

Contingency and Comparison in Hume’s “Enjoyment of Character” View
A Commentary on Gill’s *The British Moralists on Human Nature and the Birth of Secular Ethics*

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Amongst the many important strands of thought Gill identifies to be running through the British Moralists is the thought that there is an important connection between being a good person and being able to be content with one’s character. A good person is one that ought to be satisfied with herself; in Gill’s words, she is able to “bear her own survey” (14).¹ The promise of being able to bear one’s own survey in this way serves as an important motive to morality itself. Something like this basic idea, Gill suggests, can be found in philosophers as early as Plato, and continues to “exert a powerful influence on moral theory throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries” (14).

While Gill believes that all of the philosophers he is centrally concerned with – Whichcote, Cudworth, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Hume – embrace this basic idea, he devotes the most time to showing how it is developed by Whichcote and Shaftesbury. Over the course of these discussions, Gill demonstrates the significance this idea has for the development of each of their theories. He also suggests that this view – what I will call the “enjoyment of character” view – has important implications, in general, for how one answers the Human Nature Question, which concerns whether or not human beings are, by nature, virtuous or vicious.

Gill recognizes that Hume endorses the “enjoyment of character” view, yet argues that his endorsement of this view is remarkably different than that of Whichcote’s and

¹ Gill, Michael. *The British Moralists on Human Nature and the Birth of Secular Ethics*. (New York: Cambridge University Press), 2006. All parenthetical references of this form refer to this work.

Shaftesbury's. He argues that while "Hume adopts the same kind of talk" as Whichcote and Shaftesbury, "when [he] speaks of the importance of being able to bear one's own survey, he's putting new wine in an old bottle" (266). Gill reaches this conclusion largely on the grounds that Hume's understanding of what constitutes "enjoyment of character" is contingent in a way in which Whichcote's and Shaftesbury's is not.² In this paper, I explore whether or not this claim is warranted by Hume's use of the "enjoyment of character" view. I will argue, against Gill, that although Hume's employment of the "enjoyment of character" view is contingent in some respects, it is not contingent in a way that threatens its normative significance, and conclude with the suggestion that this has important implications for how we understand his position with respect to the Human Nature Question.

Let us begin by considering how it is that talk of enjoying one's character enters into Hume's discussion. Hume's most explicit reference to this view comes in his discussion of the sensible knave, where he claims that, in virtue of treating as flexible inviolable rules of justice and honesty, sensible knaves "have sacrificed the invaluable enjoyment of a character, with themselves at least, for the worthless acquisition of toys and gewgaws" (EPM 9.23; SBN 283) and then suggests that enjoyment of character is invaluable insofar as it is connected to happiness, writing: "Inward peace of mind, consciousness of integrity, a satisfactory review of our own conduct; these are

² Gill's conclusion here is a little mixed with respect to Shaftesbury: Gill notes that Shaftesbury provides two accounts of our reasons to be virtuous: the mental enjoyment account, and the teleological account. In a footnote, he suggests that Shaftesbury's mental enjoyment account "looks very similar to the Humean one" (p. 266, n 4). This is true when the mental enjoyment account is seen in isolation of the teleological account; however, as long as Shaftesbury holds on to both accounts, the teleological account allows him to escape the charge of contingency, even with respect to his mental enjoyment account, in virtue of providing an independent moral standard to ground moral judgments.

circumstances, very requisite to happiness, and will be cherished and cultivated by every honest man, who feels the importance of them” (EPM 9.23; SBN 283).

While these passages link enjoyment of character explicitly to the artificial virtues of justice and honesty, Hume elsewhere suggests that enjoyment of character is linked to the natural virtues as well. He claims that the prospect of “inward peace of mind” and enjoyment of character serves as a motive to “every” virtue: “this constant habit of surveying ourselves, as it were, in reflection, keeps alive all the sentiments of right and wrong, and begets, in noble natures, a certain reverence for themselves as well as others, which is the surest guardian of every virtue” (EPM 9.1; SBN 276).

Hume thus believes, at least, that the prospect of enjoying one’s character has a normative force of the sort that Gill finds in Whichcote and Shaftesbury. For Whichcote and Shaftesbury (amongst others), enjoyment of character is essentially connected to virtue; as a result “persons should conduct themselves so that when they look at their own reasons for action, they are content with what they see” (14). However, on Gill’s interpretation, Hume’s view is characterized by a robust contingency that makes Hume’s “talk” just that: talk, lacking the sort of justification necessary to give substance to the idea that there is a meaningful and non-contingent connection between one’s commitment to virtue and one’s capacity to enjoy one’s character.

Gill argues that Hume’s use of the “enjoyment of character” view is so lacking because, in Gill’s own words:

According to Hume, that our internal survey issues in a certain verdict does not reflect the design of any other, morally perfect mind; it does not constitute evidence our being aligned to any independent moral standard. It is simply a fact – a robustly contingent one at that – about us. (266)

Now, as Gill’s discussion of contingency in Hume makes clear, the real problem lies not

in the absence of an independent moral standard. That Hume rejects independent moral standards in favor of an internalized sentimentalist one makes his account contingent in the relatively harmless way in which Hutcheson's account is contingent, i.e. by making morality contingent to principles that constitute human nature. Gill's main concern, it seems, is not this sort of contingency, but in the "robust" contingency that results from the fact that, on Gill's interpretation at least, the moral sentiments are not determined solely by principles that constitute human nature, but are determined by contingent aspects of our experience, such as "the associations we form and the comparisons we make" (265). As a result, Gill argues, "Hume's account implies that it is a robustly contingent fact that we happen to value the things we value" (265).

If Gill's interpretation is correct, then whether or not, and under what circumstances, a person enjoys her character is a robustly contingent matter that cannot provide the sort of normative force found in Whichcote's and Shaftesbury's defense of the "enjoyment of character" view. However, if Hume's use of the "enjoyment of character" view is *not* robustly contingent, then the fact that a person enjoys her character only when she acts virtuously not only provides Hume's moral theory with normative force, but also tells us something about human nature itself. I think we'll find that, once we isolate what is involved in Hume's account of enjoyment of character, we'll see that it is not robustly contingent in the manner described above (although it is "harmlessly" contingent on principles original to human nature).

Before moving on to a further examination of the "enjoyment of character" view, let me take a moment to explore the different sources of contingency that Gill finds in Hume's moral theory. Gill identifies three sources of contingency: (1) the principles of

association that characterize our sympathy-based moral approvals; (2) the comparisons that lie at the basis of both moral and non-moral judgments; and (3) the extent to which particular (and accidental) aspects of our experience influence the above sources (265). These sources of contingency threaten the normative status of the judgments we make. After all, if it is just a “robustly contingent fact that we happen to value the things we value”(265), why should we place any weight in that of which we moral approve? Now, Gill actually thinks that, in practice, these concerns will not threaten an agent’s commitment to morality, although he does admit that agents might lose confidence in some *particular* moral judgment (336). Gill thus doesn’t see even robust contingency as a flaw with the Humean account; in fact, he sees it as the sign of Hume’s “superior” insight into morality and human behavior, which is more nuanced, complex and richer than many of his predecessors (in particular, Hutcheson) realized (262).

I agree with much of this line of thinking: I think the fact that sympathy depends on principles of association does not *threaten* our commitment to morality, but instead reflects the intricacy of our psychology and the interpersonal nature of morality. I think the fact that our moral sentiments take their shape in light of human experiences is a merit of the Humean account. I agree with Gill that the recognition of the fact that I have reached a moral judgment largely in virtue of my “addiction to general rules” isn’t going to shake my commitment to morality (336). But the thought that our moral judgments are based in comparative judgments that are made on the basis of our particular experiences worries me. It worries me that when I approve of someone, my approval only reflects the comparison class with which I happen to be familiar and not anything even remotely “intrinsic” to the object in question, or to human nature itself. If this were true of the

Humean account, I think it *would* undermine morality, and our commitment to it. This is particularly true when we see the implications this potential source of contingency has for Hume's "enjoyment of character" view.

As we have seen, the "enjoyment of character" view holds that there is an important connection between virtuous activity and enjoyment of character. According to this view, only the virtuous person is able to bear her own survey; as doing so has important ramifications for one's happiness, sense of self, and integrity, the prospect of enjoying one's character serves as a powerful reason to act well. Consider, though, how this view fares if enjoyment of character is contingent upon one's comparative judgments. Understood in this light, what it takes to enjoy one's character is not necessarily to have a virtuous character, but just to have a better character than those around you. The upshot seems to be this: if you want to experience enjoyment of character, the surefire way to do so is not to concern yourself only with developing a virtuous character, but, in reality, is to stay away from the virtuous folks and surround yourself by the vicious.

If Hume's "enjoyment of character" view *is* marked by contingency in the form of comparative judgments, then his view of morality is significantly undermined. But, as I will now argue, Hume's employment of the "enjoyment of character" view does not necessarily involve comparative judgments on one's character. As such, it avoids this form of contingency. Moreover, once we remove from Hume's account the threat this form of contingency presents, we see that Hume uses the "enjoyment of character" view in much the same fashion as Whichcote and Shaftesbury.

"Enjoyment of character" is, for Hume, a species of pride: it is the agreeable

sensation we experience through the consideration of our good character. Like all forms of pride, it is socially dependent in that its production depends on being “seconded” by others. Thus even when one possesses a virtuous character – which Hume cites as being one of the “most obvious causes” of pride (T 2.1.7.2) – this source on its own will have “little influence, when not seconded by the opinions and sentiments of others” (T 2.1.11.1; SBN 316). Hume thus stresses that “pursuit of a character” involves bringing “our own deportment and conduct frequently in review, and consider[ing] how they appear in the eyes of those who approach and regard us” (EPM 9.1; SBN 276). Where our character pleases both ourselves and others, we feasibly develop pride in it, and so attain the “invaluable enjoyment of character” Hume claims to be distinctive of the virtuous person.

At this point Gill is likely to argue that this interpretation overlooks what in Book II of the *Treatise* Hume claims to be an essential feature of pride: namely, that pride can only be had in objects which are peculiar and relatively rare. Hume writes that in order to cause pride or humility, its opposite, “the agreeable or disagreeable object [must] be not only closely related, but also peculiar to ourselves, or at least common to us in a few persons” (T 2.1.6.4). It is in light of this requirement that Gill believes that all judgments of pride necessarily involve comparative judgments: “To feel proud of something”, Gill writes, “I must think that it makes me *better* than most other people. Pride has an ineluctable *comparative* aspect” (244). In the case of virtue, Gill argues, “I will judge that I possess virtue only when I think that I possess a certain pleasant quality to a greater extent than most” (249).

If Gill’s interpretation is correct, and *all* judgments of pride involve comparisons

with others, then comparisons must enter into considerations of our character. I will take pride in my character only when both myself and others judge it to be more pleasing than everyone else's. We can see how this easily leads us to the "undermining" interpretation of the "enjoyment of character" view I described above. But is Gill correct in claiming that *all* judgments of pride necessarily involve comparative judgments? There is, after all, some significant debate about this claim.

Annette Baier suggests that there are, in Hume's discussions, two forms of pride: the vicious pride characteristic of "conceit" and the virtuous pride characteristic of "self-esteem". It is only the former sort, she argues, that requires its object to be unique and so necessarily involves comparison. The latter, "moralized" version of pride is "freed from this restriction."³ And, according to Baier, it is clear that this is the form of pride that Hume has in mind when he discusses the pride in virtue: "Pride in virtue still requires the verdict that something about one is good of its kind, but that verdict is now less directly based on simple comparison with what other persons have."⁴

Much of the support Baier uses to support her interpretation comes from the following passage from Book III of the *Treatise*, whereby Hume distinguishes between "ill-grounded conceit", which involves comparisons, and "pride proper", which does not.

Hume writes:

. . . those, who have an ill-grounded conceit of themselves, are forever making those comparisons, nor have they any other method of supporting their vanity. A man of sense and merit is pleased with himself, independent of all foreign considerations: But a fool must always find some person, that is more foolish, in order to keep himself in good humour with his own parts and understanding (t 3.3.2.7; SBN 596).

³ Baier, Annette. *A Progress of Sentiments*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press), 1991, p. 207.

⁴ Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments*, p. 207-208.

In this passage, Hume clearly seems to be distinguishing his understanding of enjoyment of character from the “undermining”, comparison-based interpretation of it: it is only the fool who will seek to surround himself by vicious losers, for it is only the fool who bases his pride on comparisons with others.

As Gill notes, however, Hume’s introduction of non-comparative pride comes in Book III. The Book II account of pride is, on both Baier’s and Gill’s interpretation, of the comparative sort, and it is in Book II that Hume first discusses virtue as a cause of pride.⁵ This suggests that virtue does invoke a comparative form of pride. This line of thinking, however, leads us astray: it is not the *cause* of pride that seems to shift between the Book II and Book III accounts, but the form of pride that results from the cause. The same cause could, in different circumstances, give rise either to the “vanity” or “vain-glory” of Book II’s comparative pride, or to the “genuine and hearty pride, or self-esteem” (T 3.3.2.11) of Book III. Elsewhere I have argued that a well-founded pride in one’s character is possible only given the establishment of existence of the conventions of justice: that, in fact, “the conventions of justice . . . make possible new forms of pride; namely, the pride in one’s character that is distinctive of, and possible only for, the just person.”⁶ If this or something like it is true, then this helps to explain why Hume’s Book III discussion of pride reveals a new, virtuous and, I should add, *post-conventional* form of pride that was absent from his initial discussion of pride in Book II.

⁵ Gill also argues, against Baier’s interpretation, that Hume invokes a virtuous form of comparative pride in his discussion of greatness of mind (T 3.3.2.12-13), suggesting that he still maintained that even the virtuous pride of Book III was comparative. One might wonder, however, whether a virtue such as *greatness* of mind, what Hume also calls “*heroic* virtue” (my emphasis) necessarily requires comparative judgments in a way that other virtues – such as honesty, justice, even benevolence, may not. I expand on this point in what follows.

⁶ Besser-Jones, Lorraine. “The Role of Justice in Hume’s Theory of Psychological Development.” *Hume Studies* 32(2) 2006, p. 273.

Setting aside this particular interpretative debate, however, I think we can find further support for the idea that the pride Hume invokes in his discussion of “enjoyment of character” is non-comparative simply by looking at his discussion of when and why we take pride in our characters. Hume’s most explicit discussion of pride in one’s character, as we have seen, arises in the context of his discussion of the artificial virtues. It is the knave who sacrifices “invaluable enjoyment of character”. He does so, Hume contends, by treating the rules of justice and honesty as good general rules that are “liable to many exceptions” and so “takes advantage of all the exceptions” (EPM 9.2; SBN 283). Even if the knave were able to keep his actions “ever so secret and successful”, he would still be sacrificing his character (EPM 9.2; SBN 283). When it comes to the artificial virtues, Hume’s message rings loud and clear: whether or not we experience “inward peace of mind, consciousness of integrity, [and] a satisfactory review of our own conduct” (EPM 9.2; SBN 283) depends on whether or not we follow the rules of justice and honesty. If we do, we enjoy our characters; if not, we do not. It does not matter, for Hume, whether or not others around her commit themselves as well to the rules of justice and fidelity; comparisons simply do not enter into the picture when it comes to the artificial virtues. He writes that “For whatever may be the case, with regard to all kinds of vice and virtue, ‘tis certain, that rights, and obligations, and property, admit of no such insensible gradation” (T 3.2.6.6). This, incidentally, is something of which Gill is well aware, writing: “To possess the artificial virtue of justice is to obey the laws of the land, and whether someone has obeyed the law is generally an all-or-nothing, non-comparative matter. The judgment that a person has or has not broken a law is, or at least usually can be, independent of thoughts about how other people have acted in relation to the law”

(249).

Since Hume believes that enjoyment of character is clearly attained through possession of the artificial virtues, and since there is no room for comparative judgments regarding one's possession of the artificial virtues, it is plausible to conclude that Hume's "enjoyment of character" view involves the non-comparative species of pride identified by Baier as "proper pride". We have seen a very strong case for this with respect to possession of the artificial virtues; let us now consider the case for the natural virtues.

Perhaps the strongest support for interpreting the pride involved in one's possession of the natural virtues as being essentially non-comparative comes from Hume's contention that the natural virtues are *not* rare or peculiar to a few. He makes this claim in the context of identifying the sense of "natural" to which is "opposed to rare and unusual" (T 3.1.2.8). He argues that,

. . . if ever there was any thing, which could be called natural in this sense, the sentiments of morality certainly may; since there never was any nation of the world, nor any single instance, showed the least approbation or dislike of manners. These sentiments are so rooted in our constitution and temper, that without entirely confounding the human mind by disease of madness, 'tis impossible to extirpate and destroy them. (T 3.1.2.8)

The natural virtues are thus anything but rare and peculiar to a few. Yet, as we have seen, Hume believes they are a source of pride. While, in contrast to the artificial virtues, it does seem possible to possess them in different degrees, since any degree of virtue will be judged to be useful and agreeable to ourselves and others we ought to be able to take some enjoyment in whatever degree of virtue we possess. We can allow that one can take more enjoyment in her character to the extent that she possess the natural virtues to a higher degree than others do, while maintaining that any degree of virtue can generate pride.

I hope to have made a compelling case for a non-comparative understanding of the pride involved in Hume's "enjoyment of character" view. If I'm right, and enjoyment of character is not contingent upon comparative judgments, then this suggests that Hume's use of the "enjoyment of character" view is more similar to Whichcote's and Shaftesbury's than Gill's interpretation suggests. In particular, it suggests that Hume's "enjoyment of character" view can provide the same sort of normative force to Hume's moral theory as does Whichcote's and Shaftesbury's to their respective moral theories. The prospect of enjoying one's character serves as a powerful motive to virtue, as it is only through committing oneself to virtue that one can enjoy one's character. Moreover, that Hume uses the enjoyment of character view in a meaningful way suggests that his account of human nature is more aligned with the Positive Answer than Gill contends.

In his introduction of the "enjoyment of character" view, Gill notes that then enjoyment of character view is intricately connected with a Positive Answer to the Human Nature Question (14-15). The Positive Answer holds that people are by nature good, such that they will, on their own, end up pursuing the path of virtue. Something like this basic belief in the natural goodness of human nature is requisite to successful employment of the "enjoyment of character view". Enjoyment of character is possible only if it is possible for one's character to be good; if people are by nature vicious, then their characters can never be good, and thus they can never take enjoyment in their characters. Thus, Gill argues, those who endorse a Negative Answer to the Human Nature Question, and hold that "our soul will always harbor corruption and sin" (15) are committed to saying that the person who enjoys her character is "profoundly misguided, either unaware of their own sinfulness or (what is worse) so far gone that awareness of

their own sin no longer upsets them” (15).

Hume’s employment of the “enjoyment of character” view, and belief that the virtuous person attains self-satisfaction and inward peace of mind suggests that he believes human nature is naturally good, that the seeds of virtue are contained within human nature, and that the process of becoming virtuous will not involve *renouncing* a fundamental aspect of human nature. This, I think, suggests that Hume does endorse some version of a Positive Answer to the Human Nature Question, albeit a more complex and nuanced one than we have seen from his predecessors.