

Hume's Second Enquiry: Paper- and Discussion-Topics

1 In Sections III and IV of the Second Enquiry, Hume appeals to "utility" in defense of

1.1 the inviolability of property (188-204), and

1.2 "reasons of state" (206),

along with

1.3 assorted minor but revealing (?) **curiosa**, such as his assertion that

"infidelity. . . is much more pernicious is women than in men" (207).

Can you imagine a colloquy devoted to questions 1.1 and 1.2 between Hume and Thomas More/'Raphael Hythlodaye'? If so, what do you think might be the consequences of such a dispute for the notion of "utility" Hume attempts to introduce, and for its alignment with his ethic of moral 'sentiment'?

2 In support of the alleged **universality** of his notion of "utility", and his concomitant claim that it is "the sole source of the moral approbation paid to fidelity, justice, veracity and integrity" (204), Hume appeals to what he (accurately, but in a very different, proto-sociological rather than physical context here) calls

"**Newton's chief rule of philosophising**": that "where any principle has been found to have great force and energy in one instance, to ascribe to it a like energy in all similar instances. . . ." (204)

If you are familiar with Hume's **metaphysics**, you may remember that he actually calls such claims of 'lawlikeness' and universality rather severely into **question**, in the **physical** contexts in which most people think they apply **best**. Why do you think he thinks he is entitled to them **here**?

If one partially **suspended judgment** about such facile (?) assertions of uniformity and universality, either on eighteenthcentury 'Humean'-**metaphysical** grounds, or on twentieth-century **anthropological** ones (the two, perhaps, being not entirely unrelated), what would become of Hume's sweeping assertion that

The intercourse of sentiments, therefore, makes us form some general unalterable standard, by which we may approve or disapprove of character or manners. (229)

More deeply, perhaps, what sorts of universal(istic) hypotheses about human 'nature' and aspirations do **you** think we 'ought' (?) to be committed to , even we do **not** share Hume's admiration for the values of urbanely well-situated eighteenth-century grandees (cf., e. g., 220-221 and 246-249)?

Might searches for such commitments, for example, drive us at least partly in the direction of Kant?

3 Are there any interesting counterexamples, in your view, to Hume's claim that

A gloomy, hare-brained enthusiast, after his death, may have a place in the calendar; but will scarce ever be admitted, when alive, into intimacy and society, except by those who are as dismal and delirious as himself? (270)

Hume, of course, has assorted hyperascetic christian martyrs and saints in mind.

What about More, however, who was canonised by the Roman Catholic Church (apparently with a certain reluctance) four centuries after his execution by Henry VIII?

More relevantly, perhaps, what about people like Woody Allen's emblematic candidate for moral nobility (god knows what she thinks of his accolades), Mother Theresa?

Or people like the Pankhurst family and other feminist hunger-strikers in early twentieth-century England, one of whom later threw herself under the hooves of a horse at the races in Ascot?

Or George Orwell, Spanish civil war veteran and lifelong temperamental dissident?

Or Simone Weil, who may have starved herself to death in solidarity with the victims of the holocaust during the second world war?

Is there something too "easy" and "agreeable", in short (cf. his usages in passages on pages 209, 214 and passim), about Hume's dismissal of such people's moral and social role(s)?

4 In class, I called into question Hume's assertion on p. 290 that

. . . in moral deliberations we must be acquainted before hand

with all the objects, and all their relations to each other; and from a comparison of the whole, fix our choice of approbation.

I did this partly on grounds Hume introduces himself, in his noticeably more skeptical arguments about epistemology and metaphysics, but partly because I wished to call attention to the apparent pragmatic **underdetermination** of many moral decisions we are called upon to make.

Prompted also in part by Hume's analyses of the 'is-ought problem' and the counterfactuality of Kant's realm of ends, I even suggested that empirical inadequacy may be **characteristic** of any tentative moral imperatives we may propose.

What do you think?

5 A final brief question. On page 306, Hume seems to suggest, in line with his endorsement of existing social orders in Section III, that one **ought** sometimes to **suspend** application of 'sentiments' of "benevolence and humanity", even though they "might often prescribe. . . measure of conduct very different from those which are agreeable to the strict rules of right and justice", with an "eye to the whole plan and system".

This looks suspiciously like a secular '**theodicy**' to me -- a counterpart of patterns of argument Hume subjected to searching and rather destructive critique in his **Dialogues concerning Natural Religion**.

Is this comparison apt?

If it is, what implications might it have for Hume's claims about justice, and roughly parallel lines of argument ('higher-morality'-justifications for 'reasons of state', for example), in other areas of ethics and social and political philosophy?