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Journal of the History of Philosophy, Volume 53, Number 2, April 2015, pp.
245-270 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/hph.2015.0028>



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Objectivity and Perfection in Hume's Hedonism

DALE DORSEY*

ABSTRACT In this paper, I investigate David Hume's theory of well-being or prudential value. That Hume was some sort of hedonist is typically taken for granted in discussions of his value theory, but I argue that Hume was a hedonist of pathbreaking sophistication. His hedonism intriguingly blends traditional hedonism with a form of perfectionism yielding a version of qualitative hedonism that not only solves puzzles surrounding Hume's moral theory, but is interesting and important in its own right.

KEYWORDS Hume, hedonism, perfectionism, well-being, prudential value

DAVID HUME'S VALUE THEORY—in particular, his theory of prudential value or self-interest—is rarely investigated in any depth. Though he makes a number of claims about particular objects or states that are in people's interest (including his discussion of the prudential value of the virtues in the second *Enquiry*; see *E* 9.14–25),¹ few have attempted a clear statement of Hume's theory of happiness, welfare, or self-interest, much less investigated whether and why Hume's various claims about the prudential value of virtue or any other qualities might or might not follow from them.

In this essay, I investigate Hume's account of the nature of self-interest (or, interchangeably, “happiness,” “welfare,” etc.). In essence, my reading is this: Hume was a hedonist. He believed that pleasure and pain are the only things that influence the prudential value of a life. But Hume was a hedonist of extraordinary sophistication. His hedonism intriguingly blends traditional hedonism with a *perfectionist* value theory leaving a version of *qualitative* hedonism with—in something of a coup for qualitative hedonists—a clear and compelling rationale for the relative value of higher and lower pleasures.

My reading of Hume's view proceeds by a series of questions, each of which arises as a natural extension of a prior step in my investigation. After having

¹References to the *Enquiry* will be made in the text (as *E*), noting the paragraph and SBN pagination.

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defended the claim that Hume is a hedonist about welfare or well-being in §1, I ask (in §2) a simple “meta-evaluative” question that arises for any version of hedonism: what, for Hume, is the *source* or *ground* of pleasure’s goodness? Is it the case that pleasure is good *because* pleasure is desired, or wanted, or is otherwise the subject of an authoritative pro-attitude (call this “subjective hedonism”)? Or is it the case that pleasure is good *independently* of such attitudes (call this “objective hedonism”)? I hold that, contrary to some suggestive textual remarks, Hume is an objective, rather than subjective, hedonist. However, an objective response to this meta-evaluative question gives rise to further *first-order* questions, in particular, how one might rank-order various pleasurable experiences if the source of their comparative value is not strictly subjective (and hence purely psychological). I discuss this question in §3: I hold that Hume accepts a sophisticated version of *qualitative* hedonism according to which the comparative value of particular pleasures is not simply determined by their intensity and duration. But this claim gives rise to a further *explanatory* question: what, for Hume, *explains* the value of the “higher” as opposed to “lower” pleasures? I discuss this in §4. I claim that Hume accepts a unique hybrid of hedonism and *perfectionism*: a view that indexes the value of individual pleasures to the extent to which these pleasures conform to, or are fitting of, a particularly sentimentalist conception of human nature. In §5, I argue that the method by which I answer the above questions sheds substantial light on a classically puzzling passage in Hume’s corpus, namely, his discussion of the sensible knave. §6 concludes.

I. HEDONISM, GOOD, AND PRUDENTIAL VALUE

That Hume is some sort of hedonist is not particularly revelatory. Consider: “Nature has implanted in the human mind a perception of good or evil, or in other words, of pain and pleasure, as the chief spring and moving principle of all its actions,” (*T* 1.3.10.2).² In explaining the sources of the direct passions, Hume writes, “Beside good and evil, or in other words, pain and pleasure, the direct passions frequently arise from a natural impulse or instinct, which is perfectly unaccountable” (*T* 2.3.9.8, 439).³ Not only does he characterize pain and pleasure as the “chief”

²Typically when quoting the *Treatise and Enquiry*, I will list the citation in the text by paragraph, and SBN pagination. Notably, however, this citation differs as there *is* no SBN pagination! This passage, drawn from the critical (Norton and Norton) edition, differs from the Selby-Bigge text. The Selby-Bigge text reads, instead: “There is implanted in the human mind a perception of pain and pleasure, as the chief spring and moving principle of all its actions.” As Norton and Norton point out, however, the Selby-Bigge text is based on a set of cancellations Hume adopted while vol. 2 of the *Treatise* was being printed, for the purposes of accommodating an expanded footnote detailing his use of the term ‘imagination.’ Norton and Norton make use of the earlier, unamended text. In any event, it is clear that Hume believes that good and evil and pain and pleasure are conceptually identical, insofar as this point comes up again, unamended, in *T* 2.3.9.8, 439 and throughout *T* 2.3.9, 438–48.

³Hume here distinguishes the direct passions from pleasure and pain. An anonymous reviewer wonders whether this means that the direct passions (fear, hope, joy, etc.) are not intrinsically valuable for Hume. And while it is clear that Hume believes that (at least some of) the direct passions are a result of consideration of the possibility of pain or pleasure or the *expectation* of some good or evil (fear, for instance, is produced by the uncertainty of evil [*T* 2.3.9.6, 439]), this does not answer the question of whether the direct passions themselves *are*, in fact, instances of pain or pleasure and are hence themselves good or evil. I do not take a stand on this issue, except to say that there is no barrier to Hume’s acceptance that such passions are instances of pleasure and pain (especially insofar as some pleasurable sentiments take intentional or propositional objects; see §2.2).

motivator of humankind, he appears to claim, in so doing, that the connection between pain and pleasure and good and evil is extremely tight. Good and evil just *are* pain and pleasure, “in other words.”

Thus Hume clearly treats pleasure and pain as good and evil. But this does not guarantee any particular reading of his theory of welfare or *prudential* value. His hedonism could, in principle, be a conception of many different concepts. For instance, one could be a hedonist about *moral goodness* (i.e. morality requires individuals to promote pleasure for some specified group—call this “moral hedonism”); a hedonist about the good *simpliciter* or *impersonal* good (call this “axiological hedonism”); or a hedonist about well-being or the personal good (call this “welfare hedonism”).⁴ It would appear that the passages above indicate only a form of axiological hedonism: pleasure is *good*; pain is *evil*. Does Hume, then, also accept a form of welfare hedonism?

Were he to do so, he would certainly not be alone among his (broadly speaking) contemporaries. Shaftesbury, for instance, claims that pleasure constitutes self-interest.⁵ Hutcheson also appears to squarely identify pleasure with self-interest or the prudential good:

Because we shall afterwards frequently use the Words Interest, Advantage, natural Good, it is necessary here to fix their Ideas. The Pleasure in our sensible Perceptions of any kind, gives us our first Idea of natural Good, or Happiness; and then all Objects which are apt to excite this Pleasure are call'd immediately Good. . . . Our perception of Pleasure is necessary, and nothing is Advantageous or naturally Good to us, but what is apt to raise Pleasure mediately, or immediately.⁶

Like Hutcheson and Shaftesbury, I think we should read Hume as a hedonist about welfare or well-being rather than *strictly* a hedonist about the good *simpliciter*. First, Hume clearly possesses the relevant concept. Hume often speaks of “self-interest” (as Hutcheson discusses “Interest, Advantage, natural Good”), for example, when he discusses the “interested obligation” to virtue in book nine of the second *Enquiry*. There, Hume writes, “Having explained the moral *approbation* attending merit or virtue, there remains nothing, but briefly to consider our interested *obligation* to it, and to enquire, whether every man, who has any regard to his own happiness and welfare, will not best find his account in the practice of every moral duty” (*E* 9.14, 278). Here Hume makes explicit use of the concepts of happiness and welfare. (Indeed, he seems to treat these concepts as referring to the same broad idea—self-interest.) Given that Hume treats good and evil as pleasure and pain “in other words,” it would be strange for him not to hold that hedonism, in some form or other, is also the proper concept of specifically prudential value or the personal good.

Second, in the first appendix of the second *Enquiry*, Hume writes,

Thus the distinct boundaries and offices of *reason* and of *taste* are easily ascertained. The former conveys the knowledge of truth and falsehood: The latter gives the

⁴For a more in-depth discussion of the variety of concepts of which hedonism is a conception, see Kagan, *Normative Ethics*, 30–31.

⁵See, for instance, Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks*, 57–59.

⁶Hutcheson, *Inquiry*, 86.

sentiment of beauty and deformity, vice and virtue. . . . Reason, being cool and disengaged, is no motive to action, and directs only the impulse received from appetite or inclination, by showing us the means of attaining happiness or avoiding misery. Taste, as it gives pleasure or pain, and thereby constitutes happiness or misery, becomes a motive to action, and is the first spring or impulse to desire and volition. (*EApp.* I, 2I, 294.)

This passage is, or so I claim, central for an understanding of Hume's theory of welfare, and I shall have occasion to return to it in due course. But as regards the point at issue: according to Hume, "happiness or misery" is constituted by the faculty of *taste*, not reason (though reason will show us the proper means by which to develop our happiness). But the explanation of this refers explicitly to the fact that taste "gives pleasure or pain." As it gives pleasure and pain, it *thereby* constitutes happiness or misery. Thus it would appear that the extent to which any particular faculty or group of sentiments constitutes, or contributes to, happiness or misery is determined by the extent to which this faculty or group of sentiments "gives pleasure or pain." And hence there is good reason to believe that Hume is some sort of hedonist about self-interest even if he is *also* an axiological hedonist (which, it seems, he clearly is).

2. WHAT GROUNDS PLEASURE'S VALUE?

To better understand the nature of Hume's value theory, however, it is worthwhile to ask a question that arises for any hedonist axiology (whether a version of welfare hedonism or not). This question is "meta-evaluative"; it is not a question about what is valuable, but rather about *how intrinsic values come to have that status*. For a hedonist, the question runs as follows: what grounds the value of pleasure? In other words, what explains the value of pleasure and the disvalue of pain and, just as importantly, the lack of intrinsic value of other, non-pleasure, goods? Broadly speaking, there are two potential answers to this question. First, one might be a *subjective* hedonist. On this view, pleasure's goodness is explained by the fact that it is the object of value-imparting pro-attitudes or sentiments. Classically, subjective hedonism claims that intrinsic prudential values are the objects of value-conferring or authoritative desires or pro-attitudes *and* that humankind is in agreement concerning the ultimate object (pleasure) of such value-authoritative attitudes. Second, one might be an *objective* hedonist. Objective hedonism holds that pleasure is good, or constitutes well-being, independently of any pro-attitude possessed by observers or evaluators. Pleasure just *is the good* and does not permit of any further grounding.⁷ P. J. E. Kail refers to the subjective version of hedonism as the "desire-constituting" (subjective) model, according to which "something acquires the status of good from being desired, such that, on the most basic model, anything that is desired is good, and is good because it is desired."⁸ On an objective hedonism, by contrast, the goodness of pleasure is independent of its being desired.

⁷For more on this distinction, see Dorsey, "Dilemma."

⁸Kail, *Realism*, 185. Classic versions of subjective hedonism are found in Sidgwick, *Methods*; and Gosling, *Pleasure*. (Gosling rejects this account of the grounding of pleasure's value, but nevertheless holds that it is a substantive and plausible proposal.)

2.1. *A Case for the Subjective Reading*

Some passages in Hume suggest a subjective reading. First, Hume seems to hold that *moral virtue* is a product of value-authoritative pro-attitudes: "To have the sense of virtue, is nothing but to *feel* a satisfaction of a particular kind from the contemplation of a character. This very *feeling* constitutes our praise or admiration. We go no farther" (*T* 3.1.2.3, 471). And if Hume believes that virtue is itself a function of our attitudes of approval or disapproval, praise or admiration, then it would appear strange to treat his axiological theory asymmetrically. Why should moral value be dependent on the sentiments of humans, but welfare or prudential value be *independent*? This is especially the case if, as some read Hume, evaluative judgments are taken just to be expressions of affective or conative states.⁹ For it would seem quite false to say that moral judgments are the expression of such states of approval or disapproval *and* that judgments about the good can nevertheless be understood as true or false in a way that is grounded independently of any attitude of approval or disapproval—which, of course, just *is* the objective view.

In addition, Hume appears to consistently deny that anything could have value in and of itself apart from the operation of human sentiment.¹⁰ Hume writes, "If we can depend upon any principle, which we learn from philosophy, this, I think, may be considered as certain and undoubted, that there is nothing, in itself, valuable or despicable, desirable or hateful, beautiful or deformed; but that these attributes arise from the particular constitution and fabric of human sentiment and affection."¹¹ Here it would appear that the ultimate standard of value *must* be "the particular constitution and fabric of human sentiment and affection." And if this is correct, to say that pleasure is valuable, or "good" (as Hume does consistently) one must say that pleasure itself is recommended by human sentiment and affection: pleasure's value must be grounded by some authoritative pro-attitude directed toward pleasure and away from pain.

⁹See Penelhum, *Hume*, 141.

¹⁰Hume appears to make this claim explicitly when concerned with the origin of virtue and vice; see *T* 3.1.1.26, 469.

¹¹Hume, "The Sceptic," 162. An anonymous reviewer for this journal notes that "The Sceptic" is a somewhat unusual piece of writing in Hume's corpus, and does not permit of a straightforward reading, given its relation to three preceding essays on happiness, viz. "The Epicurean," "The Stoic," and "The Platonist." This is quite right. However, despite its unusual placement, there is good reason to believe that "The Sceptic" represents Hume's considered views. See, for instance, Fogelin, *Skepticism*; Stewart, "Legacy"; Harris, "Four Essays." And while there is some dissent from this treatment of "The Sceptic" (see, notably, Immerwahr, "Happiness"), there is good reason to hold that the more popular position is the right one. As noted by Heydt ("Relations"), "The Sceptic" represents the alleviation of tension between the three views represented by its predecessor essays: in arguing that philosophy itself cannot pick out a single path of happiness, Hume undermines "the pretensions of the three authors [the Epicurean, Stoic, and Platonist] to be presenting *the* nature of human happiness, thereby promoting eclecticism and moderation" ("Relations," 13). However, even if we remain agnostic about the relation between "The Sceptic" *as a whole* and Hume's considered views *as a whole*, the central passages I cite from "The Sceptic" are well represented in other texts. For instance, in *E* App. 1.21, 294, Hume echoes "The Sceptic" in claiming that it is merely the operation of the faculty of taste that renders objects beautiful or despicable, which is also noted in "Of the Standard of Taste" (see §3.1 below). Furthermore, his discussion of the prudential value of virtue—to which I make reference in §3.2—mirrors almost identically Hume's own discussion of the sensible knave, to be found in book 9 of the second *Enquiry*. And hence there is good reason to believe that "The Sceptic," or at least the passages to which I make reference here, represents Hume's considered views.

2.2. *Against the Subjective Reading*

Before turning to my argument against a subjective reading of Hume's hedonism, I should briefly consider what I take to be an inconclusive argument against the subjective reading, offered by Kail. Kail argues that one ought to reject a subjective reading because a subjective reading cannot explain the "convergence on the thesis [that] pleasure and pain are essential values."¹² By 'convergence,' Kail means the "convergence in judgement regarding what is desirable and aversion-worthy for its own sake."¹³ Objective hedonism, according to Kail, "can explain the convergence by appealing to the very character of experiences. The agreement is commanded because we are acquainted with states of mind that are essentially valuable."¹⁴ In being acquainted with states of mind that are (objectively) valuable, we converge on desires for such states and (if this is different) our judgment that such states are valuable. At first glance, however, it seems wrong to say that only objective hedonism can explain this convergence. After all, a subjectivist hedonism offers a perfectly good explanation: the convergence is explained by *psychological fact*, namely, the fact that pleasure is alone the object of our judgments of value and (if this is different) the relevantly authoritative pro-attitudes. According to Kail, however, this explanation is unacceptable: "*Prima facie* people desire things other than pleasure for their own sakes, so there is nothing in the desire-constitution model *itself* which forces us to the conclusion that pleasure is the only good."¹⁵

Of course, we might agree with Kail. It may very well be implausible to believe that all individuals restrict the objects of their pro-attitudes to pleasure. But Hume himself—at least on a subjective reading—appears to have the resources to avoid Kail's complaint. Note that any subjective hedonism must deal with the fact that, of course, we approve of many non-pleasure things (including moral virtue, nice walks on the beach, satisfying cold drinks, the welfare of our children, etc.). The typical response—for virtually any kind of subjectivism, hedonist or not¹⁶—is to suggest that only a subset of pro-attitudes have import for intrinsic value or welfare *in particular*. (For instance, most subjective hedonists will say that our desires for, e.g. cold drinks are derivative—derivative of a more fundamental desire for the pleasure that such cold drinks bring.) Hume appears to have the resources to make just this sort of distinction. Not only does Hume distinguish between fundamental and derivative desires (see *E App.* 1, 18–19, 293), Hume accepts that sentiments differ in kind when it comes to the concepts of which they grant approval. (See *T* 3.1.2.4, 472, and my discussion of this passage below.) And hence it seems at least *possible* to say that, for Hume, the relevant sentiments that grant welfare value to particular pleasures are different in kind from those that grant moral value to particular character traits or gustatory value to wines, and so forth, and hence need not impart intrinsic welfare value on equal terms.¹⁷

¹²Kail, *Realism*, 184.

¹³Kail, *Realism*, 184.

¹⁴Kail, *Realism*, 185.

¹⁵Kail, *Realism*, 185.

¹⁶See, for instance, Sidgwick, *Methods*, 111; Railton, "Facts and Values," 54–55.

¹⁷Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing this point.

Hence it seems to me that Kail's argument is inconclusive. Though people very clearly desire things other than pleasure, Hume has the resources to *restrict* the range of welfare-authoritative sentiments in a manner that *may* successfully exclude all but pleasure in the realm of intrinsic goods and evils. Merely because individuals desire, say, good bottles of wine, or moral virtue in addition to their convergence on a desire for pleasure, such desires need not be authoritative for prudential value *in particular*, and hence a subjectivist reading of Hume has the resources to avoid Kail's central attack on subjective hedonism.

However, I think Kail is on the right track.¹⁸ Hume is not a subjective hedonist. I offer two arguments here, the first somewhat less decisive, the other more so. The first argument relies on a consideration of an important feature of Hume's conception of the nature of pleasure. In *T* 3.1.2.4, 472, Hume writes,

For, *first*, 'tis evident, that under the term *pleasure*, we comprehend sensations, which are very different from each other, and which have only such a distant resemblance, as is requisite to make them be express'd by the same abstract term. A good composition of music and a bottle of good wine equally produce pleasure; and what is more, their goodness is determin'd merely by the pleasure. But shall we say upon that account, that the wine is harmonious, or the music of a good flavour? In like manner an inanimate object, and the character or sentiments of any person may, both of them, give satisfaction; but as the satisfaction is different, this keeps our sentiments concerning them from being confounded, and makes us ascribe virtue to the one, and not to the other. Nor is every sentiment of pleasure or pain, which arises from characters and actions, of that *peculiar* kind, which makes us praise or condemn. The good qualities of an enemy are hurtful to us; but may still command our esteem and respect.

A proper treatment of Hume's precise conception of pleasure would take us well afield. Nevertheless, one feature of this conception is reflected in the above passage and worth noting in the present context. Most importantly, Hume appears to assert that pleasures are extraordinarily diverse in kind: the pleasure that we take in wine is different than the pleasure we take in music; the pleasure we take in an honorable enemy is different than the pleasure we take in an honorable friend. But this view is in tension with (though admittedly is not straightforwardly inconsistent with) a subjective approach to Hume's hedonism: if pleasures are of such variable kinds,

¹⁸I should note at this point one slight difference between our readings of Hume on the status of pleasure's value. According to Kail, the proper contrast on the question of the "status of good" is between the desire-constituting model and the "desire-determining" model. On the latter view, "the relation between desire and value is the other way around [in comparison to the desire-constituting model]. It is *because* the relevant feature is valuable that Edmund desires it. . . . Value and desire are 'internally connected' in so far as a suitably-equipped, suitably positioned agent must, on cognition of that value be appropriately conatively disposed" (Kail, *Realism*, 185). And while the desire-determining view implies objective hedonism (i.e. the value of pleasure is not explained by its status *qua* object of pro-attitude), the desire-determining view as Kail describes it is stronger than a commitment to objective hedonism; it commits not only to the explanatory independence of pleasure's value from desire, but to an "internal connection" between value and desire. Whether this connection holds depends, in my view, on the proper reading of "suitably-equipped." As I shall argue below, the only agents that have a consistent desire for more valuable, rather than less valuable, pleasures are those possessed of the true standard of taste. For our purposes here, however, it is sufficient to note that Kail accepts the claim that, for Hume, "[p]leasure and pain are, of their very essence, desirable and awful 'of themselves.'" This claim is objective hedonism as I understand it, and on reading Hume as accepting this view, Kail and I are in agreement.

a subjective reading appears to face a very high bar in showing that *each* diverse sensation referred to by ‘pleasure’ is equally approved of by all. This problem differs from, and is much more serious than, Kail’s challenge. Because Hume believes that pleasures are extremely diverse, the problem is not in showing that nothing else is desired or valued, but rather in showing that pro-attitudes are taken to *all* pleasure, regardless of the diverse elements in the extension of this “abstract term.” But, crucially, this cannot be shown by Hume or any subjective hedonist by restricting the range of value-authoritative sentiments.

However, the most decisive challenge for the subjective reading is that, for Hume, the identification of goodness with pleasure and evil with pain is a matter—or so it would seem—of *concept*. For Hume, pain and pleasure are simply good and evil “in other words” (*T* 1.3.10.2; *T* 2.3.9.8, 439). Indeed, throughout Hume’s discussion of the direct passions, he treats these terms as interchangeable (*T* 2.3.9, 438–48). But it would appear odd for Hume to identify pleasure and pain and good and evil in this way if he believed that the value of pain and pleasure *depended* upon an empirical psychological fact, namely, that the sentiments of humanity generally evaluate pleasure positively. In discussing the value of individual character traits, for instance, Hume provides lengthy psychological explanations for the fact that we find particular traits useful or agreeable. (See, especially, the fifth through seventh books of the second *Enquiry*.) But he appears to claim that the source of pleasure’s value is just a matter of the terms in question and offers no further psychological explanation. For this reason, we should be wary of the subjective reading: Hume nowhere allows that the value of the hedonic states, that is, their goodness or evil, is dependent upon human psychology. But this is precisely what he *should* say if he accepts the subjective reading. Instead, for Hume, pleasure simply *is* good; pain *is* evil “in other words.” There is no further ground.¹⁹

2.3. *Objection: Asymmetry*

Only an objective reading can account for Hume’s failure to vindicate the value of pleasure *via* psychological explanation. But it is too early to close the book. Two important objections to an objective reading arise.

First, if we reject a subjective reading of the value of pleasure, we must read Hume as holding that the ground of value is asymmetric: pleasure, for Hume, just is *good* in a way that is independent of psychological fact. The value of particular characters, bottles of wine, symphonies, however, must be grounded by our sentimental reactions and is not valuable independent of same. This may, in itself, constitute an objection to my proposal. Why should pleasure be special?

¹⁹One potential response to these arguments is to suggest that Hume held a desiderative theory of pleasure, a theory according to which all and only mental experiences that are desired, or to which one takes a pro-attitude, qualify as pleasure. (See, for instance, Parfit, *Reasons*, app. I.) One could accept the claim that the ground of pleasure’s value is that it is desired, but still hold that pain and pleasure are conceptually linked to value, insofar as pleasure is conceptually linked to *desire*. But notice that Hume seems to explicitly reject this view. According to Hume, at least some pleasures are “fundamental impressions”; see *T* 1.4.2.12, 192.

The purported asymmetry, however, is not unusual among sentimentalists writers. Compare, for instance, the following passages from Hutcheson.²⁰ Opening the *Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions*, Hutcheson writes, "Objects, Actions, or Events obtain the Name of *Good*, or *Evil*, according as they are the Causes, or Occasions, mediately, or immediately, of a grateful, or ungrateful *Perception* to some sensitive Nature."²¹ This passage is reminiscent of Hume's own declaration that "there is nothing, in itself, valuable or despicable, desirable or hateful, beautiful or deformed; but that these attributes arise from the particular constitution and fabric of human sentiment and affection." But for Hutcheson, the "grateful, or ungrateful *Perception*" is intended to be a product of the "several *Senses* natural to us,"²² which are identified as "*Determination[s] of our Minds to receive Ideas independently on our Will, and to have Perceptions of Pleasure and Pain.*"²³ Thus the "grateful" perception given rise to by good objects appears, simply, to be pleasure itself: good "Objects, Actions, or Events" are good insofar as they are productive of the pleasure of one of our sensitive capacities. Hutcheson confirms this:

The following *Definitions* of certain Words used on this Subject, may shorten our Expressions; and the *Axioms* subjoined may shew the manner of acting from *calm Desire*, with the Analogy to the *Laws of Motion*.

1. *Natural Good* is Pleasure: *Natural Evil* is Pain.

2. *Natural good Objects* are those which are apt, either mediately or immediately to give Pleasure; the former are called *Advantageous*. *Natural Evil Objects* are such as, in like manner, give pain.²⁴

Hutcheson adopts very different evaluative stances with regard to the "natural good" (characterized by pleasure and pain) and good *objects* (such as actions or events). The goodness of the latter class is a product of our sentiments (in particular, the *pleasurable* ones). But the goodness of the former is not grounded by sentiment or a product of "sensitive nature." For Hutcheson, it just *is the case* that pleasure is good and pain is bad. Hutcheson's hedonism, therefore, is objective. Hume should be read as saying precisely the same thing. Notice, however, that there is no incoherence or implausibility in adopting the asymmetry so described. Ultimately, the value that Hume imparts to morally valuable characters or good bottles of wine is *derivative*: it is derived from its capacity to cause *fundamentally* valuable sensations and sentiments in observers or experiencers. Indeed, in "The Sceptic," Hume says precisely this: "Even when the mind operates alone, and feeling the sentiment of blame or approbation, pronounces one object deformed or odious, another beautiful and amiable; I say that, even in this case, those qualities are not really in the objects, but belong entirely to the sentiment

²⁰Of course, the similarity between Hutcheson and Hume in general philosophical orientation is extraordinarily controversial. I bring up Hutcheson's view here simply for the sake of showing that just such an asymmetry is not unprecedented.

²¹Hutcheson, *Essay*, 15.

²²Hutcheson, *Essay*, 15.

²³Hutcheson, *Essay*, 17.

²⁴Hutcheson, *Essay*, 34; see also Kail, *Realism*, 178.

of that mind which blames or praises.”²⁵ Thus Hume appears to admit that there is a substantial asymmetry between the value of good objects and the value of “the sentiment of that mind which blames or praises” such objects: the value of the former are simply derivative of the value of the latter. And hence it should be no surprise that the source or ground of the value of pleasure, and the value of only derivatively good objects, diverge.

2.4. *Objection: Textual Incoherence*

Places in Hume’s text suggest an objective reading. But to conclude that he is an objective hedonist on this basis is to ignore a range of passages that suggest the opposite. Most importantly, recall that Hume holds that “there is nothing, in itself, valuable or despicable, desirable or hateful, beautiful or deformed; but that these attributes arise from the particular constitution and fabric of human sentiment and affection.” This might be thought to cause problems for an objective reading, insofar as Hume does not just say “no *objects*” are valuable in and of themselves, but rather *nothing*. For Hume, nothing is valuable in and of itself without its value being grounded by value-conferring pro-attitude or sentiment.

We misread this passage if we take Hume’s claim as a rejection of objective hedonism, however. As is clear from the context of the essay in which it appears, he intends simply to examine the value of good “objects,” rather than—to use a Hutchesonian phrase—the natural good of pleasure. Note that the topic of “The Sceptic” is the “methods of obtaining happiness.”²⁶ In other words, Hume is seeking to provide *prudential advice*. To this end, Hume is most interested in considering different “pursuits among our species,”²⁷ or courses of life for their relative merits. Hence from the context of “The Sceptic,” we should read ‘nothing’ as ranging over only objects, pursuits, actions, activities, and so forth, that is, the sort of thing you might *pursue* with an eye toward pleasure or happiness. This is clear from the passage immediately following: “What seems the most delicious food to one animal, appears loathsome to another: What affects the feeling of one with delight, produces uneasiness in another.”²⁸ In essence, Hume is saying this: there are no objects, pursuits, manners of existence, and so on, that are valuable *independently* of a feeling of pleasure. There are no facts about such pursuits that would render them valuable *other than* that they cause pleasure. Certain sorts of food please some animals, not others; some people take pleasure in bawdy college comedies, others enjoy brooding Scandinavian dramas. This claim, however, says very little about the nature of the value of *pleasure itself*, or how pleasure gets its evaluative stripes. Thus, it seems to me, in weighing the textual evidence, Hume is best read as holding an objective, not subjective, account of the ground of the value of pleasure and disvalue of pain.

²⁵Hume, “The Sceptic,” 163.

²⁶Hume, “The Sceptic,” 160.

²⁷Hume, “The Sceptic,” 160.

²⁸Hume, “The Sceptic,” 160.

2.5. *A New Question*

To read Hume as an objective hedonist is to uncover a new and interesting question about his value theory. This question concerns its first-order structure. Any value theory ought to provide at least a rubric to determine what intrinsic values are more valuable than others. Were Hume's hedonism *subjective*, however, this question would simply be answered by conducting a socio-psychological inquiry. To figure out the rank-ordering of particular pleasures (say, the pleasure of reading Buchan's *Greenmantle* versus the pleasure of listening to Aurora Nealand and the Royal Roses), we simply figure out the extent to which those pleasures are valued or desired perhaps by some subset of value-authoritative individuals. But if Hume's account is objective, determining the relative value of pleasures is not a strictly psychological, but rather a philosophical, or evaluative, task. Given Hume's objective hedonism, it seems sensible to ask what his position is with respect to the relative value of individual pleasurable experiences.

There are two contrary proposals I explore here. One holds that pleasures are ordered simply by their pleasurable-ness: the more pleasure, the better. This is a *quantitative* hedonism. But hedonists can consistently deny that pleasures should be ordered simply on a quantitative basis.²⁹ One might hold that the relative value of individual pleasures is in part dependent upon additional properties, that is, properties of a pleasurable experience that do not simply reduce to its pleasurable-ness. This is a *qualitative* hedonism: different pleasures are of differing quality in a way that is distinct from their differing pleasurable-ness. What is Hume's view?

3. HUME AS QUALITATIVE HEDONIST

It seems fair to say that the default hedonist position is that pleasures are to be rank-ordered according to their *intensity* and *duration*, that is, by their *pleasurable-ness*. After all, if one values pleasure, or believes that pleasure is the good, it is natural to say that more pleasure is better than less.

And though this position is natural, it is by no means universal or conceptually required. One could be a consistent hedonist and hold that there are facts *other* than the amount of pleasure that help to determine the relative value of individual pleasures. For instance, Shaftesbury seems to indicate that some pleasures *lack value*, given the fact that they are taken in objects that themselves have no value: "And for some low and sordid *Pleasures* of human Kind; shou'd they be ever so lastingly enjoy'd, and in the highest credit with their Enjoyers; I shou'd never afford 'em the name of *Happiness* or *Good*."³⁰ Hutcheson, however, takes a more conservative stance. According to Hutcheson, "The *Value* of any Pleasure, and the

²⁹Of course, this claim is controversial. According to Jonathan Riley, for instance, "ethical hedonism requires that any human capable of rational persuasion *ought* always to prefer more pleasure to less" ("Interpreting," 415). However, this critique clearly relies on an assumption about the nature of hedonism, viz. that any hedonist value theory must accept that more pleasure is better than less. But there is no reason to accept this as a canonical account of the nature of hedonism. For the purposes of this paper, I identify hedonism simply with the view that all and only pleasure is a benefit. How pleasures are rank-ordered on this understanding of hedonism is an entirely open matter.

³⁰Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks*, II.227.

Quantity or Moment of any Pain, is in a compounded Proportion of the Intenseness and Duration."³¹ Though Hutcheson does, in fact, claim that "low and sordid" pleasures contain less enjoyment than the "higher" pleasures, he does seem to claim that the value of any pleasure just is its intensity and duration.³² Shaftesbury disagrees. Shaftesbury claims that even some very long-lasting and intense pleasures are not valuable *at all*.

I think we should read Hume as a qualitative hedonist. The first bit of evidence refers specifically to Hume's declaration that the faculty of "taste, as it gives pleasure or pain . . . constitutes happiness or misery" (*EApp.* I, 21, 294). But note that the faculty of taste—and with it the pleasures that constitute this faculty—permits of an independent *standard*. According to Hume, "The great variety of Taste, as well as of opinion, which prevails in the world, is too obvious not to have fallen under every one's observation" (*ST* 226). Given this variation, however, Hume holds that "[i]t is natural for us to seek a *Standard of Taste*, a rule, by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled; at least, a decision, afforded, confirming one sentiment, and condemning another" (*ST* 229).

What constitutes the true standard of taste, for Hume? Of course, Hume could just say that the proper standard is the one that praises the good rather than the bad, and so forth. But this would require an account of good *objects* that is explanatorily prior to their vindication by sentiment, that is, the sentiments of pleasure that "gild and stain." Hume explicitly rejects this arrow of explanation. According to Hume, however, we can achieve the "true standard" by *honing* our sentiments—in particular, rendering them more delicate, avoiding prejudice, engaging in comparison, and so on. "Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this valuable character; and the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty" (*ST* 241). What is so special about these characteristics? Though I will discuss this in more depth in §4, Hume holds that to possess sentiments that conform to the standard of taste aligns our sentiments with *human nature*. Sentiments of pleasure that are out of practice, lack comparison, or are insufficiently delicate, and so forth, are "perverted" (*ST* 241)—perverted away from the sentiments of human nature (*ST* 233–34, 243). Under such conditions, our faculty of taste does not operate adequately. (Note my use of the term 'adequate.' One might wonder why someone possessed of the true standard of taste should be interpreted as possessing an "adequately" operating faculty of taste, insofar as Hume clearly notes that the possession of the standard of taste requires honing and is a deviation from the norm. The answer is that 'adequately' is not meant to be read statistically. Hume very clearly believes that the standard of taste is the state in which our faculty of taste is in adequate operation; but that the most statistically common state is one in which our faculty of taste has degraded (*ST* 232); more on this in §4.³³)

The importance of Hume's discussion of the standard of taste for a first-order understanding of his hedonism is, I think, significant. If *taste*—the pleasures of

³¹Hutcheson, *Essay*, 87.

³²For a defense of this reading of Hutcheson, see Dorsey, "Deceptive."

³³Thanks to an anonymous reviewer; see also note 50.

which constitute happiness and misery—permits of a recognized *standard*, it seems natural to say that pleasure that fails to meet this standard is less valuable than pleasure that does. One could imagine, for instance, two critics, one of whom takes substantial pleasure in brilliant work by Singer-Sargent, the other in a typical “dogs-playing-poker” effort by C. M. Coolidge. However, the pleasure of the latter individual (who, or so it would appear, lacks the requisite delicacy, etc.) is *deformed*—it is the product of an inadequately operating faculty of taste. But if this is correct, it would seem entirely strange to say that the *value* of this pleasure is just the same as the *value* of the pleasure taken by the person whose sentiments reflect the true standard.

This, then, is the reading I propose: pleasures that conform to the true standard of taste are more valuable than those that do not. The axiological ordering of pleasures, then, goes beyond a mere consideration of the relative quantity: it is possible, for instance, for a short-duration pleasure that conforms to the standard of taste to be better, a more substantial contribution to welfare, than a long-duration pleasure that does not. A few notes regarding what my view does *not* entail. I do not believe that, on Hume's account, “deformed” pleasures, that is, those that do not conform to the true standard of taste, lack value. (Hume's attitude toward the lower pleasures is not Shaftesbury's.) For Hume, as is relatively clear from the *Treatise*, all pleasure maintains value: pleasure just is *goodness*, in other words. And hence it would be a decidedly uncharitable and *ad hoc* presumption to hold that, for Hume, only some pleasures are valuable, while others are not. All I mean to suggest is that Hume is a qualitative hedonist just in the classic sense, namely, that the quality of pleasures are to be evaluated not simply along two indices (intensity and duration), but rather three (intensity, duration, and conformity to the standard of taste). One method by which to evaluate a particular pleasure is to determine whether that pleasure conforms, or does not, to the standard of taste: whether this sentiment would be possessed by those whose taste is “delicate, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice.”³⁴

A brief note before I argue for this reading. Hume declares that the pleasures of the faculty of taste constitute happiness or misery. But the term ‘constitute’ could be read in one of two ways, given Hume's context. The first way to read this term would be to hold that all and only pleasures of the faculty of taste maintain welfare value: ‘constitute’ means *full* constitution. This reading, however, is problematic. Insofar as the pleasures of the faculty of taste are taken *in* some particular object (such as wine, character traits, etc.), this would appear to rule out mere “bodily” pleasures or simple pleasurable sensations as playing any role in happiness and well-being. Furthermore, given Hume's conceptual identification between pain and pleasure and good and evil, it would appear that to read ‘constitute’ as full constitution would entail a controversial view about Hume's conception of pleasure, namely,

³⁴Of course, this renders the axiological contribution of intensity and duration somewhat unique in comparison to quality, for Hume. The lack of intensity or duration does, in fact, entail that the relevant mental attitude (the would-be “pleasure”) lacks value. Not so for a pleasure of zero quality. But this is due simply to the fact that quality is not an existential condition on pleasure. One can have a pleasurable sentiment or sensation of zero quality. But one cannot have a pleasurable sensation or sentiment of zero intensity or zero duration. Hence this asymmetry is not incoherent or unmotivated.

that there *are* no “mere” bodily pleasures.³⁵ However, my reading of Hume’s first-order axiology does not depend on this reading. It is compatible with the arguments to come that ‘constitution’ might be read as *partial* constitution—the pleasures of the faculty of taste *help* to constitute happiness and misery, rather than *fully* constitute happiness and misery.³⁶ That Hume assesses the quality of pleasures—even some limited range of pleasures—according to their quality as well as their intensity and duration is sufficient to establish that he is a qualitative hedonist. Indeed, as I shall go on to argue, Hume offers an important axiological explanation for the distinction between higher and lower pleasures of the faculty of taste that could, in principle, apply to *any* pleasure—even those bare bodily pleasures that do not appear to fall within the purview of the faculty of taste.

Without further ado, then, I present two arguments for the claim that the pleasures that conform to the true standard of taste are superior to those that diverge.

3.1. *First Argument: The Derivative Value of Good Objects*

As noted in §2.3, Hume insists that there is a particular relationship between the *objects* of value and the *value-authoritative sentiments* that determine their value. Allow me to quote again this passage from “The Sceptic”: “Even when the mind operates alone, and feeling the sentiment of blame or approbation, pronounces one object deformed or odious, another beautiful and amiable; I say that, even in this case, those qualities are not really in the objects, but belong entirely to the sentiment of that mind which blames or praises.” Hume makes a similar claim in “Of the Standard of Taste”: “It be certain, that beauty and deformity . . . are not qualities in objects, but belong entirely to the sentiment, internal or external” (*ST* 235). As I noted above, the value of objects is derivative for Hume, derived from the *value of the pleasures they cause*. And hence any value possessed by individual *objects* must ultimately rest in the *fundamental* value of the pleasures one maintains upon contemplation. But then Hume cannot say that pleasure that arises from a consideration of “New Year’s Eve in Dogville” would be *just as good* as the pleasure one takes in “Portrait of Madame X.” The beauty of the latter outshines that of the former, and hence any value that is accorded to the pleasure taken in the former rather than the latter must be substantially diminished.³⁷

³⁵Indeed, there is some evidence to believe that Hume accepted the existence of mere bodily pleasures. Hume holds that one of the fundamental impressions, along with “figure, bulk, motion, and solidity” and “colours, tastes, smells, sounds, heat and cold” is “pains and pleasures, that arise from the application of objects to our bodies, as by the cutting of our flesh with steel, and such like” (*T* 1.4.2.12, 192). Here Hume seems to be specifically referring to mere bodily pleasures, e.g. the pain that we feel as a response to physical bodily harm rather than upon contemplation of some object sufficient to “gild and stain.”

³⁶Thanks to an anonymous reviewer.

³⁷An anonymous reviewer rightly notes that Hume’s account of the standard of taste is explicitly concerned with the standard of *aesthetic* taste: what constitutes a “true judge” in matters of art, etc. But the argument of this section is neutral with regard to whether Hume believed that the standard of taste is limited to aesthetic matters or not. According to Hume, the value of good objects—even their mere aesthetic value—is explained by the value of the sentiments that approve of them. And hence this has a direct consequence for our understanding of Hume’s hedonism even if we read the standard of taste as applying only to aesthetic matters. But leaving this aside, it is clear that Hume’s standard of

Let me put this point in a slightly different way. If the value found in objects is derivative of the value of sentiments that praise them, then Hume, on a quantitative reading, must be a *relativist* about the quality of objects. On a quantitative hedonism, Hume must say that objects that produce equal amounts of pleasure for observers are equal in value. This is just a result of treating the value of objects as derivative of the value of the sentiments they cause and holding that the value of pleasurable sentiments is determined by their intensity and duration. But, as is surely correct, "Portrait of Madame X" and "New Years Eve in Dogville" can generate the *same amount* of pleasure depending on one's taste. And hence for Hume, there would be no ground for condemning the individual who praised Coolidge over Singer-Sargent so long as that person was doing so honestly, that is, genuinely took more pleasure in the former. But Hume explicitly denies any relativism of good objects and is perfectly willing to engage in such condemnation: "Whoever would assert an equality of genius and elegance between Ogilby and Milton, or Bunyan and Addison, would be thought to defend no less an extravagance, than if he had maintained a mole-hill to be as high as Teneriffe, or a pond as extensive as the ocean. Though there may be found persons, who give the preference to the former authors; no one pays attention to such a taste; and we pronounce without scruple the sentiment of these pretended critics to be absurd and ridiculous" (*ST* 230–31; see also *ST* 229). Here Hume makes no exception for those who take more pleasure in Ogilby than Milton: *anyone* who defends an equality of "genius and elegance" between them is incorrect. Thus for Hume there is no relativism of good objects. And hence the pleasures that constitute the true standard of taste must be more valuable; only this could explain the *consistently* superior value of Singer-Sargent to Coolidge given that both such objects can generate equal amounts of pleasure and given that the differential value of such objects must be explained by the differential value of the pleasurable sentiments to which they give rise.

The argument provided above has gone down a number of tangents, and tied together a number of different aspects of Hume's work. And so I think it would be helpful to frame it schematically, just to be more explicit how the parts interrelate:

1. The value of objects is derivative of the value of the pleasure they cause. ("The Sceptic," 163; *ST* 235)
2. If Hume is a quantitative hedonist, then (by [1]) the value of objects is derivative of the *amount* of pleasure they cause.
3. But the value of objects is not derivative of the amount of pleasure they cause. (*ST* 229–30)
4. Hence (by [2] and [3]) Hume is not a quantitative hedonist.

Furthermore,

5. Good objects are praised by sentiments constituting an adequately functioning faculty of taste. (*ST passim*)
6. Hence (by [1] and [5]) the value of pleasures that constitute an adequately functioning faculty of taste are more valuable than those that do not.

taste is meant to apply to every dimension of evaluative assessment. Hume also makes reference to a "standard" of taste in *E App.* 1. 21, in which he declares that the faculty of taste "gives the sentiment of beauty and deformity, vice and virtue." Furthermore, in "Delicacy," Hume refers to "that higher and more refined taste, which enables us to judge the characters of men, of compositions of genius, and of the productions of the nobler arts" ("Delicacy," 6). (This feature of the standard of taste will become more relevant in §5.)

3.2. *Second Argument: The Prudential Value of Virtue*

In “The Sceptic,” Hume suggests that

the happiest disposition of mind is the *virtuous*: or, in other words, that which leads to action and employment, renders us sensible to the social passions, steels the heart against the assaults of fortune, reduces the affections to a just moderation, makes our own thoughts an entertainment to us, and inclines us rather to the pleasures of society and conversation, than to those of the senses. (“The Sceptic,” 168)³⁸

Hume notes a variety of benefits brought by virtue. Not only does it “steel the heart against the assaults of fortune,” but it also “inclines us” to “the pleasures of society and conversation” rather than to those of the senses (such as pleasure taken from “low and sensual objects”).³⁹

One might be inclined to believe that Hume’s latter claim is direct evidence of a form of qualitative hedonism. Why else might he believe that we are better-off with the pleasures of society rather than, for example, the baser pleasures of the senses? And while I think this is the right spin to put on things, nothing comes so easy. Prior to this passage, Hume notes that the pursuit of the sensorial pleasures is “much more subject to satiety and disgust.”⁴⁰ And hence one might think that the prudential benefits of virtue might be read in a more straightforward, and quantitative-hedonism-friendly, way: being inclined to the pleasures of the senses, though they are no less valuable in themselves, tends to generate far less pleasure overall, insofar as sensorial pleasures are subject to the aforementioned handicaps.

But Hume goes further than this. Immediately following his insistence that virtue is prudentially valuable, Hume considers someone who is *insensible* to (read: does not take pleasure in) virtue:

On the other hand, where one is born of so perverse a frame of mind, of so callous and insensible a disposition, as to have no relish for virtue and humanity, no sympathy with his fellow-creatures, no desire of esteem and applause; such a one must be allowed entirely incurable, nor is there any remedy in philosophy. He reaps no satisfaction but from low and sensual objects, or from the indulgence of malignant passions. . . . He has not even that sense or taste, which is requisite to make him desire a better character: For my part, I know not how I should address myself to such a one, or by what arguments I should endeavor to reform him. Should I tell him of the inward satisfaction which results from laudable and humane actions, the delicate pleasure of disinterested love and friendship, the lasting enjoyments of a good name and an established character, he might still reply, that these were, perhaps, pleasures to such as were susceptible of them; but that, for his part, he finds himself of a quite different turn and disposition. (“The Sceptic,” 169–70)

In this passage, Hume considers someone who appears insensible of the social passions, that is, someone who does not take pleasure in “esteem and applause” or the other features that generally accompany the possession of virtue. Rather, his pleasure is in “low and sensual objects” or “malignant” passions. For Hume, the difference between the lover of virtue and this unfortunate character is a

³⁸Note that the prudential value of virtue, for Hume, is echoed in *E* 9; see §5.

³⁹Hume, “The Sceptic,” 169.

⁴⁰Hume, “The Sceptic,” 167.

difference in taste: the latter is not “susceptible” to the pleasures of an established character, love and friendship, and so forth. He is “of a quite different turn and disposition.” This passage seems to clearly indicate a form of qualitative hedonism: the pleasures of love and friendship, and so forth, are simply *better* than the “low,” “sensual,” and “malignant” pleasures.

Presented with the character above, were Hume a quantitative hedonist, we should have expected one of two things. We should expect him to back down from his previous claim, namely, that virtue is in fact a prudential benefit to all. And while there may be some reason to believe that his insistence on the prudential value of virtue permits of exceptions (he refers to his claim that “the happiest disposition of mind is the *virtuous*” as the result of a “short and imperfect sketch of human life”),⁴¹ he does not apply this caution to the individual under discussion. Indeed, he not only does not take back his insistence on the prudential value of virtue, but also claims that those insensitive to virtue are *unhappy*: “I must repeat it; my philosophy affords no remedy in such a case, nor could I do any thing but lament this person’s unhappy condition.”⁴²

Alternatively, Hume might have said that the person in question is “unhappy” compared to the virtuous person, but that this is *because* the “unhappy” person simply takes less pleasure than those who have a taste for the pleasures of virtue. (After all, the pleasures experienced by this person are subject to “satiety and disgust.”) But this explanation—though perfectly natural—does not fit the text. Hume allows that the person in question takes plenty of pleasure (in “low and sensual objects”), and does not feel “remorse to control his vicious inclinations.”⁴³ Hence the general mechanisms that render the “low” pleasures subject to “satiety and disgust” are, at least in this case, not operative! (This fits with Hume’s description of his own psychological claims—including those regarding the low and sensual pleasures—as “imperfect” and “general.”⁴⁴) And hence it would be implausible to read Hume as claiming that the unhappiness of the individual under description is a result of *less* pleasure. Given the weight of the evidence, then, his insistence on the prudential value of virtue is best read as a result of a qualitative, rather than quantitative, hedonist axiology.

3.3. A New Question

That Hume’s hedonism is objective rather than subjective gave rise to a question about its first-order structure: it seems plausible to say that Hume is a qualitative hedonist rather than a more straightforward quantitative hedonist. However, to say that Hume is a qualitative hedonist rather than a quantitative hedonist gives rise to yet a third question: what *explains* the value of the “higher” pleasures, or the pleasures that conform to the standard of taste? Why should those pleasures be better? This question is important. Because Hume relies on a qualitative hedonism to help explain the prudential value of virtue, it is important to avoid the suggestion

⁴¹Hume, “The Sceptic,” 167.

⁴²Hume, “The Sceptic,” 170.

⁴³Hume, “The Sceptic,” 169.

⁴⁴Hume, “The Sceptic,” 167.

that Hume's qualitative hedonism is strictly ad hoc. And hence we should ask of Hume whether there is any independent explanation of the evaluative distinction between the higher and lower pleasures.

Indeed, the insistence on a consistent explanatory principle of the relative value of higher pleasures is a traditional stumbling block for qualitative hedonism. A lack of any clear explanation of the prudential value of the higher pleasures has dogged John Stuart Mill's own version.⁴⁵ Indeed, Mill himself seems to punt on this question, referring only cryptically to a "sense of dignity."⁴⁶ In contrast, I claim that Hume is not only a qualitative hedonist, but offers a principled and (dare I say) plausible explanation of the relative value of higher and lower pleasures.

4. HUME'S HEDONISM AND HUMAN NATURE

Hume's hedonism divides higher and lower pleasures by the extent to which those pleasures conform to the true standard of taste. But if this is correct, an explanation of the value of higher pleasures in comparison to the lower pleasures is, for Hume, tantamount to asking about authority of the standard of taste itself. In other words, what explains the significance or superiority of a faculty of taste that lacks prejudice, maintains delicacy, practice, and comparison? Once we have explained the authority of the standard of taste as Hume construes it, we will have an explanation of the relative value of the pleasures that *conform to* that standard. One clue, however, is given in the second *Enquiry*. Here Hume writes that the standard of taste, as opposed to the standard of reason, "arising from the internal frame and constitution of animals, is ultimately derived from that Supreme Will, which bestowed on each being its peculiar nature, and arranged the several classes and orders of existence" (*E App.* 1.21, 278). For Hume, the standard of taste—at least for humans—is an aspect of their internal frame and constitution, their *nature*. Hume writes,

It appears then, that, amidst all the variety and caprice of taste, there are certain general principles of approbation or blame, whose influence a careful eye may trace in all operations of the mind. Some particular forms or qualities, from the original structure of the internal fabric, are calculated to please, and others to displease; and if they fail of their effect in any particular instance, it is from some *apparent defect or imperfection in the organ*. A man in a fever would not insist on his palate as able to decide concerning flavours; nor would one, affected with the jaundice, pretend to give a verdict with regard to colours. In each creature, there is a sound and a defective state; and the former alone can be supposed to afford us a true standard of taste and sentiment. (*ST* 233–34; my emphasis)

Here Hume appears to claim that the true standard of taste can only proceed from a *sound* state of one's sentiments. But, for Hume, the *sound* state of a faculty of taste, from which the standard of this faculty is derived, is the state commensurate with *human nature*: "The general principles of taste are uniform in human nature: Where men vary in their judgments, some defect or perversion in the faculties may commonly be remarked; proceeding either from prejudice, from want of

⁴⁵Cf. Albee, *History*, 252; Sidgwick, *Outlines*, 247.

⁴⁶Cf. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, II.6. For a reading of Mill on this question, see Dorsey, "Authority."

practice, or want of delicacy; and there is just reason for approving one taste, and condemning another" (*ST* 243; see also *ST* 232).⁴⁷

One might believe that Hume's reference to human nature is a simple report of contingent, sociological fact, namely, that it just so happens (happily!) that the true standard of taste is common or uniform.⁴⁸ However, this reading fails on two fronts. First, on this reading, the claim that the "principles of taste" are part of human nature reduces to the claim that most *display* these principles. But Hume believes that the relevant defects are common, and hence that individuals who possess the true standard of taste in perfect fashion are rare (*ST* 232, 241). Thus to read Hume's link between the standard of taste and human nature as a claim about its sociological uniformity is explicitly ruled out.⁴⁹ In addition, and more importantly, Hume believes that the *reason* we trust a given faculty is *because* it is not perverted or deformed away from human nature. Thus the fact that a particular sentiment conforms to human nature is reason to grant it evaluative authority. As confirmation of this reading, Hume accepts that in cases in which human nature does not generate only one particular sentimental reaction ("where there is such a diversity in the internal frame or external situation as is entirely blameless on both sides") there can be *no* standard of taste: "We seek in vain for a standard, by which we can reconcile the contrary sentiments" (*ST* 244). And hence, or so it would seem, the authority of the particular standard Hume picks out is explained by the fact of its correspondence with human nature; Hume's reference to human nature is therefore not merely sociological, but explains the trustworthiness, and hence superior value, of the sentiments of those whose taste conforms to the standard.

For Hume, the explanation of the comparative value of "higher" pleasures draws parallels with the theory of welfare sometimes known as "perfectionism." Perfectionism about welfare or prudential value holds that a person's life goes better to the extent that she develops or "perfects" the capacities inherent in human nature.⁵⁰ Of course, "human nature" is a fraught philosophical concept; it smacks of certain forms of Aristotelian teleology, as well as a reference, say, to humankind's rationality. Indeed, perfectionism as a view has generally identified humanity's rational capacities as the central evaluative feature of human nature.⁵¹ But this is not essential to perfectionism; the perfectionist is free to select those features of human nature that are most essential to value. And it is clear that, for Hume, the most valuable pleasures are those that proceed from a perfection

⁴⁷See also Jones, "Texts," 440.

⁴⁸See Townsend, *Hume's Aesthetic Theory*, 194.

⁴⁹An anonymous reviewer notes that it may be incongruous to say that the standard of taste requires extraordinary care and cultivation and, in the same breath, to say that lacking such taste is somehow deformed rather than merely lacking this extraordinary care. But this is not incongruous. As Hume writes, "Those finer emotions of the mind are of a very tender and delicate nature, and require the concurrence of many favourable circumstances to make them play with facility and exactness, according to their general and established principles. The least exterior hinderance to such small springs, or the least internal disorder, disturbs their motion, and confounds the operation of the whole machine" (*ST* 232).

⁵⁰Cf. Hurka, *Perfectionism*, ch. 1; Dorsey, "Three Arguments."

⁵¹Cf. Hurka, *Perfectionism*, ch. 2; Brink, "Significance."

(sound operation) of humanity's *sentimental* nature: the sentiments that would occur for humans would be their sentiments in a "sound" rather than "defective" state. Putting this all together, one might respond to the question posed in this section in the following way: the normative significance of the "higher" pleasures, for Hume, is explained by the fact that higher pleasures just are those sentiments that characterize the perfection or sound operation of humanity's sentimental nature. Other pleasures, such as a relish for the "low and sensual objects or from the indulgence of malignant passions," are defects or perversions and are worth less because of it.

That human nature should play an important role in Hume's axiological theory should come as no surprise. It plays a similar role in Hume's moral theory. For instance, Hume writes that "no action can be virtuous, or morally good, unless there be in human nature some motive to produce it, distinct from the sense of its morality" (*T* 3.2.1.7, 479). Hume's "undoubted maxim" grants a role not just to our *motivations*, but rather the motivations found in *human nature*, and hence grants human nature *in particular* a role in determining the applicability of virtue to particular actions. So it would be unsurprising for Hume to hold that human nature also plays a role in determining the value of individual pleasures. Of course, this argument is not a knock-down. But to say that Hume treats the pleasures experienced by an adequately functioning faculty of taste as more valuable *because* those pleasures exhibit a particular property (i.e. being the pleasures of human nature) explains the axiological distinction between Hume's higher and lower pleasures, and comports with Hume's treatment of the significance of human nature in his wider moral theory.

One might object to this reading on the following grounds. To hold that Hume accepted a hybrid of hedonism and perfectionism treats Hume as accepting an unstable philosophical position.⁵² After all, if human nature itself is valuable, why believe that it is simply *pleasures* that conform to or are fitting of human nature that are more valuable? Why not believe, say, that activities, or styles of life, or exercises of capacities that are also fitting of human nature (such as the capacity for rationality, etc.) are themselves valuable? After all, such things can all display, or fail to display, consonance with human nature.

I have two responses to this question. The first is that my reading of Hume's view does not interpret "conformity to human nature" as itself valuable, any more than it interprets "intensity" or "duration" as valuable. Rather, conformity to human nature is a property of individual pleasures that renders that pleasure better or worse; it is a method by which to rank-order pleasures, just as, other things being equal, more intense pleasures are more valuable, and longer-lasting pleasures are more valuable. Admittedly, intensity and duration are methods by which to measure the quantity of a pleasure; conformity to human nature is not (see note 35). But there is no reason that a qualitative hedonist of the form I am attributing to Hume would have to admit that non-pleasures that conform to human nature are valuable any more than they would have to admit that intense and long-lasting non-pleasures are valuable.

⁵²Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

Second, however, even if the current position is philosophically unstable, there is sufficient evidence to believe that it is, in fact, Hume's view. Hume commits himself to a conceptual form of hedonism: the good just *is* pleasure, in other words. And hence it would be false to say that non-pleasures could be good, non-pains evil. But there is also very good evidence to say that Hume believes that not all pleasures are to be rank-ordered given their quantity, for the reasons already offered. The pleasures of an adequately functioning faculty of taste (which are themselves identified as pleasures inherent in human nature) are clearly more valuable than those of a "deformed" taste—only this reading can explain the existence of a standard of taste at all.

As a final note in this section, recall that there was some question of whether, for Hume, happiness was fully, or only partially, constituted by the pleasures of the faculty of taste. And while it is clear that the pleasures of taste come in higher and lower varieties, if it is the case that conformity to human nature explains the pleasures of an adequately operating faculty of taste, then there is no barrier to applying this particular axiological principle to pleasures that may not fall within the faculty of taste, such as bare sensory or bodily pleasures. I leave aside consideration of whether such bare bodily pleasures *will* display a difference in conformity to human nature; I merely note that Hume's qualitative hedonism need not be read to apply only to pleasures of the faculty of taste. On Hume's view, any distinction, among any set of pleasures, in their conformity to human nature can in principle be relevant to their quality.

5. THE SENSIBLE KNAVE IN LIGHT OF HUME'S QUALITATIVE HEDONISM

I have so far argued that Hume is a hedonist of extraordinary sophistication. Not only is he a qualitative hedonist, but his hedonism is intriguingly blended with elements of a perfectionist value theory. In addition to contributing directly to our understanding of his moral philosophy, however, reading Hume's hedonism in this way pays substantial dividends when it comes to Hume's treatment of the virtue of justice.

As noted before, Hume devotes the second part of the ninth book of the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* to the question of "our interested *obligation*" to virtue, that is, "whether every man, who has any regard to his own happiness and welfare, will not best find his account in the practice of every moral duty" (*E* 9.2.14, 278). According to Hume, "The peculiar advantage of" his account of the nature of the virtues "seems to be, that it furnishes the proper mediums for that purpose" (*E* 9.2.16, 280). So Hume appears to say that, in fact, virtuous behavior is in the interest of *everyone*. And while Hume thinks it is easy to show that this fact holds for *most* of the virtues, we hit a snag when it comes to *justice*: "Treating vice with the greatest candour, and making it all possible concessions, we must acknowledge, that there is not, in any instance, the smallest pretext for giving it the preference above virtue, with a view to self-interest; except, perhaps, in the case of justice, where a man, taking things in a certain light, may often seem to be a loser by his integrity" (*E* 9.2.22, 282). The puzzle, then, would be that this

person (viz. the apparent loser by integrity) appears not to have any interested obligation to virtue; Hume has failed in his own stated goals.

Hume's discussion of the *sensible knave*, namely, a person who holds that "*honesty is the best policy*" but that the prudential value of virtue is nevertheless "liable to many exceptions," has been the subject of exhaustive comment. Readings of the knave typically fall into one of two camps. The first camp suggests that Hume believes that justice is not, in fact, in the interest of the knave: the sensible knave's assessment of his own prudential interests is accurate. For instance, David Gauthier claims that the sensible knave shows that Hume's account of the virtue of justice is an "error theory." "The sensible knave's message is that human society, which depends on the [disposition to be just], lacks any moral foundation."⁵³ A crucial step in defense of Gauthier's reading is his claim that "Hume does not accuse the sensible knave of mistaking his interest."⁵⁴ Making reference to the knave, Stephen Darwall writes that "[b]y the time he wrote the *Enquiry* . . . Hume was no longer prepared to say that justice is invariably advantageous."⁵⁵ According to Annette Baier, "From the knave's point of view, and given her psychology, it may be prudent to continue with knavery."⁵⁶ For Jason Baldwin, the sensible knave is just an exception to the general rule that virtue is prudentially valuable.⁵⁷ This general reading is in part motivated by Hume's confessed inability to provide any adequate response to the knave: "I must confess, that, if a man think, that this reasoning much requires an answer, it will be a little difficult to find any, which will to him appear satisfactory and convincing. If his heart rebel not against such pernicious maxims, if he feel no reluctance to the thoughts of villainy or baseness, he has indeed lost a considerable motive to virtue; and we may expect, that his practice will be answerable to his speculation" (*E* 9.2.23).

The second camp reads Hume as insisting that the sensible knave does mistake his own prudential interests. Gerald Postema claims that the sensible knave has a perfectly good prudential motivation to conform to justice, given a disposition to take pleasure in the esteem of himself and others.⁵⁸ Christine Korsgaard's view is similar: "[T]he fact that *other people* will disapprove and dislike the sensible knave will be sufficient to provide him with feelings of disapproval and dislike of himself. Of course a knave will try to keep his knavish actions secret. But unless he is very hardened indeed, even the knowledge that others *would* hate him if they knew what he is up to will be enough to produce humility and self-hatred when he acts unjustly."⁵⁹

Neither reading fully captures Hume's text in the crucial section of the *Enquiry*. To claim that the sensible knave does not act imprudently in carrying out his knavish strategy is inconsistent with Hume's refusal to retreat from his claim that virtue is in the interest of the virtuous. Hume *explicitly* claims that his own system

⁵³Gauthier, "Artificial," 422.

⁵⁴Gauthier, "Artificial," 417.

⁵⁵Darwall, *Internal*, 309.

⁵⁶Baier, "Response," 431.

⁵⁷Baldwin, "Interests," 291–96.

⁵⁸Postema, "Knave," 23–40.

⁵⁹Korsgaard, *Sources*, 59.

can show that "every man" will best advance his own happiness and welfare by conforming to virtue (*E* 9.2.16, 280). (And hence his own stated argumentative goal can seem to permit of no exception to be made in the case of the knave.) Second, Hume appears to deny that the knave is, in fact, motivated by "the esteem of himself and others." As Hume notes, the sensible knave's heart "rebels not" at "thoughts of villany or baseness." (And hence, or so it would seem, Hume does conceive the knave as "very hardened indeed," in Korsgaard's phrase.)

If Hume is a qualitative hedonist, however, we have the power to read his discussion of the sensible knave in a way that simply and straightforwardly vindicates his main conclusion.⁶⁰ Take the final paragraph of *E* 9:

But were [the sensible knave] ever so secret and successful, the honest man, if he has any tincture of philosophy, or even common observation and reflection, will discover that they themselves are, in the end, the greatest dupes, and have sacrificed the invaluable enjoyment of a character, with themselves at least, for the acquisition of worthless toys and gewgaws. How little is requisite to supply the *necessities* of nature? And in a view to *pleasure*, what comparison between the unbought satisfaction of conversation, society, study, even health and the beauties of nature, but above all the peaceful reflection on one's own conduct: What comparison, I say, between these, and the feverish, empty amusements of luxury and expense? These natural pleasures, indeed, are really without price; both because they are below all price in their attainment, and above it in their enjoyment. (*E* 9.2.25, 283–84)

Here Hume describes the sensible knave as "the greatest dupe." In providing a reason for this conclusion, he notes the distinction between the "invaluable enjoyment of a character" and the "empty amusements of luxury and expense." This should sound familiar. Hume is indicting the sensible knave not for being a faulty reasoner or for failing to grasp his own motivations, but for failing to possess the proper *taste*. According to Hume, however successful the sensible knave is at procuring these "empty amusements," the sensible knave will *not* be successful at procuring a better life as compared to the life of virtue. Why? Because the pleasures of virtue are *more valuable*; a person who maintains delicacy, discernment, a lack of prejudice, and so forth—in other words, the *honest man*⁶¹—will enjoy character more than the pleasures of "worthless toys and gewgaws."⁶² Note what Hume does not say. He does not attempt to claim that there is more pleasure to be had in the life of the honest man, or those that engage the "natural pleasures." And though he states that the favored pleasures are "above" the amusements of luxury and expense "in their enjoyment," this should not be read to indicate that the honest man takes *more* pleasure (which, given the psychological makeup of the sensible knave, Hume explicitly rejects). Rather, the honest man takes *better* pleasure than the knave does in his "feverish" pursuits.

If we read Hume like this, we can explain his conviction that every man, even the knave, maintains an interested obligation to virtue. Though the knave may take

⁶⁰The following argument is foreshadowed in Dorsey, "Internalism," 16–19.

⁶¹To claim that the "honest man" possesses the proper taste is supported by Hume's suggestion that the standard of taste is essential for proper moral judgment and motivation; see note 38.

⁶²Worth noting in this connection is that Hume explicitly states that an honest man will *seem* to be a loser by his integrity. Hume spends the rest of this section arguing that, in fact, this is a mere seeming: the sensible knave maintains pleasures that are worth *less*.

less pleasure in virtue than in the pursuit of fortune, and so forth, the pleasure he takes in virtue is “finer” (*ST* 236) than the pleasure he takes in collecting his tchotchkes. Of course, Hume is unable to address himself directly to the sensible knave, because no *reasoning* will convince the sensible knave that the honest man’s pleasures are more valuable. Indeed, why should it? What must be addressed in the sensible knave is not his faulty *reasoning* but rather his faulty *taste*. And insofar as one cannot *reason* one’s way to an adequately operating faculty of taste (*ST* 231) one cannot, presumably, convince the sensible knave to alter his pursuit other than by altering his taste (by, for instance, practice, delicacy, lack of prejudice, etc.). Thus it would appear that Hume’s perfectionist hedonism helps us understand his treatment of the sensible knave, and his general claim that virtue is a benefit, and vice a burden (even if the vicious are of a “quite different turn and disposition”).⁶³

Hume’s treatment of the sensible knave is, if we read Hume as accepting a form of qualitative hedonism, utterly unmysterious. For this reason, Hume’s discussion of the sensible knave supports my reading of his hedonism. To sum up, then, Hume’s hedonism is, first, objective: he holds that pleasure and pain are identical to good and evil, and this is independent of any preference or pro-attitude. Second, Hume’s hedonism is qualitative. He holds that pleasures that constitute an adequately operating faculty of taste are better than pleasures taken by a poorly functioning faculty of taste, or a faculty that is not practiced, delicate, and so forth. Third, the proper explanation of Hume’s axiological distinction between higher and lower pleasures appeals to the evaluative authority of humanity’s sentimental nature. To accept this view is to straightforwardly account for Hume’s stated argumentative goals in *E 9* as well as his inability to directly address the sensible knave. This is enough, I think, to entitle my reading very serious consideration.

6. CONCLUSION

In light of the argument of this paper, two points are, I think, worth reflection. First, one feature of my reading of Hume may give some pause. I have generally treated Hume’s writings throughout his career, including the *Treatise* (1739), the second *Enquiry* (1751), and the *Essays* (1741; “Of the Standard of Taste,” 1757), as expressing a coherent account of the welfare value of pleasure. But some may plausibly object that Hume’s hedonism as expressed in the *Treatise*, for instance,

⁶³There is perhaps one method of reading Hume’s treatment of the sensible knave that is compatible with a quantitative rather than qualitative hedonism. This reading holds that, on Hume’s view, those without the taste for the social pleasures—though they experience plenty of low “amusements”—will, when their taste is refined, take *more pleasure* in the pleasures of virtue than they do in the lower pleasures, as a simple matter of psychological fact. This would explain Hume’s inability to convince the knave: the knave, given his poor taste, is insensible to, or at the very least takes less pleasure in, virtue. But once his taste is refined, *more pleasure* is available to the knave in the practice of virtue. But this reading has two problems. First, and most importantly, it cannot explain why the knave, *given* his psychology, would be better-off experiencing less pleasure (the pleasures of virtue) than more (the pleasures of toys and gewgaws), even though, with a more refined taste, more pleasure would be available *via* a noble character. And hence this reading would be unable to deliver Hume’s claim that “every man” is better-off being virtuous. Second, and somewhat less clear-cut, Hume refrains from using explicitly quantitative terms to discuss the pleasures of a refined taste, preferring instead terms such as “finest” or “most innocent” (*ST* 236–37).

cannot sensibly be read as containing anything like the qualitative features of his hedonism as expressed in the second *Enquiry*, or his later *Essays*. I have some sympathy for this line of critique. Nevertheless, it seems to me preferable to read Hume as maintaining a coherent view if possible, and, in addition, there is nothing in the *Treatise* itself that tells in favor of or against a qualitative interpretation of his work. (Although, to be fair, evidence for the normative force of human nature itself—which, on my reading, helps to explain the axiological significance of Hume's "higher" pleasures—can be found in the *Treatise* [*T* 3.2.1.7, 479].) And hence, or so I claim, there is good reason to read Hume's hedonism as consistent, but of course I cannot rule out the suggestion that this *qualitative* hedonism in particular is a distinctive feature of his late, or at least comparatively late, thought.

Second, there are a number of questions that might still arise when thinking about Hume's hedonism. In particular, one might ask about the metaphysical nature of pleasure as Hume conceives it.⁶⁴ (I have noted that Hume uses the term 'pleasure' to refer to a diverse set of feelings and sentiments that differ radically, but there remain important questions on this front.) In addition, there are first-order questions: how much more are the "higher" pleasures worth? Should we be willing to trade any amount of the lower pleasures for the higher? (Admittedly, it is difficult to maintain Hume's confidence in the prudential value of virtue as compared to vice unless one is also willing to grant *very* heavy axiological weight to the "higher" as opposed to "lower" pleasures. But much more should be said to come up with anything like a full picture of the axiological relationship between these pleasures, for Hume.)

Leaving these further questions aside, however, I think that on balance we should read in Hume not just a form of hedonism about happiness or welfare, but a sophisticated and pathbreaking form of qualitative hedonism. Hume not only offers an axiological distinction between higher and lower pleasures, but also helpfully explains this distinction in terms of their relative conformity to the pleasures inherent in human nature. The emerging "perfectionist hedonism" is not just significant for our growing understanding of Hume's moral theory, but is a legitimate view worth taking seriously in its own right.⁶⁵

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⁶⁴See Hudson, "Pleasures."

⁶⁵I would like to thank Erin Frykholm and two anonymous reviewers for the *Journal of the History of Philosophy* for helpful comments on this paper. I would also like to thank the Murphy Institute at Tulane University for generous support.

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