CHAPTER 5

OTHER INFLUENTIAL MORAL THEORIES: DOES MORALITY DEPEND ON CULTURE, GOD, NATURE, OR EMOTIONS?

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you will be able to:

- **5.1** Analyze both the good intentions and the problematic deficiencies of cultural relativism.
- **5.2** Critically evaluate Aquinas' Natural Law, its problems including Hume's succinct objection to it, and its cultural influence.
- **5.3** Articulate the dilemma presented by Socrates in *Euthyphro.*
- **5.4** Discuss the moral significance of emotions according to David Hume.

5.1 CULTURAL RELATIVISM: BUT WE'VE ALWAYS DONE IT THIS WAY

One way, quite an old way, to decide what is right and what is wrong is simply to follow what society believes is right and what society believes is wrong. Given that definitions of right and wrong differ from culture to culture, it is perhaps then the case that there is no objective truth in morality. The particular moral code of our society is no better and no worse than the code of another society—what's right for them is right for them, by definition; it just may not be right for us. It would be arrogant to assume that our

society's values are right for everyone. That is, in fact, the moral assumption behind the beginnings of sociology; other fields, including journalism, also often take pride in the objectivity of their nonjudgmental observations. On this assumption , the argument based on recognizing cultural differences sounds sensible. In other words, we can be sure of what is right and wrong in our own society, but we have no moral standing to judge right and wrong in another society.

ATHENS, GREECE-MARCH 26, 2016: Statue probably of Herodotus in stoa of Attalos.
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The relativist position began early, with the best of intentions. **Herodotus**, considered the first historian, was perhaps also the first to demonstrate a relativist attitude as he consciously observed, but never judged, foreign customs in his travels. In doing so, he began an intellectual trend that continued to this day, in fields as diverse as sociology, anthropology, American journalism in particular, and funerary science. In relation to this last one, it was Herodotus who documented the various funerary practices in Ancient Greece and its neighbors, noticing how some peoples buried their dead, others cremated them, and others still ate them. He did not judge any of these right or wrong. He just thought they were all interesting, though he himself thought the Greek practices—which did not involve turning your dead aunt into sushi—were probably best. Our ideas of right and wrong differ from culture to culture. Who are we to judge?

> ***"If anyone, no matter who, were given the opportunity of choosing from amongst all the nations in the world the set of beliefs which he thought best, he would inevitably—after careful considerations of their relative merits—choose that of his own country. Everyone without exception believes his own native customs, and the religion he was brought up in, to be the best; and that being so, it is unlikely that anyone but a madman would mock at such things. There is abundant evidence that this is the universal feeling about the ancient customs of one's country."***
>
> Herodotus

CHALLENGES AND DRAWBACKS OF RELATIVISM

Herodotus doubtless was right that it is desirable to understand a culture from the inside to better explain it to ourselves. His *Histories* understandably have been praised for millennia for the breadth of his observations. The refusal to judge another culture but rather to study it objectively remained the rule in 20th-century development of anthropology. One of the early leaders in that academic field, **Ruth Fulton Benedict**, wrote in her influential *Patterns of Culture* (1934) that "morality differs in every society, and it is a convenient term for socially approved habits." There is, it seems, no objective moral guide other than what works within the culture in question. In other words, morality is relative to the values of each culture.

Few philosophers subscribe to this form of relativism, but an alarming number of students turn up in college as relativists. "Who am I to judge?" is a common, well-intentioned attitude among young people. Respect for other cultures, recognistion and tolerance of differences, openness to learning from our dazzlingly diverse multicultural society are all desirable traits. So what can be the problem with that?

To consider relativism, see the following example of something that happened recently in another society, in a very conservative town called Mingora in Pakistan. The 15-year-old **Malala Yousafzai**, with the support of her family, defied the Taliban religious authorities and demanded that she be given an education, the same education that boys of her age received in her community in a school that her own father had founded. The education of girls is frowned upon in her community, and Malala first received death threats from the Taliban and, then, after she tried going to school, she was shot in the head by a Taliban gunman in 2012 while she was going home at the end of a school day.

NEW YORK-NOV 11: Malala Yousafzai attends the Glamour Woman of the Year Awards at the Carnegie Hall on November 11, 2013 in New York

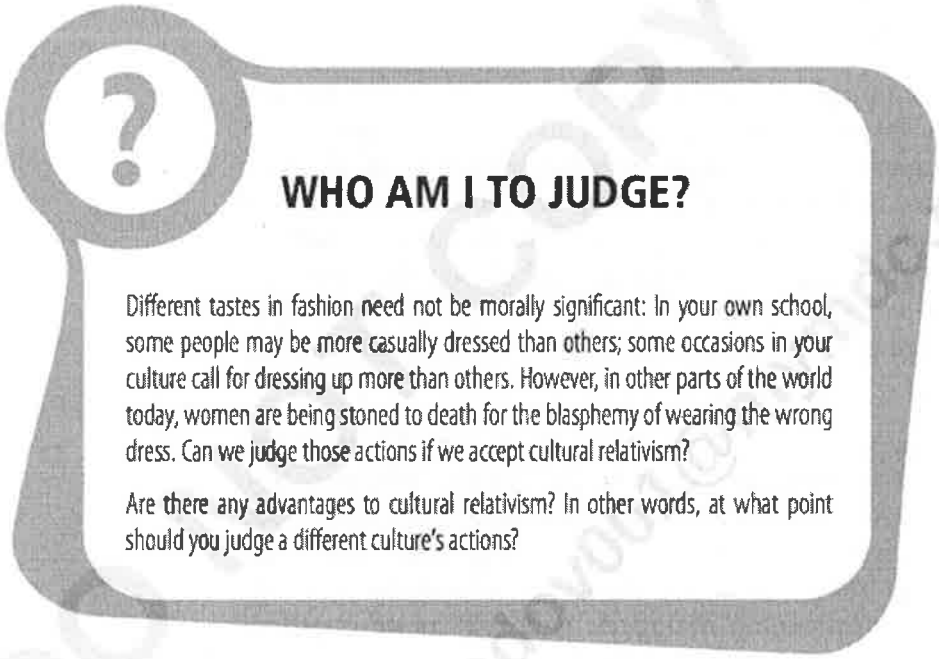
She was taken to a hospital in Peshawar initially, and part of her skull was removed to alleviate the swelling in her brain. She was then transferred to a hospital in Birmingham, England, for further medical care; underwent multiple surgeries; and was left with the left side of her face paralyzed. But she survived. Since then, Malala has become a powerful moral force in the fight for equal rights, but she is still under a death threat from the Taliban. She continues to speak out bravely. She was awarded Pakistan's National Youth Peace Prize in 2011 and in 2013, she received the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought from the European Parliament. In 2014, she was given the Nobel Peace Prize and became the youngest person ever to win that coveted award. She is still living under the threat of death from fundamentalist religious extremists.

> ***"If I win the Nobel Peace Prize, it would be a great opportunity for me, but if I don't get it, it's not important because my goal is not to get the Nobel Peace Prize, my goal is to see the education of every child."***
>
> Malala Yousafsai

If we accept relativism, and if we are not Pakistanis living in Mingora, who are we to judge what is right and what is wrong in Pakistan? The law that requires the death penalty for the crime of blasphemy was instituted in Pakistan not in the 12th century but in 1990, and proclaiming that women have the same rights as men is considered blasphemy. Perhaps, in that case, the Taliban was right to do what it did. After all, it is their society, not ours. Other examples of relativist ethics abound, and some of them are taken seriously. Who are we to judge the Nazis? After all we don't know what it was like living in Munich in 1936. Worse yet, if you are part of the society whose mores you accept by definition, then you also have no moral standing to object—you are simply wrong because all wrong means is what your culture or community says is wrong.

What a reasonable person could consider obscene when applying the standards of his or her community, for example, is the definition of obscenity in the United States. What is obscene in one community is not obscene in another. Eve Ensler's 1996 international Off-Broadway hit *The Vagina Monologues* has enjoyed several successful productions all over the world, including two in Miami at Miami Dade College. Yet in 2007, north of Miami but in the same state of Florida, the Atlantic Beach Theater near Jacksonville had to change the name of the play on

its marquee to *The Hoohah Monologues*. The word "vagina" offended at least one local citizen, who objected to its use. That is how applying community standards works. Deciding moral matters by checking the standards of society forbids any criticism of that society. Progress would be at best unlikely. Keeping an open mind would be difficult. It is desirable to accept that there are cultural differences, but it is less desirable to equate those differences with moral equivalencies. Cultural arrogance is not a good thing, but moral apathy may well be worse.



WHO AM I TO JUDGE?

Different tastes in fashion need not be morally significant: In your own school, some people may be more casually dressed than others; some occasions in your culture call for dressing up more than others. However, in other parts of the world today, women are being stoned to death for the blasphemy of wearing the wrong dress. Can we judge those actions if we accept cultural relativism?

Are there any advantages to cultural relativism? In other words, at what point should you judge a different culture's actions?

DIVINE COMMAND

Perhaps there is a better way, another very old way, to decide right and wrong. Divine Command theory is simple: The right thing to do is whatever your God commands you to do. God is a lawgiver, so to live well and do the right thing, one should follow his commands.

There are initial objections to this theory, not least of them the question of whose God we mean, of how we happen to get commands from that God, of trusting a messenger, and, most of all, of the vast diversity of religions in a multicultural society. Your religion may not allow you to eat shellfish, but it would be difficult to argue that because of that no one should eat

shellfish. You might claim, as some politicians do, that Jesus told you to run for office; someone might reasonably doubt that bit of information. St. Joan of Arc heard divine voices, and today she is considered a martyr and saint, a symbol of France. Another woman moved to do battle because of voices in her head—say, to join forces with ISIS—today might likely be forced to receive psychiatric care even though she might be as sincere as the Maid of Orleans. The al-Qaeda terrorists who slammed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, by all accounts were following their God's commands, and there is no reason to doubt that they believed that.

Still, even if you are sure of your God and you are sure you got the message right, there is a problem. This basic problem, one that has plagued theologians for millennia, was first pointed out by Socrates in Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro*, included in this chapter. A young man looking for an answer on ways to live right and do the right thing offers Socrates a possibility, namely, that the right thing to do is whatever that pleases the Gods. That is, the right thing to do is what God commands you to do. "Morally right" means "commanded by God," and "morally wrong" means "forbidden by God." Simple.

Socrates agrees, but he suggests there may be more to *Euthyphro*'s idea. Let's agree that the right thing to do is whatever God commands you to do, Socrates tells him. This question remains: Is it right because God commands it, or does God command it because it is right? This is one of the most famous questions in the history of philosophy, and, like so much in Plato's challenging dialogues, it creates more questions than answers.

In one instance, God commands something because it is right. After all, God is wise and would not steer us wrong. God knows best. The problem here is that you have then set up an authority higher than God, that the concepts of right and wrong precede God. You have turned God into Google, a nice source of information. Once you get that information, you do not need Him anymore. God is omniscient in this case, but He is no longer omnipotent because right and wrong are out of His hands.

So perhaps the alternative is better—something is right because God commands it. In this case, however, you have made God's commands arbitrary. God could command you to lie, murder, or worse—he is omnipotent, after all—and those acts would be right precisely because

what makes them right is that God commanded them. Either way, the results are not what any religious person would want. One way you take away your God's power; the other way you take away His mercy. In fact, the omniscience and omnipotence of any God are a major dilemma for theologians, beyond the scope of a critical thinking and ethics discussion here, but nevertheless interesting. Atheists, understandably, have found solid ammunition against religious faith in this dilemma; in the 20th century, the great British philosopher **Bertrand Russell** expanded on the *Euthyphro* problem in his *Why I Am Not a Christian*, making a case for the inevitable dilemma as an internal, fatal flaw in religious belief.

INDIA-CIRCA 1972: stamp printed by India, shows Bertrand Russell, circa 1972
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But it is hardly only atheists who take the *Euthyphro* problem seriously. Major theologians of the three hegemonic Abrahamic religions—Jews, Christians, and Muslims—also have thought that the problem was interesting.

> ***"To disparage the dictate of reason is to condemn the command of God."***
>
> St. Thomas Aquinas

St. Thomas Aquinas thought so too. The 13th-century philosopher knew the *Euthyphro* problem very well, and his strikingly original, if ultimately flawed, Natural Law theory went a long way to avoid Divine Command theory. What he did was clever. Following Aristotle and synthesizing the pagan Greek's philosophy into a Christian morality, Aquinas suggested the following. Our reason reveals to us how the world works. So far so good—this is what Aristotle suggested with his theory of the four causes, and it is the basis of today's scientific method. That is, unlike his teacher Plato, Aristotle thought that we could trust appearances to get us closer to the truth and, by using our reason and asking questions, we could even get to moral truths. Then Aquinas added something Aristotle would not have countenanced.

5.2 NATURAL LAW AND ITS DISCONTENTS

If reason reveals to us how nature works, and we also know that God made nature, then it follows that reason reveals to us that this is the way it has to work, because God made it that way. So it is the case that the right thing to do ends up being what God commands, but not because God commands it but rather because "in the light of reason" you yourself find that moral truth revealed to you.

Unnatural equals bad; natural equals good. That is Natural Law according to St. Thomas Aquinas. Never mind that, for example, the most natural thing in life would be to die of cancer, slowly and in pain; we have found Egyptian mummies with cancer, a disease that has been around naturally as long as humanity itself. Yet few people today would call chemotherapy, radiation therapy, and pain killers wrong—though they are all certainly unnatural. Vaccines keep nature from killing us. Hospitals are in the business of going against nature; that is what they do. If you have ever taken an aspirin, you have committed an unnatural act.

That same Natural Law, which was declared the official philosophy of the Catholic Church in the 19th century, has been widely used along with scriptural citations to support slavery (reason reveals that some races are superior to others); to launch the Holy Crusades; and to oppose scientific discoveries such as that the Earth is not the center of the universe, that it is not flat, and that the Sun does not go around the Earth. For centuries, scientists from Hypatia in the Hellenistic Age to Giordano Bruno in the Renaissance were executed as heretics for suggesting that church pronouncements about nature might be scientifically and, therefore, morally incorrect.

To this day, Natural Law is the main argument used not only by the Catholic Church but by other religious and political organizations to oppose, for instance, that the use of condoms is unnatural and therefore wrong. There are AIDS-prevention programs in Africa that have been denied funding because they promote the use of condoms, which is unnatural. The Natural Law argument bears studying because it is still being invoked. In recent times, Natural Law was the first argument used to oppose interracial marriage, racial integration, women in combat, gays in the army, and marriage equality. "That's just not natural" remains a powerful emotionally charged insult passing for moral judgment.

"An 'is' is not an 'ought'."

David Hume

David Hume: The Real Problem with Natural Law. As it happens, it is not a moral judgment at all. Natural Law begins with a mistake of the sort no critical thinking and ethics student ought to make. We owe this discovery to David Hume, one of the most important philosophers in the English language. Put simply, even if Aquinas had been right about every description of nature that his reason apparently revealed to him—and clearly he was not: the Earth is in fact not flat—merely describing something is not the same thing as prescribing or judging anything about that same thing. Science is descriptive; ethics is prescriptive or normative. One needs reasons, clear and impartial reasons, to begin making moral arguments. One cannot obtain a prescriptive or normative statement—that is, a moral judgment—from a descriptive statement. As Hume pointed out in one of the most devastating, pithy claims in all of moral philosophy, an "is" is not an "ought." Natural Law rests on a mistake.

Does It Matter How I Feel About It? Ethical Subjectivism. As Ernest Hemingway once said, "What is moral is what you feel good after, and what is immoral is what you feel bad after."

David Hume's ethical theory is based on his theory of perception and metaphysics. Most contemporary philosophers interpret Hume as a sentimentalist—that sentiments or feelings are the basis of ethical statements. This view is based in part on his various works, including the *Treatise of Human Nature*. There, Hume states "An impression first strikes upon the senses, and makes us perceive heat or cold, thirst or hunger, pleasure or pain, of some kind or other. Of this impression there is a copy taken by the mind, which remains after the impression ceases; and this we call an idea. This idea of pleasure or pain, when it returns upon the soul, produces the new impressions of desire and aversion, hope and fear, which may properly be called impressions of reflection, because derived from it."

"The rules of morality are not the conclusion of our reason."

David Hume

Some philosophers take Hume's claims to suggest that the great Scottish philosopher is actually some sort of utilitarian—given his reliance on pain and pleasure for the determination of actions. Yet the standard view is that Hume bases ethical determination on sentiments or feelings. Ethical subjectivism, emotivism, and sentimentalism variously have been inspired by Hume's analysis of morals. Major thinkers including Immanuel Kant and Jeremy Bentham were deeply impressed by Hume's philosophy and in many ways responded to it in their own. A sentimentalist, in general, argues that our feelings guide or determine ethics. Or, to put it another way, the only definition of whether something is right or wrong is precisely whether we approve or disapprove of it. If we feel good about something, it is good; if we feel repulsed by something, it is bad.

Moral judgments are not a matter of fact, according to Hume. Given that our morals have an influence on our actions, it cannot be the case that these moral judgments are derived from reason. Therefore, reason is of no help in making those judgments.

Moral philosophers up to this point all have shown a faith in reason as the way to discover moral truths, variously reaching conclusions that morally right means reasonable and morally wrong means unreasonable: philosophers as different as Aristotle, Kant, and Mill all depend on human reason as the way to morality. Hume rejects all these theories. Human nature is such that we all share a certain sympathy for other creatures—an insight Hume shared with his lifelong friend and fellow Scot **Adam Smith**. This sympathy we share is largely responsible for our moral and political opinions.

MORAL PHILOSOPHERS: DAVID HUME (1711–1776)

Controversial in his lifetime, and today widely considered the greatest philosopher in the English language, David Hume was born in Edinburgh, Scotland. His father Joseph Home died in 1713 when his son was two years old—the spelling "Hume" is one the philosopher used from 1734, tired of hearing the English mispronounce the Scottish surname "Home." The precocious youngster began his studies at the University of Edinburgh when he was only 12 years old, and by age 24 he wrote his masterpiece *A Treatise on Human Nature.*

High dynamic range HDR Statue of David Hume in Edinburgh, philosopher historian of Western philosophy and Scottish Enlightenment

A radical skeptic and empiricist of considerable influence on future philosophy, Hume pointed out that we assume too much, not only about ourselves but also about the world around us. We may assume that the future will be like the past, but in fact we have no proof of that prediction. Our knowledge in fact is based on sense impressions, on our experiences. We don't even have any factual knowledge of the self, when it comes to that, because any conception of identity must be based on impressions. "It must be some impression that gives rise to every real idea," he wrote in his *Treatise*. But the self is not any one impression, but that to which our several impressions are supposed to have a reference." Therefore, as far as our idea of the self, Hume believed "there is no such idea."

The implications of this observation are far-reaching, indeed. But at first they were clearly against the grain, even in the Enlightenment. After Hume, the choices for moral philosophers were difficult. One could agree with him that all we mean by right and wrong is simply "I approve" or "I disapprove." One could, as Kant would, insist on reason as a guide to morals that would go beyond our own emotions. Or, later still, one could go the Utilitarian route and figure out practical and measurable reasons why one course of action was preferable to another. Neither approach contradicts Hume's observations on human nature, which anticipates the science of psychology by more than a century.

As Hume developed his ideas, he also was led to conclusions that, for example, exposed the faulty logic of what is today called an "intelligent design" argument for the existence of God. Being an atheist, a skeptic, and a confirmed bachelor to boot did not endear Hume to the church. Like his intimate friend and fellow philosopher Adam Smith, Hume longed for a teaching position in the University of Edinburgh; but influential clergy made sure that he never would teach. In fact, Hume narrowly escaped being tried for heresy. Smith did land a position late in life in his own alma mater, the University of Glasgow.

MORAL PHILOSOPHERS: DAVID HUME (1711–1776) *continued*

Hume died of cancer in 1776, shortly after completing his autobiography. The younger Adam Smith died in Edinburgh in 1790. He is buried in the Canongate Churchyard in Edinburgh's Royal Mile, not far from a monument honoring David Hume, itself not far from the venerable university that did not have either of these brightest stars of the Scottish Enlightenment while they lived.

EMOTIONS ARE MORALLY SIGNIFICANT

Approval and disapproval are the source of our moral ideas of right and wrong, according to Hume.

Our first reaction of horrified moral outrage when witnessing, for example, someone kicking a puppy is in fact the emotional reaction Hume believes is precisely what we mean when we condemn such an act. We could of course consider what sort of person would do such an act, we could consider the act of kicking the puppy and judge it accordingly, or we could look at the consequences and how they affect the poor creature. But these are all considerations after the fact. The immediate reaction was one of disgust or disapproval. That, Hume believes, is all there is to a moral judgment.

Hume may in fact be correct about human nature, and in this sense his *Treatise of Human Nature*, written when he was only 24 years old, anticipates the science of psychology by more than a century. But describing emotions accurately is not the same thing as prescribing a course of action. It may very well be true that "morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions," Hume wrote, adding that "reason itself is utterly impotent in this particular."

"The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of reason," according to Hume. The main problem with any view that relies on sentiments, feelings, or intuitions is that not all people share those same feelings. What is one to do when they don't? For example, several years ago a man in Texas called 911 claiming to be eating his girlfriend for breakfast. If you make such a call, rest assured that the police will come to your door.

> *"Take any action allowed to be vicious: Wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call vice. In whichever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. Here is a matter of fact; but 'tis the object of feeling, not of reason."*
>
> David Hume.

This, of course, seems outrageous to most reasonable persons, yet it illustrates a fundamental flaw basing ethics on subjective intuitions, feelings, or sentiments—there is no basis for rational deliberation. If you feel sick seeing an interracial couple together holding hands at a shopping mall, then their holding hands is wrong (for you). Yet obviously the interracial couple does not share your sentiment.

Hume, with his usual flare, embraces this apparent absurd position when he states: "'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger. 'Tis not contrary to reason for me to choose my total ruin, to prevent the least uneasiness of an Indian or person wholly unknown to me. 'Tis as little contrary to reason to prefer even my own acknowledged lesser good to my greater, and have a more ardent affection for the former than for the latter."

5.3 READINGS

READINGS: PLATO: EUTHYPHRO

In this selection from Plato's dialogue Euthyphro, a very difficult dilemma emerges as Plato and the young man discuss the nature of goodness and the Gods. The backstory to the dialogue is that Euthyphro is in Athens to help prosecute his own father for murder. Millennia after Plato and the Gods

From *The Dialogues of Plato*, translated by Benjamin Jowett, New York, Macmillan, 1892.

of the Ancient Greeks have stopped attracting believers; what has become known as the Euthyphro problem remains an impossible challenge to Divine Command moral theory in any monotheistic religion that claims that the right thing to do is whatever God commands you to do: Is something right because God commands it, or does God command it because it is right?

SOCRATES: And what is piety, and what is impiety?

EUTHYPHRO: Piety is doing as I am doing; that is to say, prosecuting any one who is guilty of murder, sacrilege, or of any similar crime—whether he be your father or mother, or whoever he may be—that makes no difference; and not to prosecute them is impiety. And please to consider, Socrates, what a notable proof I will give you of the truth of my words, a proof which I have already given to others:—of the principle, I mean, that the impious, whoever he may be, ought not to go unpunished. Yes, I should say that what all the gods love is pious and holy, and the opposite which they all hate, impious.

SOCRATES: Ought we to enquire into the truth of this, Euthyphro, or simply to accept the mere statement on our own authority and that of others? What do you say?

EUTHYPHRO: We should enquire; and I believe that the statement will stand the test of enquiry.

SOCRATES: We shall know better, my good friend, in a little while. The point which I should first wish to understand is whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved of the gods.

EUTHYPHRO: I do not understand your meaning, Socrates.

SOCRATES: I will endeavour to explain: we, speak of carrying and we speak of being carried, of leading and being led, seeing and being seen. You know that in all such cases there is a difference, and you know also in what the difference lies?

EUTHYPHRO: I think that I understand.

SOCRATES: And is not that which is beloved distinct from that which loves?

EUTHYPHRO: Certainly.

SOCRATES: Well; and now tell me, is that which is carried in this state of carrying because it is carried, or for some other reason?

EUTHYPHRO: No; that is the reason.

SOCRATES: And the same is true of what is led and of what is seen?

EUTHYPHRO: True.

SOCRATES: And a thing is not seen because it is visible, but conversely, visible because it is seen; nor is a thing led because it is in the state of being led, or carried because it is in the state of being carried, but the converse of this. And now I think, Euthyphro, that my meaning will be intelligible; and my meaning is, that any state of action or passion implies previous action or passion. It does not become because it is becoming, but it is in a state of becoming because it becomes; neither does it suffer because it is in a state of suffering, but it is in a state of suffering because it suffers. Do you not agree?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Is not that which is loved in some state either of becoming or suffering?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes.

SOCRATES: And the same holds as in the previous instances; the state of being loved follows the act of being loved, and not the act the state.

EUTHYPHRO: Certainly.

SOCRATES: And what do you say of piety, Euthyphro: is not piety, according to your definition, loved by all the gods?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Because it is pious or holy, or for some other reason?

EUTHYPHRO: No, that is the reason.

SOCRATES: It is loved because it is holy, not holy because it is loved?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes.

SOCRATES: And that which is dear to the gods is loved by them, and is in a state to be loved of them because it is loved of them?

EUTHYPHRO: Certainly.

GREECE-CIRCA 1998: A stamp printed in Greece shows Socrates, circa 1998
© *neftali/Shutterstock.com*

SOCRATES: Then that which is dear to the gods, Euthyphro, is not holy, nor is that which is holy loved of God, as you affirm; but they are two different things.

EUTHYPHRO: How do you mean, Socrates?

SOCRATES: I mean to say that the holy has been acknowledged by us to be loved of God because it is holy, not to be holy because it is loved.

EUTHYPHRO: Yes.

SOCRATES: But that which is dear to the gods is dear to them because it is loved by them, not loved by them because it is dear to them.

EUTHYPHRO: True.

SOCRATES: But, friend Euthyphro, if that which is holy is the same with that which is dear to God, and is loved because it is holy, then that which is dear to God would have been loved as being dear to God; but if that which is dear to God is dear to him because loved by him, then that which is holy would have been holy because loved by him. But now you see that the reverse is the case, and that they are quite different from one another. For one is of a kind to be loved cause it is loved, and the other is loved because it is of a kind to be loved. Thus you appear to me, Euthyphro, when I ask you what is the essence of holiness, to offer an attribute only, and not the essence--the attribute of being loved by all the gods. But you still refuse to explain to me the nature of holiness. And therefore, if you please, I will ask you not to hide your treasure, but to tell me once more what holiness or piety really is, whether dear to the gods or not; and what is impiety?

EUTHYPHRO: I really do not know, Socrates, how to express what I mean.

For somehow or other our arguments, on whatever ground we rest them, seem to turn round and walk away from us.

SOCRATES: And of the many and fair things done by the gods, which is the chief or principal one?

EUTHYPHRO: I have told you already, Socrates, that to learn all these things accurately will be very tiresome. Let me simply say that piety or holiness is learning how to please the gods in word and deed, by prayers and sacrifices. Such piety is the salvation of families and states, just as the impious, which is unpleasing to the gods, is their ruin and destruction.

SOCRATES: Is not the right way of asking to ask of them what we want?

EUTHYPHRO: Certainly.

SOCRATES: And the right way of giving is to give to them in return what they want of us. There would be no meaning in an art which gives to any one that which he does not want.

EUTHYPHRO: Very true, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Then piety, Euthyphro, is an art which gods and men have of doing business with one another?

EUTHYPHRO: That is an expression which you may use, if you like.

SOCRATES: But I have no particular liking for anything but the truth. I wish, however, that you would tell me what benefit accrues to the gods from our gifts. There is no doubt about what they give to us; for there is no good thing which they do not give; but how we can give any good thing to them in return is far from being equally clear. If they give everything and we give nothing, that must be an affair of business in which we have very greatly the advantage of them.

EUTHYPHRO: And do you imagine, Socrates, that any benefit accrues to the gods from our gifts?

SOCRATES: But if not, Euthyphro, what is the meaning of gifts which are conferred by us upon the gods?

EUTHYPHRO: What else, but tributes of honour; and, as I was just now saying, what pleases them?

SOCRATES: Piety, then, is pleasing to the gods, but not beneficial or dear to them?

EUTHYPHRO: I should say that nothing could be dearer.

SOCRATES: Then once more the assertion is repeated that piety is dear to the gods?

EUTHYPHRO: Certainly.

SOCRATES: And are you not saying that what is loved of the gods is holy; and is not this the same as what is dear to them—do you see?

EUTHYPHRO: True.

SOCRATES: Then either we were wrong in our former assertion; or, if we were right then, we are wrong now.

EUTHYPHRO: One of the two must be true.

SOCRATES: Then we must begin again and ask, What is piety? That is an enquiry which I shall never be weary of pursuing as far as in me lies; and I entreat you not to scorn me, but to apply your mind to the utmost, and tell me the truth. I am sure, therefore, that you know the nature of piety and impiety. Speak out then, my dear Euthyphro, and do not hide your knowledge.

EUTHYPHRO: Another time, Socrates; for I am in a hurry, and must go now.

READINGS: DAVID HUME: THE PRINCIPLLES OF MORALS

6.4 *There are no moral facts. In fact the most we can say about the meaning of terms such as "right" and "wrong" is that they have little to do with reason and everything to do with emotions. In the selections from David Hume's An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals (1751), as in his earlier Treatise of Human Nature (1740), the great Scottish philosopher argues that our moral opinions are based on feelings, that is all.*

Of the General Principles or Morals. Disputes with men, holding fast to their principles, are, of all others, the most irksome; except, perhaps, those with persons, entirely disingenuous, who really do not believe the opinions they defend, but engage in the controversy, from affectation, from a spirit of opposition, or from a desire of showing wit and ingenuity, superior to the rest of mankind. The same blind adherence to their own arguments

From *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 1912 Reprint of 1777 Edition by David Hume.

is to be expected in both; the same contempt of their antagonists; and the same passionate vehemence, in enforcing sophistry and falsehood. And as reasoning is not the source, whence either disputant derives his tenets; it is in vain to expect, that any logic, which speaks not to the affections, will ever engage him to embrace sounder principles.

Those who have denied the reality of moral distinctions, may be ranked among the disingenuous disputants; nor is it conceivable, that any human creature could ever seriously believe, that all characters and actions were alike entitled to the affection and regard of everyone. The difference, which nature has placed between one man and another, is so wide, and this difference is still so much farther widened, by education, example, and habit, that, where the opposite extremes come at once under our apprehension, there is no skepticism so scrupulous, and scarce any assurance so determined, as absolutely to deny all distinction between them. Let a man's insensibility be ever so great, he must often be touched with the images of Right and Wrong; and let his prejudices be ever so obstinate, he must observe, that others are susceptible of like impressions. The only way, therefore, of converting an antagonist of this kind, is to leave him to himself. For, finding that nobody keeps up the controversy with him, it is probable he will, at last, of himself, from mere weariness, come over to the side of common sense and reason.

There has been a controversy started of late, much better worth examination, concerning the general foundation of Morals; whether they be derived from Reason, or from Sentiment; whether we attain the knowledge of them by a chain of argument and induction, or by an immediate feeling and finer internal sense; whether, like all sound judgment of truth and falsehood, they should be the same to every rational intelligent being; or whether, like the perception of beauty and deformity, they be founded entirely on the particular fabric and constitution of the human species...

...The end of all moral speculations is to teach us our duty; and, by proper representations of the deformity of vice and beauty of virtue, beget correspondent habits, and engage us to avoid the one, and embrace the other. But is this ever to be expected from inferences and conclusions of the understanding, which of themselves have no hold of the affections or set in motion the active powers of men? They discover truths: but where the truths which they discover are indifferent, and beget no desire or aversion, they can have no influence on conduct and behavior. What is honorable,

what is fair, what is becoming, what is noble, what is generous, takes possession of the heart, and animates us to embrace and maintain it. What is intelligible, what is evident, what is probable, what is true, procures only the cool assent of the understanding; and gratifying a speculative curiosity, puts an end to our researches...

...The very nature of language guides us almost infallibly in forming a judgment of this nature; and as every tongue possesses one set of words which are taken in a good sense, and another in the opposite, the least acquaintance with the idiom suffices, without any reasoning, to direct us in collecting and arranging the estimable or blamable qualities of men. The only object of reasoning is to discover the circumstances on both sides, which are common to these qualities; to observe that particular in which the estimable qualities agree on the one hand, and the blamable on the other; and thence to reach the foundation of ethics, and find those universal principles, from which all censure or approbation is ultimately derived. As this is a question of fact, not of abstract science, we can only expect success, by following the experimental method, and deducing general maxims from a comparison of particular instances. The other scientific method, where a general abstract principle is first established, and is afterwards branched out into a variety of inferences and conclusions, may be more perfect in itself, but suits less the imperfection of human nature, and is a common source of illusion and mistake in this as well as in other subjects. Men are now cured of their passion for hypotheses and systems in natural philosophy, and will hearken to no arguments but those which are derived from experience. It is full time they should attempt a like reformation in all moral disquisitions; and reject every system of ethics, however subtle or ingenious, which is not founded on fact and observation...

Reason or Emotion—Traffic sign with two options—rationalism, pragmatism and logical thinking against passion and feelings of emotional life.

Why Utility Pleases. It seems so natural a thought to ascribe to their utility the praise, which we bestow on the social virtues, that one would expect to meet with this principle everywhere in moral writers, as the chief foundation of their reasoning and enquiry. In common life, we may observe, that the circumstance of utility is always appealed to; nor is it supposed,

that a greater eulogy can be given to any man, than to display his usefulness to the public, and enumerate the services, which he has performed to mankind and society. What praise, even of an inanimate form, if the regularity and elegance of its parts destroy not its fitness for any useful purpose! And how satisfactory an apology for any disproportion or seeming deformity, if we can show the necessity of that particular construction for the use intended!... What wonder then, that a man, whose habits and conduct are hurtful to society, and dangerous or pernicious to everyone who has an intercourse with him, should, on that account, be an object of disapprobation, and communicate to every spectator the strongest sentiment of disgust and hatred.

But perhaps the difficulty of accounting for these effects of usefulness, or its contrary, has kept philosophers from admitting them into their systems of ethics, and has induced them rather to employ any other principle, in explaining the origin of moral good and evil. But it is no just reason for rejecting any principle, confirmed by experience, that we cannot give a satisfactory account of its origin, nor are able to resolve it into other more general principles. And if we would employ a little thought on the present subject, we need be at no loss to account for the influence of utility, and to deduce it from principles, the most known and avowed in human nature.

From the apparent usefulness of the social virtues, it has readily been inferred by skeptics, both ancient and modern, that all moral distinctions arise from education, and were, at first, invented, and afterwards encouraged, by the art of politicians, in order to render men tractable, and subdue their natural ferocity and selfishness, which incapacitated them for society. This principle, indeed, of precept and education, must so far be owned to have a powerful influence, that it may frequently increase or diminish, beyond their natural standard, the sentiments of approbation or dislike; and may even, in particular instances, create, without any natural principle, a new sentiment of this kind; as is evident in all superstitious practices and observances: But that ALL moral affection or dislike arises from this origin, will never surely be allowed by any judicious enquirer. Had nature made no such distinction, founded on the original constitution of the mind, the words, HONOURABLE and SHAMEFUL, LOVELY and ODIOUS, NOBLE and DESPICABLE, had never had place in any language; nor could politicians, had they invented these terms, ever have been able to render them intelligible, or make them convey any idea to the audience. So that nothing can be more superficial than this paradox of the

skeptics; and it were well, if, in the abstruse studies of logic and metaphysics, we could as easily obviate the cavils of that sect, as in the practical and more intelligible sciences of politics and morals.

The social virtues must, therefore, be allowed to have a natural beauty and amiableness, which, at first, antecedent to all precept or education, recommends them to the esteem of uninstructed mankind, and engages their affections. And as the public utility of these virtues is the chief circumstance, whence they derive their merit, it follows, that the end, which they have a tendency to promote, must be some way agreeable to us, and take hold of some natural affection. It must please, either from considerations of self-interest, or from more generous motives and regards.

...A generous, a brave, a noble deed, performed by an adversary, commands our approbation; while in its consequences it may be acknowledged prejudicial to our particular interest.

Where private advantage concurs with general affection for virtue, we readily perceive and avow the mixture of these distinct sentiments, which have a very different feeling and influence on the mind. We praise, perhaps, with more alacrity, where the generous humane action contributes to our particular interest: But the topics of praise, which we insist on, are very wide of this circumstance. And we may attempt to bring over others to our sentiments, without endeavoring to convince them, that they reap any advantage from the actions which we recommend to their approbation and applause.

What Is That To Me? There are few occasions, when this question is not pertinent: And had it that universal, infallible influence supposed, it would turn into ridicule every composition, and almost every conversation, which contain any praise or censure of men and manners.

It is but a weak subterfuge, when pressed by these facts and arguments, to say, that we transport ourselves, by the force of imagination, into distant ages and countries, and consider the advantage, which we should have reaped from these characters, had we been contemporaries, and had any commerce with the persons. It is not conceivable, how a REAL sentiment or passion can ever arise from a known IMAGINARY interest; especially when our REAL interest is still kept in view, and is often acknowledged to be entirely distinct from the imaginary, and even sometimes opposite to it.

A man, brought to the brink of a precipice, cannot look down without trembling; and the sentiment of IMAGINARY danger actuates him, in opposition to the opinion and belief of REAL safety. But the imagination is here assisted by the presence of a striking object; and yet prevails not, except it be also aided by novelty, and the unusual appearance of the object. Custom soon reconciles us to heights and precipices, and wears off these false and delusive terrors. The reverse is observable in the estimates which we form of characters and manners; and the more we habituate ourselves to an accurate scrutiny of morals, the more delicate feeling do we acquire of the most minute distinctions between vice and virtue. Such frequent occasion, indeed, have we, in common life, to pronounce all kinds of moral determinations, that no object of this kind can be new or unusual to us; nor could any FALSE views or prepossessions maintain their ground against an experience, so common and familiar. Experience being chiefly what forms the associations of ideas, it is impossible that any association could establish and support itself, in direct opposition to that principle.

Usefulness is agreeable, and engages our approbation. This is a matter of fact, confirmed by daily observation. But, USEFUL? For what? For somebody's interest, surely. Whose interest then? Not our own only: For our approbation frequently extends farther. It must, therefore, be the interest of those, who are served by the character or action approved of; and these we may conclude, however remote, are not totally indifferent to us. By opening up this principle, we shall discover one great source of moral distinctions.

...Usefulness is only a tendency to a certain end; and it is a contradiction in terms, that anything pleases as means to an end, where the end itself no wise affects us. If usefulness, therefore, be a source of moral sentiment, and if this usefulness be not always considered with a reference to self; it follows, that everything, which contributes to the happiness of society, recommends itself directly to our approbation and good-will. Here is a principle, which accounts, in great part, for the origin of morality: And what need we seek for abstruse and remote systems, when there occurs one so obvious and natural?

Have we any difficulty to comprehend the force of humanity and benevolence? Or to conceive, that the very aspect of happiness, joy, prosperity, gives pleasure; that of pain, suffering, sorrow, communicates uneasiness? The human countenance, says Horace, borrows smiles or tears

from the human countenance. Reduce a person to solitude, and he loses all enjoyment, except either of the sensual or speculative kind; and that because the movements of his heart are not forwarded by correspondent movements in his fellow-creatures. The signs of sorrow and mourning, though arbitrary, affect us with melancholy; but the natural symptoms, tears and cries and groans, never fail to infuse compassion and uneasiness. And if the effects of misery touch us in so lively a manner; can we be supposed altogether insensible or indifferent towards its causes; when a malicious or treacherous character and behavior are presented to us?...

...If any man from a cold insensibility, or narrow selfishness of temper, is unaffected with the images of human happiness or misery, he must be equally indifferent to the images of vice and virtue: As, on the other hand, it is always found, that a warm concern for the interests of our species is attended with a delicate feeling of all moral distinctions; a strong resentment of injury done to men; a lively approbation of their welfare. In this particular, though great superiority is observable of one man above another; yet none are so entirely indifferent to the interest of their fellow-creatures, as to perceive no distinctions of moral good and evil, in consequence of the different tendencies of actions and principles. How, indeed, can we suppose it possible in anyone, who wears a human heart, that if there be subjected to his censure, one character or system of conduct, which is beneficial, and another which is pernicious to his species or community, he will not so much as give a cool preference to the former, or ascribe to it the smallest merit or regard? Let us suppose such a person ever so selfish; let private interest have engrossed ever so much his attention; yet in instances, where that is not concerned, he must unavoidably feel SOME propensity to the good of mankind, and make it an object of choice, if everything else be equal. Would any man, who is walking along, tread as willingly on another's gouty toes, whom he has no quarrel with, as on the hard flint and pavement? There is here surely a difference in the case. We surely take into consideration the happiness and misery of others, in weighing the several motives of action, and incline to the former, where no private regards draw us to seek our own promotion or advantage by the injury of our fellow-creatures. And if the principles of humanity are capable, in many instances, of influencing our actions, they must, at all times, have some authority over our sentiments, and give us a general approbation of what is useful to society, and blame of what is dangerous

or pernicious. The degrees of these sentiments may be the subject of controversy; but the reality of their existence, one should think, must be admitted in every theory or system...

Thus, in whatever light we take this subject, the merit, ascribed to the social virtues, appears still uniform, and arises chiefly from that regard, which the natural sentiment of benevolence engages us to pay to the interests of mankind and society.

...It appears to be matter of fact, that the circumstance of UTILITY, in all subjects, is a source of praise and approbation: That it is constantly appealed to in all moral decisions concerning the merit and demerit of actions: That it is the SOLE source of that high regard paid to justice, fidelity, honor, allegiance, and chastity: That it is inseparable from all the other social virtues, humanity, generosity, charity, affability, lenity, mercy, and moderation: And, in a word, that it is a foundation of the chief part of morals, which has a reference to mankind and our fellow-creatures.

It appears also, that, in our general approbation of characters and manners, the useful tendency of the social virtues moves us not by any regards to self-interest, but has an influence much more universal and extensive. It appears that a tendency to public good, and to the promoting of peace, harmony, and order in society, does always, by affecting the benevolent principles of our frame, engage us on the side of the social virtues. And it appears, as an additional confirmation, that these principles of humanity and sympathy enter so deeply into all our sentiments, and have so powerful an influence, as may enable them to excite the strongest censure and applause. The present theory is the simple result of all these inferences, each of which seems founded on uniform experience and observation.

Were it doubtful, whether there were any such principle in our nature as humanity or a concern for others, yet when we see, in numberless instances, that whatever has a tendency to promote the interests of society, is so highly approved of, we ought thence to learn the force of the benevolent principle; since it is impossible for anything to please as means to an end, where the end is totally indifferent. On the other hand, were it doubtful, whether there were, implanted in our nature, any general principle of moral blame and approbation, yet when we see, in numberless instances, the influence of humanity, we ought thence to conclude, that it is impossible, but that everything which promotes the

interest of society must communicate pleasure, and what is pernicious give uneasiness. But when these different reflections and observations concur in establishing the same conclusion, must they not bestow an undisputed evidence upon it?

It is however hoped, that the progress of this argument will bring a farther confirmation of the present theory, by showing the rise of other sentiments of esteem and regard from the same or like principles.

Is It Feelings or Reason That Counts Most?

Is cheating wrong? Why?

Our actions flow from our passions or our feelings, according to Hume. Reason is no help here, because reason is a slave to the passions, and it is passion that exerts the biggest influence on our actions. Kant, you may recall, believes in his categorical imperative that reason clearly shows us what is right and wrong, no matter how you feel about it. Who is right, Kant or Hume?

So, is it your gut that tells you something like cheating is wrong? Is that how you judge that action? What is going on when you make a moral judgment?

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