

Qualifying Hume's Sentimentalist Defense Against Moral Relativism

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On my honor, I have given nor received unauthorized aid in the production of this Senior Essay.

– P.B.H.

Abstract : This essay revisits David Hume's argument for moral sentimentalism and qualifies his solution to moral relativism. Agreeing with Hume's empirical thesis that emotional judgments are contextually-determined, I trace his argument showing it is impossible to ground moral judgment in pure reason because reason is impartial and thus cannot choose moral values. Moral judgment therefore must be grounded in emotion. It follows that moral truth is relative to one's subjective position because the partiality of moral judgment that enables the preference of certain moral values simultaneously makes it impossible for those judgments to be impartial and universal. Hume and other sentimentalists defend against this relativism by arguing that people who have been exposed to a diversity of thought and maintain an open-minded and empathic attitude are able to make superior moral judgments. I support this defense on the grounds that it champions freedom of expression and provides a viable framework for resolving moral disputes. At the same time, I argue that the moral relativism implied by Hume's sentimentalism is too strong for him to claim that open-mindedness and empathy are absolute moral standards.

Keywords : ethics, Hume, moral relativism, sentimentalism, moral philosophy, empathy

0. Introduction

Through Hume's moral psychology this essay addresses his argument that moral judgments are motivated by emotion and what this implies for how moral disputes might be resolved without absolute moral authority. Hume explains the fact of aesthetic and moral disagreement by showing that one's emotions and values are determined by their personal experiences and cultural context. Sound moral judgments must be motivated by these emotions because pure reason is impartial and therefore cannot choose moral values—thus Hume implies that morality, like emotion, is only true relative to one's perspective. This claim that there is no absolute moral truth is dangerous because it implies that we do not have to accept moral authority. Although Hume's position makes a degree of relativism inevitable, he argues that this relativism is not complete because a person's character improves the validity of their judgment. This idea of a "good" moral judge who is experienced, open-minded, and empathetic may be convincing, but cannot be a universal moral standard. The degree of relativism implied by sentimentalism makes it so that one can only argue that these values *ought* to be universally recognized from their own moral viewpoint. Nonetheless, moral sentimentalism provides useful conceptual tools to understand and address moral disagreements stemming from conflicting worldviews. Rather than searching for an elusive moral truth, it encourages us to take note of what our emotions tell us and to work to understand the moral perspective of the other.

1. Hume's Psychology of Emotions

In sum, Hume argues that human emotions emerge in the interaction of an individual's perception and their unconscious preconceived ideas of qualities such as goodness, beauty, or justice. To make sense of this claim, it is necessary to outline Hume's empirical thesis of human understanding. He contends that all thought can be divided into categories of *impressions* and

ideas. *Impressions* include perception, such as sensations or emotions, which arise spontaneously and “with [the] most force and violence.”¹ These are impermanent and necessarily partial to the limited perspective of their perceiver. *Ideas* are the “faint images of [*impressions*] in thinking and reasoning,”² and are thus derived from perception but more permanent. The mind accumulates and freely manipulates these *ideas* through imagination and reason to create new and more abstract ideas including memories, myths, or connections of cause and effect.³ In a basic sense, Hume’s psychology demonstrates that all human thought, abstract or not, is derived from perception. In this light, personal experiences and cultural context should determine one’s aesthetic and moral values.

In every instance of an emotional reaction or judgment is hidden a preconceived value that governs the character of the judgment. An object or situation that provokes emotion corresponds to an idea of a *quality* in the mind that relates to that specific emotion.⁴ Hume says he would feel proud of owning a beautiful horse,⁵ but nothing in the horse itself produces the feeling—it is the *quality* of the horse’s beauty that he perceives, as well as the *quality* of his ownership of the horse. The perception of the horse recalls these two *qualities* that provoke a feeling of pride. It is important to note that the definition of a *quality* likely differs from person to person. It is obvious that the *quality* of beauty provokes a positive emotion, but we do not necessarily agree on the features that make something beautiful. Hume notes that although we all consider “elegance, propriety, simplicity, [and] spirit” to be desirable qualities of writing, we do

¹ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature: A Critical Edition* Vol. 1, ed. David F. Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), Book 1, Part 1, Section 1, Paragraph 1. Hereafter citations of Hume will appear in the format: *Abbreviated Title*, Book.Part.Section.Paragraph.

² *Treatise*, 1.1.1.1

³ *Treatise*, 1.1.2.1, 1.1.3.4

⁴ David Hume, “A Treatise of Human Nature,” in *David Hume: Moral Philosophy*, ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), 2.1.2.6

⁵ *Treatise*, 2.1.2.6

not agree on the definitions of these terms.⁶ So Hume's notion of *quality* simply refers to the logical mechanism of thought that translates perception into corresponding emotions, without universally defining the real features of the *quality*.

For perception to provoke an emotion requires that the perceiver already has preconceptions of these *qualities*. We must already 'know' what qualifies something as beautiful, just, good, et cetera, in order to judge an object of our perception as such. This knowing may be an explicit definition or unconscious. It is common to feel that something is beautiful or feel uncomfortable about a situation without being able to articulate exactly why. Either way, these preconceived *qualities* allow perceptions of the external world to be internalized in the mind. Reed explains that for perception to create a feeling of approval or disapproval "it has to become internal: we have to have an idea of a useful or agreeable trait and the effects it produces before we can approve of it."⁷ A match or opposition between a perception and a preconceived *quality* creates a feeling of approval or disapproval. One can think of *quality* as a dictionary the mind uses to translate perception into emotion and subsequent judgments of approval or disapproval.

Someone quick to note that every person has their own tastes and emotions will also realize that Hume's theory implies that everyone also must have different preconceptions of any particular *quality*. Emotions arise spontaneously, therefore we can add that these preconceptions straddle our conscious and unconscious. We can identify certain aspects of a perception that provoke a particular emotion, but it is not necessary to actively pick them out each time in order to experience the emotion. So how does the mind assimilate these preconceived *qualities*? They are logical connections in the mind, and because they are resilient over time, they fall into

⁶ David Hume, "Essay VI. Of the Standard of Taste," in *David Hume: Moral Philosophy*, ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), paragraph 2.

⁷ Philip Reed, "Hume on Sympathy and Agreeable Qualities," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 24, no. 6 (2016): 1140. See also *Treatise*, 2.1.5.5

Hume's category of *ideas*. And just as perceptions imprint *ideas* in the mind, the accumulation of life experience builds these preconceptions about what emotion should arise from a particular situation. It is "evident we never should be possess[ed] of that passion, were there not a disposition of mind proper for it."⁸ One's habituation to the external world shapes their preconceived ideas of *quality*, while those preconceptions simultaneously frame their perception and thus the entire process of their continued habituation. To go further, this implies that any particular emotional judgment is never universal or absolutely true but may be similar to those of others through the sharing of cultural values and common experiences.

Hume shows that emotion and taste can never be universally true because they adapt to new and contingent circumstances. Unfortunately, when he claims that the "*nature* has attributed" an emotion to a particular circumstance,⁹ his use of the term "nature" can be misinterpreted as a claim about a universal human nature. In fact, he only uses "nature" to mean that through experience humans naturally become accustomed to relating emotions with particular *qualities*, but the relations themselves are not natural in an objective sense. In his words, it would be absurd

to imagine that each [art] was foreseen and provided for by nature, and that every new production of art... instead of adapting itself to the passion by partaking of some general quality, that naturally operates on the mind; is itself the object of an original principle, which till then lay conceal'd in the soul.¹⁰

The most plausible explanation for the ability to react to new and contingent experiences is that they correspond to some *quality* already internalized in the mind. Hume famously argues that there is no principle of necessity linking cause and effect, and that we only come to expect

⁸ *Treatise*, 2.1.5.6

⁹ *Treatise*, 2.1.5.5, emphasis mine.

¹⁰ *Treatise*, 2.1.3.5

effects from causes through the repeated experience of a sequence of events.¹¹ This supports his argument that there is no fixed cause of emotion. Habituation forms and continually reforms the *quality* ‘rules’ that the mind uses to connect perception to emotion. A child who tries tomatoes for the first time does not know whether they will enjoy them, but as soon as they taste and find that they in fact do not, they connect the perception of a tomato with the memory of disapproval. Maybe over time they are made to eat more tomatoes and continue to hate them, solidifying their idea of the qualities of tomatoes as bad. But one day they are made to eat a tomato and find the taste better than their memory of it—even though a preconception framed their experience (they expected to be repulsed), it did not override the force of perception. Our moral judgments too, are always framed by our preconceptions of what *qualifies* as good or just, without preventing us from reevaluating our preferences. Moral disputes can therefore be framed in terms of the significant disparities between the disputants’ sets of habituated preconceptions.

Differences of perspective on whether the practice of hijab is oppressive supports this conception of moral dispute. Hijab here refers to the general practice of modesty in Islam which may vary from a veil covering the head except the face, to a burqa that conceals the entire body including the eyes. Criticisms from the West claims that hijab is inherently unjust because Muslim women are coerced by religious authorities or their families, and that dresscodes are a tool of the patriarchy used to control women’s bodies. Without denying the prevalence of coercion (which also surrounds gender roles in the West), one can note several concealed preconceptions underpinning this argument. First, relatively-secularized Westerners often view religion as inherently manipulative and oppressive. Second, an Orientalist view of Muslim culture paints Muslim women as inherently submissive and Muslim men as evil and oppressive.

¹¹ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* 2nd ed., ed. Eric Steinberg (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), Section VII.

Finally, the popular narrative of sexual liberation in the West defines freedom as the discarding of conspicuous gender-specific rules and norms. These preconceptions about the definition of freedom as a *quality* and the lived experience of Muslim women boost the anti-hijab argument only to the extent they are shared by a Western audience.

The criticism rehearsed above arises from a superficial examination of hijab that fails to recognize its biased definition of freedom, and quickly falls apart with a more open-minded examination. If freedom is the right to expression, then hijab should be acceptable when it is a free choice. If the right to privacy is also necessary for freedom, then modesty is more of a “right to remain silent” than a failure of sexual liberation. The judgment that hijab necessarily disempowers women is reasonable only from a culturally-determined, Western moral view.

Although the subjective nature of perspective prejudices our emotional judgments, it is clear that the bias of the preconceived *qualities* shaped by our personal experience and cultural context are surmountable. Hume argues that our preconceived definitions of *qualities* such as good or beauty interact with perception to produce the connected emotion. *Qualities* are not universal or absolute because they are *ideas* constructed by the accumulation of perception—in other words, one’s own experience of the world. In this way perception and the preconceptions that frame perception reciprocally influence one another, and it is clearly possible to intervene by parsing the hidden logic of one’s personal preconceptions.

2. *Outlining Moral Sentimentalism*

From this blueprint of the psychological mechanism of emotion Hume raises the proposition that all moral judgments are and should be motivated by emotion, or in other words, by one’s aesthetic sensibility. He supports his claim on two grounds, firstly that moral judgments cannot be motivated by pure reason because reason is just a means rather than an end in itself.

Secondly, emotions are special among perceptions because they are able to tell us what is “good” or “bad,” and they ground moral judgments in reality because like all perceptions, they are empirically true. Humans routinely use reason to determine the most effective action to obtain what they value (that which is “good”), but seeing that reason is impartial, it does not distinguish “good” from “bad” and therefore can only direct moral judgment while emotion motivates it. I will elaborate on these arguments with the aid of Micheal Slote and Friedrich Schiller before moving onto a critical phase in Section 3.

Reason alone cannot motivate moral judgment because its necessary impartiality precludes it from being able to choose between moral values. Reason itself is mechanical in that it is only used to direct some motivation or energy “*to some design'd end or purpose.*”¹² This motivation or purpose is supplied by “the prospect of pain or pleasure” in a broad sense,¹³ that is, whatever a person is naturally attracted to. But this judgment is not purely hedonistic. The *qualities* that factor into any emotional judgment change depending on the context. While for evaluating a piece of writing one might depend on their preconceived *qualities* of “clarity” or “elegance,” judging whether the practice of hijab is misogynistic concerns the *qualities* of “freedom,” “justice,” and maybe “equality.” A person’s preconceived definitions of these *qualities*, shaped by habituation, factor into their judgment. Even if they are reasoning about these *qualities*—asking which ones are more or less important, and even redefining them—their reasoning is always motivated by a value for “clarity” or “equality” in themselves. This also makes it clear that aesthetic and moral judgments are of the same type because both compare perception to preconceived *qualities*.

Another way to put this is that because reason is fundamentally impartial and objective, it

¹² *Treatise*, 2.3.3.2, emphasis original.

¹³ *Treatise*, 2.3.3.3

cannot prefer “good” over “bad” and must treat all perspectives equally. Emotions, on the other hand, are partial because they are *impressions* which are all necessarily connected to a particular spatially and temporally defined perception.¹⁴ To be partial is to be inclined or attracted to something, which requires seeing it from a particular perspective. If reason is supposed to be a universal and object standard that humans can use to judge truth, then it does not depend on a particular perspective, and cannot be partial.

Sentimentalist Michael Slote frames this argument in terms of empathy. For him, empathy is central to our moral judgment because he claims we generally think that the “moral(ly good or decent) life depends on our being altruistically concerned with others and on refraining from harming them.”¹⁵ To act altruistically depends on one’s ability to see the world from another’s perspective, because to act authentically in their interest requires understanding their wants, needs, and feelings about how they want to be treated. In the same way that for Hume perception connects our minds to the external world, for Slote empathy connects our personal motivations with the needs of others. When we are able to feel what others are feeling, we directly motivated to protect them from harm. Given that reason is not dependent on a subjective perspective, it cannot help us feel for others, or even form moral values for ourselves.

To be clear, sentimentalism does not suggest that reason is unnecessary for moral judgment but only that it cannot tell us what we value or distinguish “good” from “bad.” Hume acknowledges that emotional judgments are fallible if they are based on imagined or mistaken perception, or if they “choose means insufficient for the[ir] design’d end.”¹⁶ It is no better to rely on the imagination in our moral judgments than on abstract rational laws, because neither

¹⁴ Michael Slote, *Moral Sentimentalism* (New York: Oxford UP, 2010), 14.

¹⁵ Slote, *Moral Sentimentalism*, 14.

¹⁶ *Treatise*, 2.3.3.6

method relates to the external world. Emotions only connect to the world through perception. Naturally, various and contradictory emotions often complicate the choice between different actions. Persistent values such as health and education conflict with immediate desires such as desiring food or rest. Reason helps us balance these desires. For example, one might deliberate about whether a need for sleep should be ignored because other pursuits need immediate attention, or whether sleeping would actually help achieve those things more efficiently and thoroughly afterwards. Even though reason itself has no values, it is indispensable to moral judgment because it can find the best action to realize those values given by emotion.

Artificial Lives

But what happens if one values reason in itself? And it makes sense why one might, because it gets other things of value. Hume insists that in itself, reason is an abstracted or empty value that is substituted for the other values it is enabling. So humans value reason purely for its utility, and because utility “is only a tendency to a certain end,” it would be contradictory to value utility if “the end itself no wise affects us.”¹⁷ For example, we value rational legal processes not because they are rational but because they produce more just outcomes; they are supported by credible testimony rather than the whims of the legislators and they fairly consider different objectives—such as lowering taxes versus providing public services—rather than corruptly favoring certain interests. In this case justice and fairness are the values in themselves that reason helps us obtain. But just because a process is rational does not necessitate that it is morally good. Death camps are a rational means to the end of ending vast numbers of human lives. While the Nazis might have claimed their genocidal project was just, I disagree because I

¹⁷ David Hume, “An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals,” in *David Hume: Moral Philosophy*, ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), 5.2.17. Hereafter abbreviated as *EPM*, Section.Part.Paragraph.

see the situation differently. In other words, my preconception of justice as a *quality* does not allow for genocide. But the *quality* of reason does not distinguish whether the end of a rational process is just or not. So moral judgments based purely on reason are dangerous in that they are detached from the empirically grounded emotional judgments that shape our values. To live by a purely rational principle, for Hume, is to live an *artificial life* with no consistent moral grounding.¹⁸

3. *Shades of Moral Relativism*

After showing how moral judgment should be motivated by emotion and empathy in particular, it remains for the sentimentalists to explain how we ought to resolve moral disputes. Affirming that emotions are empirically true and that moral judgments are based on accurate emotional judgments precludes the possibility of an absolute moral authority or standard that can inform justice in practice. If all partial moral judgments are valid to some extent, then among themselves they cannot identify a standard of moral judgment. Iwasa calls this the “identification problem.”¹⁹ Hume also acknowledges this absurdity.

‘Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger... ‘tis as little contrary to reason to prefer even my own acknowledg’d lesser good to my greater, and have more ardent affection for the former than the latter.²⁰

The absence of an absolute moral authority is frightening because it allows these preferences despite their blatant partiality. Yet this absence of absolute rules is also necessary to freedom because it also justifies acting against authorities that are potentially tyrannical. If an authority has defined what ‘good’ is and we must act in pursuit of that ‘good,’ then our actions and moral judgments are prescribed. Although Hume’s words make moral relativism sound anarchical, it is

¹⁸ *EPM*, “A Dialogue,” paragraph 57.

¹⁹ Iwasa, “On Three Defenses of Sentimentalism,” 67.

²⁰ *Treatise*, 2.3.3.6

crucial to consider that freedom is impossible without some flexibility in moral standards. But the responsibility still rests on sentimentalists to explain how to identify moral standards that can enforce justice and avoid anarchy.

Slote and Hume answer that education and a wide range of life experience ensure that the perspective informing one's moral judgments is fair. As discussed in Section 1, the framework of preconceived *qualities* that one absorbs from personal and cultural experience determines their emotions and by extension their moral judgments. Section 2 then outlined Hume's argument that reason directs moral judgment by at once helping a person balance the different values arising from emotion and then finding the best course of action to achieve them. For Hume, the relative validity of moral judgments depends on the character of the person making them. A fine sensibility "improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to... the true standard of taste and beauty."²¹ These traits allow us to identify and reconsider the ingrained *qualities* that influence our judgment, and new "[e]xperience and practice of the world readily correct any great extravagance" of prejudice or oversight caused by the partiality of this personal framework of *qualities*.²²

Slote agrees that intellectual "sophistication and general experience" improve our empathic capacities. This is evident in the way that we prompt children to reflect on the impacts of their actions on the feelings of others, a practice that becomes habit for many adults.²³ Or more concretely, the memory of feeling overwhelmed or lonely as a freshman might motivate an upper classman to offer help and advice to her underclassmen acquaintances. This intellectual capacity to imagine another's perspective and relate it to one's own is critical to empathy,²⁴

²¹ Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," paragraph 23.

²² *EPM*, "A Dialogue", paragraph 52.

²³ Slote, *Moral Sentimentalism*, 17, 18.

²⁴ Slote, *Moral Sentimentalism*, 17.

because it is the partiality of perspective itself that makes moral judgment possible. In Slote's view then, strong critical and creative abilities and an exposure to a diversity of thought permit us to resolve moral disputes by helping us understand the logic behind the moral judgments of others.

Breaking Down "Relativism"

While the sort of open-minded and empathetic attitude that Hume and Slote recommend may well be effective in addressing moral disputes, the sentimentalist ethic is not universal or necessary exactly because it requires that disputants accept these values and have an orientation towards compromise. In order to pinpoint where Hume's sentimentalism stands on the spectrum of moral relativism—in other words, the degree to which it rejects moral authority—requires a more precise description of relativism. Henrik Bohlin differentiates several types of moral relativisms: *descriptive* relativism is an observation that the basic moral views of different cultures are at odds with one another, *meta-ethical* relativism is the claim that there is no objective basis for morality, *normative* relativism is the view that what is just or good in one circumstance may not be in another, and *prescriptive* relativism is an imperative that we equally tolerate every moral judgment.²⁵ Bohlin argues that Hume's moral sentimentalism implies only meta-ethical relativism and rejects the others.²⁶

Though Hume is clearly meta-ethically relativist given his argument that our moral judgments are determined by cultural context and personal experience, he does not appear to reject descriptive or normative relativisms. Bohlin interprets Hume to be claiming that "differences in moral views between cultures are derivative rather than fundamental" because

²⁵ Henrik Bohlin, "Universal Moral Standards and the Problem of Cultural Relativism in Hume's 'A Dialogue'," *Philosophy: The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy* 88, no. 346 (2013): 602-3.

²⁶ Bohlin, "Universal Moral Standards...", 603.

every “moral thought of a given culture has the capacity to stretch beyond its own boundaries.”²⁷ He reads this as a rejection of descriptive relativism. This argument might seem sound in that (1) Hume does imply that the psychological structure of emotions is universal and (2) he argues that a balanced and self-critical viewpoint makes better moral judgments. But neither of these arguments addresses the actual problem of descriptive relativism, which is an “observed radical difference among cultures.”²⁸ Firstly, the *qualities* that determine one’s emotional judgments are formed through habituation and therefore allow for radical differences of judgment between cultural contexts. And secondly, the range of experiences and open-mindedness that supposedly grant certain judgments a privileged status are themselves values that both Hume and Bohlin assume are universal. Simply put, to assert that the universal standard of moral judgment is an empathetic and open-minded perspective contradicts the sentimentalist principle that all moral judgments motivated by emotion have some validity.

On normative relativism, Bohlin interprets Hume as claiming that “there are universal standards for good and bad, right and wrong, and [that] artificial lives, monkish virtues, polygamy, and slavery are blameworthy regardless of how well-entrenched they may be.”²⁹ This is certainly a starry-eyed reading of Hume, who argues himself that moral judgment is determined by one’s cultural context and personal experience. Section 1 addressed this point. Bohlin contradicts himself when he concludes that “[w]hat is universal among humans cannot be the actual moral sentiments or emotional dispositions, but only [a] potential for them” that depends on “fully developed capacities for sympathy and humanity.”³⁰ Furthermore, even if

²⁷ Bohlin, “Universal Moral Standards...”, 603, 604.

²⁸ Maria Baghramian and J. Adam Carter, "Relativism," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2018 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, Dec. 21, 2018, accessed Nov. 4, 2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/relativism/>.

²⁹ Bohlin, “Universal Moral Standards...”, 603.

³⁰ Bohlin, “Universal Moral Standards...”, 602.

artificial lives such as religious or philosophical fanaticism are condemnable because they are detached from reality and “common reason,”³¹ it would be impossible to identify that these morals are condemnable when they are “entrenched.” A religious zealot would simply argue that their devotion is a good because their god is inherently good—and from their perspective, killing someone who challenges their faith could be a moral act. While I might identify this ethic as wrong, it is reasonable in the terms of their worldview.

This same argument applies to Nazi Germany. Today everyone but motivated anti-Semites agree that the Nazis committed crimes against humanity. But those crimes must have seemed reasonable to many Germans at the time because they were immersed in a society with a sense of vengeful resentment and “in which it was nearly impossible to *think*.”³² This is to say German society discouraged any interrogation of the values motivating the evil actions of the Reich. Hume might say that the Germans went wrong by ignoring the repercussions of their complicity in the Nazi state, and so their moral judgments about their actions were detached from the reality of what their empathy would have told them if they were put face-to-face with the prisoners in their concentration camps, for example. His sentimentalist ethic relies on the possibility of this sort of intimate encounter with injustice itself. Given that “every culture has the capacity to stretch beyond its own boundaries,”³³ Hume would hold the Nazis responsible on the grounds that they suppressed the freedom of thought without which there is no potential for good moral judgment. Thus he rejects prescriptive relativism on the grounds that he is allowed to condemn injustices from *his* moral viewpoint. But Hume cannot say that open-minded empathy *is* a universal value because values are contextually dependent. He can only say that in his view,

³¹ *EPM*, “A Dialogue”, paragraph 57; Bohlin, “Universal Moral Standards...”, 599.

³² Sara Fleming, “Thinking Towards Justice: Hannah Arendt on Plato and the crisis of moral relativism,” *Anamnesis* III (2018): 14, emphasis original.

³³ Bohlin, “Universal Moral Standards...”, 604.

it *ought* to be.

4. *Conclusion*

Hume claims that moral judgments are motivated by emotion—even though our viewpoints can be changed through rational deliberation, reason itself cannot motivate us because it is impartial. Emotions arise out of the interaction of our perception and preconceived ideas of *qualities* such as good, beauty, or justice. Moral judgments are also regulated by these *qualities* and thus are similarly contextually-dependent. One’s values continuously evolve with the internalization of new data that build on or challenge these preconceptions, and in this way reason plays a secondary but crucial role in moral judgment by balancing our immediate and persistent moral values and guiding these into effective action. Though moral sentimentalism is attractive because it supports the legitimacy of subjective moral judgment, it also cannot identify moral standards because of its tendency towards meta-ethical and normative relativisms.

Sentimentalists defend their thesis from moral relativism by showing that a wide range of experience and an open-minded, empathetic attitude prepare a person to make better moral judgments. But finally, Hume’s conclusion that all moral judgments are subjective and context-dependent means that he cannot justly claim that open-mindedness is a universal value because that claim itself is made from a partial perspective. His implication that morality is relative to its perspective and cultural context (in other words, that it is normative) prevents him from claiming that his ideal characteristics of a moral person *are* universal. But this does not make the sentimentalist ethic worthless.

If Hume’s sentimentalism can only reject prescriptive relativism—that is the imperative to equally tolerate all moral judgments—we move from an ideal to a non-ideal theory of justice.³⁴

³⁴ Amartya Sen, “Voice and Social Choice,” in *The Idea of Justice*, (Boston: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2009), 96.

Slote claims that one recognizes injustice through their emotions of disapproval and empathy for its victims. Emotions are in this way legitimate moral expressions because they are empirical facts. Thus one should not conceive of justice as a natural law to be discovered through reason, but as the accumulation of emotional reactions to injustice. If moral judgments are fundamentally partial, then perfect rational impartiality cannot help us define moral principles, thus our only grasp on justice is through our disgust for injustice and the freedom to express it.

Furthermore, denying the fact of normative relativism and the context-dependency of our moral judgments would prevent us from being able to explain why others would act in ways that seem irrational or immoral. And worse, there would be no potential for reconciliation because we would have no framework for understanding why moral judgments differ. By acknowledging the context-dependency of moral judgments, we understand that uninformed judgments occur when there is a lack of criticism and little exposure to alternative viewpoints. Moreover, it becomes clear that deep disagreements cannot be resolved without consideration of the basic assumptions and values motivating each side. Impartial and purely rational argument cannot resolve moral conflict because it does not account for the fundamental partiality of both the actors and judge. It would be more useful for us to learn how to express our emotional judgments in a way that will encourage others want to listen, and realize that in order to achieve that, we will have to listen too.