

'REASON AS A SLAVE OF PASSION' IN DAVID HUME'S MORAL THEORY: A GENUINE FOUNDATION OF MORALITY OR AN ABERRATION IN OUR CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY?

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Abstract

A foundation of moral principles in tandem with ontological basis of human nature for human beings to live a good life and in harmony with others has been the concern of moral philosophers from Pre-Socratic days until now. It is indisputable that a universal and irrefutable moral principles for this purpose have being difficult to establish in human society. It is evident that many moral theories have been propounded, criticized, deconstructed and reconstructed by moral philosophers at different intervals in the history of humanity but none has offer incontrovertible moral theory. However, Hume's moral theory was prominent in the Europe of eighteenth century as an alternative to the rationalist moral philosophy of Platonic tradition that dominated previous centuries. This paper locates Hume's moral foundation in human passions motivated by sympathy for others irrespective of their relations and affiliations as the basis of moral preference, judgment and action of human beings. The research reveals why Hume attributes insignificant role to reason in moral commendation and condemnation. Nevertheless, a thorough appraisal of his moral theory shows that the moral aberrations attributable to his moral foundation makes his theory unrealistic and fertile ground for all kinds of moral discrepancies in human society.

Keywords: Reason, Slave of Passion, David Hume Morality, Theory

Introduction

This paper examines the moral theory that David Hume put together mainly in his two principal texts: *A Treatise of Human Nature* and *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. The principal aim of Hume after his rejection of Pre-Socratic moral philosophy is to found a different moral philosophy that will stand out for recognition in the world of his time. It is obvious that he employed Scientific cum psychological arguments to establish the foundation of his moral theory. He persistently maintained that human passions and reason provide the basis on which the phenomenological complexities of human behaviours are scientifically

demonstrated for approval and disapproval.¹ It is necessary to evaluate the analysis and demonstrations of his arguments for natural inclinations to be the foundation of morality and why reason has no role in morality except a slave or instrument of passions. The objective of this paper is to accentuate the complementary relationship between reason and passions in morality that is appropriate for human beings notwithstanding the inherent intricacies that are involved in human behaviour. The most intriguing question then is whether a morality founded on human passions alone can ever attain the level of objectivity and universality that is required for a practicable ethical theory in human society. In the evaluation, the paper shows some achievements and inconsistencies of Hume's moral theory and over indulgence of passions that make his moral foundation deficient for human society. At the end, the conclusion of this article is centred on the fact that human nature is composed of reason and passions and none is less important or subservient to the other in moral approval and disapproval of moral agents in human society.

David Hume's notion of Human Nature and its Relationship to Morality

The opposition of Hume to the Platonic understanding of human nature is fundamentally rooted in the fact that reason takes prominent over passion in all the processes culminating in moral commendation and condemnation. In Platonic moral tradition, the passions of man are demonised and considered distractive in all the processes that will terminate in moral decision. In his understanding of human nature, Hume tried to explain the basic characteristics that are common to every man of different generations, backgrounds and dispositions. It is evident in Hume's anthropology that his idea of human nature is centred on passions and related human character traits like sympathy, affection and solidarity. Besides, it is observable that his study of human nature and moral action are closely comparable to the views of Thomas Hobbes, Benedict Spinoza, Francis Hutcheson and Adam Smith. As Rachel Cohon clearly asserts,

Hume's predecessors have varied aims in analysing the passions: dualists such as Descartes seek to explain mind-body interaction, materialists such as Hobbes seek a mechanistic account, and philosophers of different

¹Aso, Williams Olorunfemi, *David Hume's Moral Theory: A Justification for its Ethical Reconstruction*, Lagos: Fropiel International Limited, 2018, p. 74.

persuasions pursue other goals such as founding their ethical theories or recommending a strategy to attain human happiness.²

In the perspective of the above, anthropological and sociological theories have clearly demonstrated beyond any reasonable doubt that there are some actions and dispositions of human beings that are practically observable in every culture and generation that ever lived. As a matter of fact, sociologists like Emile Durkheim and philosophical anthropologists like G.E.M. Anscombe and Alasdair Macintyre have given us diverse interpretations of human nature and their relationship to moral approval and disapproval in human society.³ The relationship of Hume's understanding of human nature and its relationship to morality is essentially based on the fact that the common universal principles of human nature supposed to be the foundation stones for a conceivable moral theory in human society. The crux of his concept of human nature is centred on the fact that human nature is not structured, determined, fixed and imposed by God on human beings. He strongly believed that passions and natural inclinations of man take a prominent role in the procedure that motivate his moral and immoral actions. Hence, Hume skilfully articulated his foundation of morality around the human passions and traits like sympathy, benevolence, virtues and free will as evident below.

Hume's Identified Passions and Relationship to his Moral Theory

A close look at the history of moral philosophy shows clearly that there is a diversity of understandings and interpretations of human passions. It is palpable in Aristotelian tradition that passions are essentially the origins of pleasure and displeasure in the psychology of human action. As a result of this, happiness and not anguish is valued as the final goal and desire of every man.⁴ The Stoics equally affirmed that obedience to the principles inherent in human nature with the motivation of passions are influential in attainment of human happiness or anguish. Hume appreciated the position of the Stoics on the relationship between the principles inherent in human nature and the influence of passions in action that may end up either in pleasure or displeasure. As he briskly asserted, "what we commonly understand by passion is a violent and sensible emotion of mind,

²R. Cohon in *A Companion to Hume*, edited by E. S. Radcliffe, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 180.

⁴Joseph Omoregbe, *ETHICS: A Systematic and Historical Study*, Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Ltd., 1993, p. 164.

when any good or evil is presented, or any object, which, by original formation of our faculties, is fitted to excite an appetite.”⁵ He identified three categories of passions in human nature: direct, indirect and calm passions and their diverse influence in the motivation that is necessary for moral judgment of human beings as evident in his second book on *A Treatise of Human Nature*. It is pertinent to examine each category of passion that Hume identified and evaluate its nature and relevance to moral foundation that is he affirmed appropriate for human society.

Hume and Influence of Direct Passions in the Foundation of Morality

In his understanding of human nature, Hume defined direct passions as feelings that spontaneously sourced from natural inclinations or impulses of man as evident in every cultural group of the world. These natural impulses of man are the impetus that motive the desire for the realization of what is morally good or bad, right or wrong, true or false, commendable or condemnable in human society without any difficulty. In the words of Hume, “the impressions, which arise from good and evil most naturally, and with the least preparation are the direct passions of desire and aversion, grief and joy, hope and fear, along with volition. The mind by an original instinct tends to unite itself with the good, and to avoid evil, tho’ they conceiv’d merely in idea, and consider’d as to exist in any future period of time”.⁶ In his interpretation of Hume’s understanding of direct passions, T. Magri says, “direct passions have two principal features. They occur in the mind as episodes of feeling, rather than of thought. And they occur with a certain causal character that Hume loosely characterises in terms of firmness and solidity, force and influence, intensity and weight”.⁷ Judging from this quotation, it means that the influence of direct passions on human beings is primarily substantial to regulate the direction of their moral cravings or rebuffs.

Moreover, Hume ascertained that anytime human beings have regular experience of good or evil in their relationship with one another, they often have passionate desire for the objects of good and aversion for the objects of evil. This is largely because the quality of the objects of good is pleasurable and attractive to them while the objects of evil is nasty and repulsive. It is clear that direct passions take a primary role in the motivation of processes that facilitate moral judgment of every man. As Magri pithily puts it, “direct passions motivate in

⁵David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, book 2, part 3, section 8, paragraph 13.

⁶David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, book 2, part 3, section 9, paragraph 2.

⁷T. Magri in *A Companion to Hume*, edited by E. S. Radcliffe, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 186.

that they cause [moral] agent to act”.⁸ In his analysis and evaluation of the nitty-gritty of the complexity involved, he enunciates that, “calmness of direct passions, grasp of and preference for the greatest good, and practical control or strength of mind, are thus neatly tied together. In this context of Hume’s understanding of calmness of passions, “what we call practical reason is nothing but the result of systematic and causal differences and interrelations among direct passions”.⁹ The main focus of Hume in his elaboration on the meaning, nature and relationship of direct passions to moral judgement is to substantiate that direct passions are the sources of the human feelings that characterise violent emotions or passions. It is violent passions that automatically generate response for proximity, familiarity, affiliation, benevolence, threat to security and other associated issues¹⁰. Hence, Hume doggedly claimed that all these factors are often build up in human psychology to generate a drive for sympathy and moral judgment and not any cognitive ability of man.

Hume and the Relevance of Indirect Passions in Moral Foundation

The concern of Hume on the meaning, nature and relationship of indirect passions runs through a significant part of his book two of *A Treatise of Human Nature*. in this book, he defined indirect passions as the effects of the influence of previously noted direct passions in the motivation that facilitate the action of a moral agent in human society. The four indirect passions identified by Hume are: pride, humility, love and hatred.¹¹ In Jacqueline Taylor’s analysis and evaluation of Hume’s identified indirect passions, she maintains that, “indirect passions of pride, humility, love and hatred, along with the principle of sympathy...play a central role in producing the moral sentiments.”¹² Hume discovered that indirect passions are not significant enough to motivate any human action on their own without a prevailing object of direct passions to heighten the necessary action or else they will become useless. In his unequivocal example of how direct passions become a foundation on which indirect passions thrive, Hume explained that,

a suit of fine cloaths produces pleasure from their beauty; and this pleasure produces the direct passions, or the impressions of volition and

⁸T. Magri, p. 186.

⁹Ibid, p.198.

¹⁰Ibid.,

¹¹Jacqueline Taylor, in *A Companion to Hume*, edited by E. Radcliffe, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 276.

¹²Ibid. p.276.

desire. Again, when these cloaths are consider'd as belonging to our self, the double relation conveys to us the sentiment of pride, which is an indirect passion; and the pleasure, which attends that passion, returns back to the direct affections, and gives new force to our desire or volition, joy or hope.¹³

This illustration of Hume clearly demonstrates the significant role of indirect passions as power booster to the motivation that direct passions already generated to influence the moral action of a man. The details of the processes contained in the interrelationship between direct and indirect passions and their influence on moral judgment are beyond external forces. In other words, the nut and bolt of such mechanism are located in the inner psychological principles of human action rather than rational justification. As Magri corroborates the opinion of Hume in this context, "indirect passions influence the mind from the inside, as sentiments felt in response to objects under certain descriptions."¹⁴ This position of Hume becomes the foundation of his notable claim that "reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them."¹⁵ Therefore, any effort to hold a contrary opinion to this view of Hume will unambiguously lead to a foundation of morality that is inconsistent with the human nature he earlier identified and justified in his *Treatise of Human Nature*.

Hume and the Importance of Calm Passions in the Foundation of Morality

In his psychology of human action and as evident in his *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume defined calm passions as those natural emotional feelings that motivate a moral agent to act in contrary to the motivation coming from direct passions. He claimed that it is not reason that enhances a moral agent to act contrary to the motivation of a direct violent passion but rather the elusive influence of gentleness, a corollary of calm passion. There is no clear interface between the two because the fluidity of procedure and interrelationship involved are primarily internal and imperceptible. In this context, there are times that two opposing passions, joy and sorrow, subtly reconciled with themselves to jointly produce another state of mind that may be based on calmness or indifference in human action. As Hume highlighted, "when a man is afflicted for [by] the loss of

¹³David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, book 2, part 3, section 9, paragraph 4.

¹⁴T. Magri in *A Companion to Hume*, edited by Radcliffe, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 186.

¹⁵ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, book 2, part 3, section 3 paragraph 4, also in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humes_Guillotine, quoted on the 16th of February, 2012.

a law-suit, and joyful for the birth of a son, the mind [is] running from the agreeable to the calamitous object, with whatever celebrity it may perform this motion, can scarcely temper the one affection with the other, and remain betwixt them in a state of indifference".¹⁶ The point Hume tried to justify is that the common phenomenon of invisible readjustment among passions and its effects on human action is the source of the error of the moral philosophers of Platonic tradition to think that reason is the motivating factor of moral judgment. In actual fact, Hume wanted us to know that reason is incapable of suppressing the natural impulse that often emanate from a particular passion that motivates human action. As he rightly claimed, "since reason alone can never produce any action, or to give rise to volition, I infer, that the same faculty is as incapable of preventing volition, or of disputing the preference with any passion or emotion."¹⁷ Judging from this perspective, it is only a contrary passion that can oppose an impulse generated from a particular type of passion and any attempt to attribute such capacity to reason will imply it is "so in an improper sense."¹⁸ It is unacceptable for Hume for anybody to think that reason is at work whenever human beings change their choice of action for another one. Hence, Hume strongly established the fact that passions are the motivating and determining factors for moral judgment of man while the reason only makes the object of the good or bad intelligible and attractive or repulsive but incapable of going beyond the level of intelligibility.

The Relationship of Passions to Human Will in Hume's Moral Theory

Human will is generally defined as the capacity of man to make a rational deliberative choice of action after the evaluation of the details and consequences of the action without any internal and external constraint. In the context of this paper, Hume defined human will as internal motivation that man consciously needs to have before he can freely perform an action without any hindrance. As Hume appropriately stated, human free will is "the internal impression we feel and are conscious of, when we knowingly give rise to any new motion of our body, or a new perception of our mind."¹⁹ In actual fact, Hume enthusiastically argued that the volition for moral action is always comes from the sympathetic feelings and motivation that is fundamentally sourced from passions and not reason in any way. This is logically implied in the moral theory of Hume that

¹⁶A *Treatise of Human Nature*, book 2, part 3, section 9, paragraph 14.

¹⁷Ibid. book 2, part 3, section 9, paragraph 12.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid, book 2, part 3, section 1, paragraph 2.

moral choice of action lacks fundamental cognitive background. As a result of this conceivable conclusion, Jurgen Habermas and Peter Geach emphatically claimed that Hume is non-cognitive moral philosopher. The conviction of these two philosophers is largely based on the fact that Hume scientifically asserted that the *energia* of natural response to moral responsibility is obtainable from the passions often demonstrated in courteous and sympathetic feeling and not from any cognitive capacity or reason. There is need to examine further to see if there is any role that Hume assign to reason in his foundation of moral responsibility for human society.

The Place of Reason and Moral Obligation in the Moral Theory of Hume

We remember that one of Hume's objections to both Pre-Socratic and Platonic anthropology and moral philosophy is the claim that human nature is divinely structured, determined, fixed and universalized without any regards to human sentiments and factors responsible for their choice of action. The rational moral philosophers like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas and W. Leibniz claimed that human beings are rationally endowed to recognise their moral obligations and other regulatory principles that are inherent in the natural law. The concern of Hume is not basically on the source of human deliberative choice of action but the justification for how and why human beings act the way they behave in the society. The emphasis of Hume on how and why human beings behave the way they do in the society is primarily based on the fact that moral sensitivity is systematically and practically interrelated to sentiments rather than rationality. Francis Hutcheson's elaboration on the fact that moral sense plays the role of intuitive recognition of good and evil just as human organs of sight and hearing are responsible for the recognition of diverse colours and sounds as the basis of Hume's moral sentimentalism. As evident in his *Treatise of Human Nature*,

our decisions concerning moral rectitude and depravity are evidently perceptions...Morality, therefore, is more properly felt than judg'd of; tho' this feeling or sentiment is commonly so soft and gentle, that we are apt to confound it with an idea, according to our common custom of taking all things for the same, which have any near resemblance to each other.²⁰

Judging from this quotation, it is clear that moral sense is the source of the human capacity to spontaneously determine, justify and govern human

²⁰David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, book 3, part 1, section 2, paragraph 1.

sympathetic concerns to motivate the passions for the choice of a particular moral preference and judgement. As a result of this, Moral philosophers like Thomas Reid ardently classified Hume's moral theory as morality of sentiments because of its absolute bond with natural inclinations and not reason like the moral philosophers before him.

Nevertheless, there is need for us to know that Hume never claim that human beings supposed to act contrary to reason as moral philosophers recommended against passions. His point of divergent is located in his claim that the source of the moral principles by which human beings are to make moral judgment are traceable to the inner disposition and their subjective concerns because reason alone is incapable of motivating them to do so. As James Baillie gathers from Hume, "the role of reason is to establish facts [teleological facts that make a particular action desirable], whether through *a priori* demonstrative inferences involving relations of ideas, or by acquiring beliefs through causal inferences grounded in observation."²¹ One can deduce from this quotation that the role of reason in the context of the moral theory of Hume is limited to the recognition of why and how an action is good or bad but actually deprive of ability to motivate moral agents to successfully fulfill their desirable moral obligation. As Hume categorically emphasised,

since morals, therefore, have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows, that they cannot be deriv'd from reason; and that because reason alone, as we have already prov'd, can never have any such influence. 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.²²

A closer look at the above quotation clearly show that the moral obligations and judgment of human beings are defined, determined, justified, promoted, preserved and traceable to their passions or sentiments and not reason. It is indisputable to claim that reason has the ability to make moral ideas, facts, values and consequences intelligible for human beings but it cannot motivate them to act accordingly. There are other moral terms in the moral sentimentality of Hume that he identified as human habitual traits like: natural and artificial

²¹James Baillie in *A Companion to Hume*, edited by Radcliffe, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 80.

²²David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, book 3, part 1, section 1, paragraph 6.

virtues, benevolence and sympathy. He employed each of them to heighten the necessary motivation that passions need to influence the choice of moral preference and judgment of human beings in the society.

Evaluation

There is no gain saying that the Hume developed his moral theory at the time the impulse of enlightenment was running high in the world. This period was characterised with a thoughtful revolution against established scientific, philosophical, religious, economic, cultural and political authorities that reigned supreme over others in the society. The era before Hume was notable for moral foundation that are already structured, determined and justified by God for rational recognition of human beings and obedient in the society. The wave of revolt during the period of enlightenment allowed Hume to propose a different moral theory that is quite contrary to the one that was absolutely associated with the inclination of that time. The foundation of the moral theory Hume defined, determined, analysed, justified and promoted as alternative to the Pre-Socratic and Platonic moral foundation was admired by many his contemporaries because of its opposition against the moral absolutism of time. However, a thorough evaluation of the foundation of his moral theory clearly shows that there are artificialities, inconsistencies and contradictions that make his moral theory mindboggling and prone to criticism in human society.

The Influence of the Moral Foundation of Hume in Human Society

The moral theory of David Hume actually became a cynosure of the eyes of many of his contemporary scholars in philosophy, theology, anthropology, socio-cultural studies and politics as a result of the followings: (i) Hume was generally recognised and applauded for his courage to develop a moral theory that relegated the place of God and reason to absurdity for human passions to take the rightful place of authority on the processes involved in moral judgment as the rationalist moral philosophers like Thomas Aquinas, Francis Hutcheson and Thomas Reid. (ii) This is an outstanding achievement for a society where human freedom on issues about their lives have been enthusiastically denied and absolute obedience to political and religious authorities held sacrosanct. (iii) It is observable that Hume was the pioneer philosopher that employed scientific method and experimental explanation of the how and why passions served as the foundation of deliberative choice of moral approval and disapproval in human society. (iv) The foundation of Hume's moral theory that is sourced from

passions and sympathetic concerns for others becomes the motivation for the Humanist and Feminist philosophy of Annette Baier, Joan Tonto and Sara Ruddick. All these positive landmarks in the moral theory of Hume are quite impressive but some parts of his moral philosophy generated some questions, conflicts and inconsistencies that required answers and clarifications. For instance, (i) does human nature clearly shows that man is just a physical entity or a machine that react to stimulus without any contribution from reason? (ii) Can one say categorically that reason is totally separate from passions? (iii) if human nature is composed of rational and emotional elements, is it possible for the two coalesce to have influence on man's moral responsibility? (iv) where is the place of sympathetic concerns between the passions and reason?

Inconsistencies and Artificiality in the Morality of Hume for our contemporary Society

It is generally observed that the moral foundation of Hume is fundamentally rest on superfluous emphasis of the influence of human passions and relegation of reason to a subservient role. This implies that Hume has gone to the other extreme of the position of rationalist moral philosophers. Hence, there should be a meeting point where the extremism of Hume and rationalist moral philosophers can be resolved. The foundation for this resolution is established on the systematic and empirical anthropological understanding that human beings are the only creatures endowed with a unique personality in which passions and reason are naturally coalesced. The natural elements of man phenomenologically interwoven as one and jointly exercise influence in the moral moral decision of human beings. Any attempt to make one a subservient of the other will lead one to a ludicrous assertion on the fundamental basis and processes that end in moral judgement of human beings. This is essentially because human beings are neither spiritual beings that are unlimited in body and passions nor regular animals that devoid of rationality. As evident in the submission of Joseph Omoregbe,

man is a harmonious blend of reason and the passions. He is neither pure reason without instincts nor pure instincts without reason. Nor do reason and instincts (passions) occupy separate compartments in man's being; on the contrary, they are inseparably blended together and

interpenetrate each other. As a result of this fact, man's instincts are rational instincts, i.e, instincts permeated with rationality.²³

An inference from the above quotation clearly confirms an indisputable fact that passions and rationality are fundamentally integrated in man to the point that none can facilitate his moral judgment without a complementary influence of the other one. In this context, we need to know that appreciation of moral values like, patriotism, love, justice, integrity, solidarity and condemnation of immoral habits like robbery, murder and hatred are not ordinary emotional inclinations. In actual fact, they are emotional feelings that rationality has defined, determined, verified and justified to be sensible in human society.²⁴ In other words, "it is because man is a blend of reason and passions that he is capable of weeping, neither a god nor a beast is capable of weeping; the former is incapable because it is a disembodied being without passions while the latter is incapable because it lacks reason."²⁵ This implies that the gap the moral Platonists purported between reason [spiritual element of man] and passions [bodily aspect of man] of human nature is imaginary and erroneous perception that is capable of leading to a morality that is intolerable to human nature. Without mincing words, the passions apparent in animals are governed essentially by ordinary passionate inclinations for pleasure or displeasure while human beings are guided by rational passions for honourable characters or ignoble habitual behaviours. Therefore, any moral foundation that is established on non-integrated functions of reason and passions would effortlessly make unbalanced and moral incongruities thrive in human society. In conclusion, the moral theory of David Hume is fundamentally disposed to moral irregularities because of its artificiality and subjection of the role of reason to a subservient of passions in moral disposition, approval and disapproval in human society. Since a logical and rational conclusion confirms the fact that human nature is not essentially emotional or rational alone but passions fundamentally integrated with rationality, a thorough review of Hume's moral theory is therefore required to reduce its inherent inconsistencies, contradictions and artificiality to a level conceivable in human society.

²³J. Omoregbe, *ETHICS: A Systematic and historical study*, p. 103.

²⁴Ibid. p. 103.

²⁵Ibid, p. 104.