what I take to be its most appealing aspects.

Hume has an extremely rich vocabulary when it comes to virtues and vices. James Fieser writes, "A conservative estimate of the various virtues Hume refers to in his moral writings would put the number at around seventy".[13] This understanding of virtue is quite broad compared to most philosophers', arguably including things like eloquence, good manners, cleanliness, and even wit and good humor (T3.3.4.8-9; Hackett 177).[14] If we combine this wide construal of virtues, along with the result I've just discussed about the innocence of most preferences for virtues, we end up with a moral theory that is remarkably accommodating—it can find value in various different lifestyles that accord with different character traits. This follows because there is a great multiplicity of character traits, and each of us has a fairly unique combination of them. This entails our evaluations of those around us will be fairly distinct since we will tend towards more positive evaluations of those with traits similar to our own. Communities of like-minded individuals will naturally form. We can see exactly this playing out in our world today. Artists tend to attract/be attracted to other artists due to their shared preference for character traits such as expressiveness

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[13] "Hume's Wide View of the Virtues," *Hume Studies*, 1998, Vol. 14, pp. 295-312

[14] The end of the *Treatise* has a section titled "On Natural Abilities" which argues that there is not a hard line between virtues and revered natural abilities. I write "arguably including things…" because it is unclear whether Hume would say these natural abilities do belong in one and the same category as virtues, or if he more modestly is claiming that the lines between the two categories is blurry.

or creativity. In the business sector, industrious individuals become friends with other industrious individuals. So long as these communities do not become hostile towards each other, then their formation is not only innocent, but also can greatly aid the well-being of those within a given community through acceptance, commiseration, etc. Additionally, there is much social utility created when people group up and work together on a diverse set of shared interests—it prevents stagnation, monotony, and the stifling of creativity. It is a point in favor of Hume's morality that it not only accommodates but also sees value in this phenomenon.

While initially seeming uncontentious, I believe a proper appreciation of Hume's plurality has two upshots: 1) it shows the distinctive appeal his moral theory has over more rigid moral theories, and 2) it is in tension with interpreting Hume as a utilitarian. I begin discussing these upshots by comparing the type of pluralism I am here attributing to Hume with the pluralism that Michael Gill argues for in his works.

Moral pluralism as Gill uses it is a label that demarcates a moral theory which at bottom has multiple ultimate moral ends. Specifically, Gill sees the four principles underlying moral judgment in Hume as ultimate moral ends. These are usefulness to the self, usefulness to others, agreeability to self, and agreeability to others.[15] The sense of pluralism that I mean to ascribe to Hume is downstream from Gill's; I see Hume as a pluralist in the sense that his moral theory can accommodate various lifestyles that accord with different virtues (as argued for in the previous section). I don't see anything in Hume to suggest an outright ranking of virtues, and it follows that

[15] Gill's point is best illustrated with specifics: the value of an agreeable character trait is not meant to be understood in terms of its usefulness. Different virtues will be valuable because they reduce down into one or more of these ultimate moral ends. Benevolence will be valuable because it is both agreeable and useful to others. Industriousness is primarily valuable because it is useful both to the self and others.

there is likewise nothing to suggest an outright ranking of occupations or societal roles.[16] This sort of pluralism is compatible with Gill's, but it does not require it.

While Gill convincingly argues that Hume meant the four principles of natural virtue to be independent from each other (i.e., they do not reduce down into each other, nor can one be derived from another), it is less clear that they all do not reduce down into something common between them—the promotion of well-being. Elizabeth Ashford in her paper "Utilitarianism with a Humean Face" convincingly argues that Hume's moral theory meets the "welfare criteria" of utilitarianism.[17] The welfare criterion states that promoting welfare is a necessary condition for an action to be considered a morally good one. I do not wish to come down on one side of this debate about whether Hume's four criteria can be collapsed into the welfare condition; I believe what I've said about Humean pluralism is compatible with either theory about the ultimate moral ends in Hume. However, what I've said about Humean preferences does seem straightforwardly incompatible with certain versions of utilitarianism that also include a "maximization" criterion. The options are thus: 1) that Hume is not a utilitarian at all (if one does not believe the "welfare criteria" applies to his theory), or that 2) he is a utilitarian, but his version of the theory has a notable fluidity. I now hope to describe this fluidity by contrasting it with some modern utilitarian thinkers. If Hume is any sort of utilitarian, he is one who does not believe in the "maximization" claim of utilitarianism that states that we must not only promote welfare, but we must act in a way that maximizes it with every action we take, a claim adopted by the theorists I will now describe.

There are modern strands of utilitarianism that are at odds with the pluralism found in Hume's moral theory. In particular, some versions of the view held by some ethicists that we ought

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[16] This pluralism is captured well by Australian songwriter Courtney Barnett when she sings "The paramedic thinks I'm clever 'cause I play guitar; I think she's clever cos she stops people dying" in her song "Avant Gardner".
[17] Ashford, Elizabeth (2005). "Utilitarianism with a Humean Face". *Hume Studies*, Volume 31, Number 1, pp. 63-92

to "earn to give" hold that those of us living in affluent countries have a moral duty to earn as much money as we can in order to donate to lower income countries. This strand of thought initially gained serious traction with Peter Singer's article "Famine, Affluence and Morality", but some more radical versions have been explored in Peter Unger's Book *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence* as well as William MacAskill's Book *Doing Good Better: Effective Altruism and How You Can Make a Difference.*[18]All of these thinkers have proposed that we may have a moral obligation to enter into the field in which we can earn the most money (Unger argues that those in academia may have a moral duty to enter into finance) so that we may produce the most well-being throughout the world. While the decision to dedicate one's life to helping those who most need it certainly qualifies as a life of benevolence and great moral worth, I think these theorists are at odds with what I've said regarding the innocence of preferences for character traits.[19] If someone is naturally disposed for the virtue of expressiveness, and they favor those with this trait, then it may be perfectly innocent on my reading of Hume for them to pursue a career in a creative field, surrounded by other likeminded individuals, even when this career won't generate as much money as they could earn in business. Any moral theory which features a *duty* to live a particular sort of lifestyle, even when this lifestyle is disharmonious with one's character, will be at odds with the sort of pluralism I've ascribed to Hume.[20] These versions of utilitarianism which feature a "maximality criteria" certainly fit the bill. In comparison to the rigidity of certain aspects

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[18] Unger, Peter (1996). *Living High and Letting Die*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
MacAskill, W. (2015). *Doing good better: How effective altruism can help you make a difference*. Penguin.
- See also: MacAskill, William (2015-09-10) "Working for a hedge fund could be the most charitable thing you do". *The Washington Post*.
Singer, Peter (Spring 1972). "Famine, Affluence, and Morality". *Philosophy and Public Affairs*

[19] For another interesting criticism of earning to give, see Pete Mills article "Mobile Privatization" in *Oxford Left Review* Issue 7 (May 2012)*,* where he argues that pursuing fields such as business perpetuates an unjust system, ultimately undermining the attempts of effective altruists to alleviate suffering.

[20] I've chosen them in particular since Hume is sometimes described as a proto-utilitarian, but the disharmony between his theories and others is also prevalent when we compare it to some forms of deontology that have over-arching moral principles such as Kant's categorical imperative.

of these modern utilitarians, I find Hume's theory to be far more accommodating. The notion that all capable humans should live one sort of life—one that effectively turns oneself into a cog in the utility machine, strikes me as extreme and dehumanizing.

Before moving on to a criticism, one final point I'd like to make regarding the advantages of the Humean picture of preferences I've outlined here emerges when one evaluates this picture of preferences using the same criteria Hume argues are at the heart of moral evaluations. Would Hume's own standard of virtue lead to an approval or disapproval of the pluralism that I've argued exists in his theory? It seems to me that if we were to personify the pluralistic aspect of his theory, we could imagine someone who is quite tolerant and optimistic about the difference found among temperaments—someone who sees the humanity throughout disparate groups of people. Such a person could be said to evince the character trait of *open-mindedness*. While I certainly think such a character trait would qualify for a virtue in Hume's ethics, it is interesting to consider which of the four criteria it will most readily meet. My hunch is that such a character trait would be immediately agreeable to many others. There is affirmation and kindness to be found in such an individual, and it is hard to imagine someone feeling anything but approval for their accepting nature. Moreover, they would be someone who, through their open-mindedness, would be effective as a leader and diplomat, assigning roles to others based on their strengths, and so they would likely be useful to others as well.

I now turn to the main concern I see with the picture of Humean preferences I've outlined: factionalism. For Hume, morality serves the purpose of social stabilization. We develop moral language and evaluation so that we may communicate our approval and disapproval of other's character traits in an intelligible way, which will lead to conflict resolution and cooperation. It may strike some that Hume is optimistic to the point of naivety about the success of this goal. Recall

the second premise from the argument from social stability: Hume believes our moral evaluations have a great deal of communicability and stability. In the *Treatise,* Hume writes that if there is "any variation in this particular [our moral evaluations], it proceeds from nothing but a difference in the tempers and complexions of men; and is besides very inconsiderable" (T 2.1.3; Hackett 17). It seems to me that either Hume understates the difference between disparate communities' moral evaluations, or that polarization might be more rampant today than during his time. He has a seemingly undue optimism in the capacity of sympathetic response to curtail social polarization. The criticism is that sympathy is doing more heavy lifting in Hume's morality than it can really handle. If sympathy isn't able to adequately curtail selfishness and violence among people, then it would follow that the preferences found among people for various character traits might not be innocent at the rate Hume would assume, because of the possibility of like-minded individuals forming violent factions. This is primarily a criticism about sympathy, but the problem carries downstream into what I've said about preferences.

The central question is this: is sympathy as powerful and ubiquitous as Hume believes? One might think there is plenty of evidence to suggest otherwise—the constant conflict that takes place around the world every day, the increasing political polarization, the formation of extremist in-groups on online communities—all these seemingly reflect a human capacity for disregarding others, and this capacity may erode away more of morality than Hume believed. Focusing on the human tendency to prefer character traits similar to our own makes this point salient. As I've argued in the last section, Hume is committed to thinking that our preferences for traits like our own does not frequently prevent us from adopting the general point of view, and so these preferences do not frequently threaten morality as an enterprise. But it seems quite common for people to gravitate towards others similar to themselves to the point of forming an "in group" that

is actively hostile towards others. In his book *Why It's OK to Ignore Politics,* Freiman presents a slew of empirical evidence that suggests political polarization is deeply entrenched in American culture, and that those who believe they are immune to it may be even more susceptible to partisan beliefs.[21] Similarly, one might wonder what role the Internet has played in contributing to rampant polarization. The ways we interact with one another have dramatically changed. Michael Lynch has done work showing how the change in our epistemic access has considerable effects on our characters. In his book *The Internet of Us,* he argues that we may know more things nowadays, but we understand less.[22] The lack of activeness in our learning has led to a culture of people who are less able to sympathize and understand one another. It is worth exploring whether "in-group" formation is a phenomenon that has increased over time, but whether it was as prevalent in Hume's time or our own, the current phenomenon should call us to question Hume's optimism about the power of sympathy to rein in violent and selfish motives.

If one is less optimistic about Hume on the power of sympathy to curtail selfish and violent impulse, then it follows that one should be skeptical about the innocence of preferences for character traits similar to our own. If the human capacity for sympathy is insufficient, then our positive evaluations of others like our own risks leading to moral and political instability, and it is impossible to deny that this does happen to a certain level in our world, as I've described in the previous paragraph. While I've argued that Hume is committed to thinking most preferences for character traits similar to our own are innocent, the empirical evidence I've described should make us question whether this view is a tenable one. Perhaps Hume has undue faith in humanity's capacity to sympathetically respond to the pain of others.

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[21] "We're All Partisan Hacks." *Why It's OK to Ignore Politics*, by Christopher Freiman, Routledge, 2021, pp. 25-42.
[22] Lynch, Michael Patrick. *The Internet of US: Knowing More and Understanding Less in the Age of Big Data*. Liveright, 2017.

There are multiple ways for a Humean moral theorist to respond to the concern of polarization and hostility rampant in our society. For one, they could point to the ample evidence that shows the stability of moral evaluation. The Internet has plenty of communities that feature participants from across the globe commiserating and sharing common viewpoints. Extremely popular media portrays characters which are generally evaluated in similar ways, regardless of the country of the evaluator. For my part, I think Hume was fairly optimistic, but not far off from the truth when he describes the stability of moral evaluation. The same general trends show up across cultures and in-groups, while the particulars are where disagreements arise. Relatedly, it is unclear how much disagreement that is seemingly moral really arises due to a difference in knowledge instead of a difference in moral criteria. Extremist in-groups such as "red-pillers" demonstrate a hatred for feminism, but it is unclear that this results from a difference in the principles which ground their moral evaluations, or rather whether they disagree with the facts on the ground. What I mean is that extreme groups may still have in mind the same principles Hume argues are at the base of our moral evaluations (agreeableness and usefulness towards self and others), but they simply disagree about whether a particular social movement actually harmonizes with these principles. The issue, then, is not a lack of stability in our moral evaluation of character traits, but a lack of agreement in whether a given person or group instantiates a given character trait. A red-piller doesn't see feminism the same way other people do- they attribute societal harm to it. It isn't as though people disagree about whether it is a good thing to be helpful to others, but they do disagree on whether a given movement or action will actually be helpful. The disagreements that lead to factionalism are frequently epistemological in nature, and the solution to them comes from non-moral education.

A final response on behalf of the Humean moral theorist would be to ask how other moral theories fare when it comes to dealing with the issue of factionalism. It seems doubtful that a rationalist theory which features some universal principle (e.g., Kant's categorical imperative, or rule-utilitarians principle of maximizing welfare) is better suited for dealing with in-group formation and violence. Moral philosophy as a whole is generally impotent and ill-suited for this task since it is something inaccessible and alien to most people. Some credit can in fact be given to Hume for resting his theory on the human capacity for sympathy, something less esoteric than any rational principle. His account, it seems to me, is less suited than rationalist theories for providing a means of outright condemnation of others, but it is well suited for influencing others to see our point of views through appealing to sympathetic response. If I'm faced with a red-piller, will it be more effective to try and persuade them that they can't coherently universalize a maxim about the way they think women ought to be treated, or will I be better served in showing them the harm they inflect on those around them through their beliefs and actions? It seems clear to me that Hume's approach is one that is built out of a better understanding of human nature than most other moral theorists, even if he was overly optimistic about sympathy's role in this nature.

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