

## On Why Hume's "General Point of View" Isn't Ideal -- and Shouldn't Be<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

It is tempting and not at all uncommon to find the striking -- even noble -- visage of an Ideal Observer staring out from the center of Hume's moral theory.<sup>2</sup> When Hume claims, for instance, that virtue is "*whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation; and vice the contrary*," it is only natural to think that he must have in mind not just any spectator but a spectator who is fully informed and unsullied by prejudice.<sup>3</sup> And when Hume writes that "the true standard of taste and beauty" is set by those

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at a conference on *Cultural Pluralism and Moral Knowledge* at Bowling Green State University, as well as Santa Clara University's *Conference on David Hume's Philosophy*, the 1993 Pacific Division Meetings of the *American Philosophical Association*, the Research Triangle Ethics Circle, The Australian National University, Massey University, the University of Otago, Monash University, and the Nineteenth Hume Conference at the Université De Nantes, France. The audiences on each occasion proved to be both useful and agreeable, even on the many occasions when they did not agree. I have benefitted considerably too from comments by and discussions with Annette Baier, Simon Blackburn, Charlotte Brown, Rachel Cohon, David Cumiskey, Richard Dean, Don Garrett, Patricia Greenspan, Paul Hurley, Roderick Long, Kurt Norlin, Gerald Postema, Elizabeth Radcliffe, and Christopher Williams.

<sup>2</sup> Among the many who have given in to the temptation are John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 185-88; Roderick Firth in "Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (1952), pp. 336-41; Jonathan Harrison in *Hume's Moral Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 114; and Ronald Glossop in "The Nature of Hume's Ethics," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (1967), pp. 527-36. When Ideal Observer theories are discussed, Hume is almost always cited as an early advocate of the view.

<sup>3</sup> David Hume, *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, p. 286. Likewise, when he holds that "everything, which gives uneasiness in human actions, upon the general survey, is call'd Vice, and whatever produces satisfaction, in the same manner, is denominated Virtue..." (*Treatise*, p. 499), the survey that matters, one might think, is that taken by a suitably qualified judge. See also p. 591 of Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2d ed. with revisions and notes by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978). A number of passages from the *Enquiry* also suggest this interpretation, usually in the context of emphasizing the proper role of reason in moral judgment. See, for example, pp. 173 and 290-91 of *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3d ed. with revisions and notes by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975). References in the body of the essay for the *Treatise* will appear parenthetically as (T.), while those for the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* will appear as (E.).

who exhibit "[s]trong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice," he appears to describe a character no ordinary human could actually possess.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Hume's frequent appeals to the moral sentiments of spectators, his insistence that those sentiments depend upon taking 'the general survey', and his persistent invocation of the general point of view (and the corrections it requires), together make the temptation almost irresistible.

Moreover, the Ideal Observer interpretation has the advantage of combining nicely a Humean recognition of the importance of sentiment with the promise of a single stable standard that could serve to adjudicate among the heartfelt, though often conflicting, attitudes and commitments one finds across people, times, and cultures. Fully informed, free from prejudice, proportionately sympathetic to all humanity, the Ideal Observer might seem the perfect standard to use in measuring the adequacy of our own moral responses.

Yet, I will argue, it is not a standard Hume advocates, and for good reason. Hume does identify and defend a standard of moral judgment -- fixed by the attitudes of one taking the general point of view -- that controls for ignorance, adjusts for the distortions of perspective, and leaves to one side self-interest. But his standard supposes neither an impossible omniscience nor an angelic equi-sympathetic engagement with all of humanity. Hume's is a standard both more human in scope and more accessible in practice than any set by an Ideal Observer. And its very accessibility, according to Hume, is crucial to its playing the distinctive role in practical life that gives point to its introduction and adoption. Tempting as it is to see Hume as an Ideal Observer theorist, a cure for the temptation is found, I believe, in appreciating the place of the general point of view in Hume's moral theory.

Significantly, Hume has two separate but, as it turns out, related ambitions for his moral theory. He attempts, first of all and most explicitly, to give an *explanation* of morality, one that offers an account of morality's origins, an articulation of its principles, and a picture of its contribution to both personal and social life. At the same time, though, he hopes his theory succeeds not just in explaining moral thought but also in *justifying* it, by showing that our moral practice has a point, that it serves a purpose. Far from alienating us, reflection on the nature of morality will, Hume thinks, bring it closer to our hearts. In fact, he is convinced, the sense of morals "must certainly acquire new force, when

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<sup>4</sup> David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," in his *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller, (Indianapolis: LibertyClassics, 1985), p. 241. References in the body of the essay for "Of the Standard of Taste" will appear parenthetically as (*Taste*.).

reflecting on itself, it approves of those principles, from whence it is deriv'd, and finds nothing but what is great and good in its rise and origin."<sup>5</sup>

The two ambitions come into play throughout Hume's moral theory. In places, they encourage him to stretch, bend, or otherwise construe the facts so as to have them support an appealing account.<sup>6</sup> In other places, they lead him to find attractive, when he shouldn't, an actual practice seemingly only because he is well able to explain its existence.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, and to a surprising extent, Hume combines the two ambitions admirably, coming up with plausible explanations of our practices and producing a picture of virtue, and of moral thought more generally, that does represent "her genuine and most engaging charms, and make[s] us approach her with ease, familiarity, affection."<sup>8</sup>

The dual ambitions work together strikingly when it comes to Hume's invocation of the general point of view. This point of view, as he would have it, sets the standard we do and should use to correct and regulate our moral judgments. By introducing it, Hume improves mightily his ability to explain why we make the moral judgments we do. At the same time, he advances compelling and underexplored reasons for the practice he describes.

I will try, in what follows, to identify and keep separate -- in a way Hume does not -- both the reasons Hume has for introducing the general point of view into his explanation of moral judgment and the reasons we have, according to Hume, for embracing that point of view as setting the standard for our judgments. In the process, I hope to make clear why the general point of view, as Hume conceived of it, is not and should not be an Ideal Observer's. Throughout, the contrast I draw will be between Hume's theory and a theory

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<sup>5</sup>. Treatise, p. 619. Combining the explanatory and justificatory projects, of course, carries significant risks. An explanation of any fairly predominant moral view will likely be an explanation of a view many of us think is inadequate in some important way. If the theory offered is to be remotely plausible as a normative theory, the principles advanced must give us a purchase on actual practice that allows critical evaluation of what happens to be in place. Even so, there must be some explanation of why we hold the views we do see as justified, so the explanatory and justificatory projects cannot diverge completely (at least when the views being explained are our own). And the hope is that what explains our particular moral views and our practice of forming such views might simultaneously serve as a justification in our own eyes of both the views and the practice. Christine Korsgaard does a nice job of articulating Hume's conception of normativity as reflective endorsement in the second lecture of her 1992 Tanner Lectures, "The Sources of Normativity" (manuscript).

<sup>6</sup>. I am thinking here, for instance, of his tendency to see human nature as extraordinarily and conveniently uniform.

<sup>7</sup>. His account of the artificial virtues, for instance, seems to tempt him in this direction (justice's silence concerning the weak, and modesty's especially strong claim on women, come to mind here).

<sup>8</sup>. Enquiry, p. 279.

according to which the standard we either do or should appeal to is set by an Ideal Observer -- an observer who enjoys, and responds equi-sympathetically in light of, full information about the actual effects on everyone of what is being evaluated (someone's character, an action, an institutional practice, etc.).<sup>9</sup>

### The Basic Framework

Famously, Hume traces the origins of morality not to reason, but to sentiment.<sup>10</sup> As he sees things, "the approbation of moral qualities most certainly is not derived from reason... but proceeds entirely from a moral taste, and from certain sentiments of pleasure or disgust, which arise upon the contemplation and view of particular qualities or characters" (T. 581). But which sentiment and why? With a collection of lovely arguments, Hume maintains that self-love is not the relevant sentiment. "Avarice, ambition, vanity, and all passions vulgarly... comprised under the denomination of self-love, are here excluded from our theory concerning the origin of morals," Hume writes, "not because they are too weak, but because they have not a proper direction for that purpose" (E. 271). Only a sentiment that is commonly shared, comprehensive in scope, and more or less unified in its deliverances, he maintains, can explain both why we expect others to concur in our judgments and why we judge not simply those around us but people in distant lands and ages. Only our humanity, our ability to be moved by sympathy with others, meets these requirements.<sup>11</sup> "One man's ambition is not another's ambition, nor will the same event or object satisfy both; but the humanity of one man is the humanity of every one, and the same object touches this passion in all human creatures" (E. 273), and this is true "however remote the person; but every man, so far removed as neither to cross nor serve my avarice and ambition, is regarded as wholly indifferent by those passions" (E. 274).

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<sup>9</sup>. Thus, the idealizations involved are at least (i) the requirement of *full* knowledge, (ii) the *complete* impartiality of the responses, and (iii) the inclusion of the effects on *everyone*. Even more, or more specific, idealizations might be imposed. Roderick Firth, for instance, characterizes the Ideal Observer as not only omniscient with respect to nonethical facts, but as omniscient, disinterested, dispassionate, and consistent. Others, taking a lead from Richard Brandt, might suggest that an appropriate observer must have undergone cognitive psychotherapy. See Richard Brandt, A Theory of the Good and the Right, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), where the condition is advanced as part of an account of what sets the standard for an individual's good. The contrast I will be pressing would only be heightened by adding some or all of these other idealizations. See also Peter Railton, "Moral Realism," *Philosophical Review*, vol. 95 (1986).

<sup>10</sup>. "Morals," he observes, "excite passions, and produce or prevent actions. Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular. The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason" (Treatise, p. 457). This argument is just the first in a salvo Hume fires at attempts to found morality on reason. I will not here either rehearse or endorse the whole collection.

<sup>11</sup>. Hume's argument is set out nicely on p. 272 of the Enquiry.

Sympathy's distinctive role becomes clear when Hume collects together first virtues and then vices, and tries "to discover the circumstances on both sides, which are common to these qualities; to observe that particular in which the estimable qualities agree on the one hand, and the blamable on the other; and thence to reach the foundation of ethics..."<sup>12</sup> He discovers...

First, as he puts it in the Enquiry, that virtue is "*whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation*; and vice the contrary" (E. 289) -- or, as he puts it in the Treatise, that "whatever mental quality in ourselves or others gives us a satisfaction, by the survey or reflexion, is of course virtuous; as every thing of this nature, that gives uneasiness, is vicious."<sup>13</sup> This leads naturally to the question, "which qualities have this effect?" And he discovers,...

Second, that everything we count as a virtue (because we approve of it in the relevant way) falls into one of four categories: either it is useful to others or to the possessor, or it is immediately agreeable to others, or to the possessor.<sup>14</sup> This, in turn, leads naturally to the question, "why do these qualities have this effect?" And he discovers,...

Third, that the mechanism of sympathy (or our humanity or general benevolence)<sup>15</sup> explains why we approve of those traits we count as virtues. We approve of the character traits we do in the way we do, Hume says, because they present "the lively idea of pleasure" (T. 580), an idea which in turn engages our

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<sup>12</sup> Enquiry, p. 174; see also pp. 173 and 312. In the Treatise, Hume takes on the same project, asking what "distinguishes moral good and evil, *From what principles is it derived, and whence does it arise in the human mind?*" (p. 473). Interestingly, Hume is concerned primarily to establish the principles that govern our judgments of virtue, not to explain the origin of our idea of virtue. This contrasts intriguingly both with Hume's own discussion of causation and with Francis Hutcheson, who seems especially concerned to show that our idea of virtue arises from a moral sense. See Francis Hutcheson, Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue, selections of which can be found in Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant, vol. 2, ed. J. B. Schneewind (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>13</sup> Treatise, pp. 574-75; the same view is advanced on pp. 296, 471, and 499, as well as on p. 261 of the Enquiry.

<sup>14</sup> Combining the first claim with the second, Hume writes "Every quality of the mind is denominated virtuous, which gives pleasure by the mere survey; as every quality, which produces pain, is call'd vicious. This pleasure and this pain may arise from four different sources. For we reap a pleasure from the view of a character, which is naturally fitted to be useful to others, or to the person himself, or which is agreeable to others, or to the person himself" (Treatise, p. 591).

<sup>15</sup> In a footnote in the Enquiry, Hume distinguishes two kinds of benevolence, general and particular. He does this in a way that, on the one hand, distinguishes both from the universal benevolence he ridicules (as nonexistent) in the Treatise (p. 481) and, on the other hand, treats as pretty much equivalent general benevolence, humanity, and sympathy (Enquiry, p. 298n.). In this essay I will treat sympathy and humanity as interchangeable. There are, I think, some subtle and important differences, but not differences that matter to the issues I am exploring here.

approbation, regardless of our connection to the person, thanks to the workings of sympathy.<sup>16</sup>

Putting the three together: the virtues secure our approbation because, on the one hand, virtues are traits that are either useful or agreeable to someone or other, and, on the other hand, we are moved by sympathy to take pleasure in our idea of others' benefit without regard to their connection to us. It is our ability to be engaged by our idea of others' benefit, through the workings of sympathy, that explains why traits that are either useful or agreeable (to others or the possessor) secure our moral approbation and are thus denominated "virtues." The story, in mirror image, goes for vices as well.

### Problems on Two Fronts

As Hume recognizes, and even emphasizes, this account (as it stands) can neither explain nor justify the way we actually make moral judgments. On the one hand, it hasn't the resources needed to explain the pattern our moral judgments in fact exhibit. On the other hand, it fails to identify any standard whatsoever that we might willingly embrace for criticizing the views people happen to hold.

The explanatory problems arise because our sympathetic responses vary in ways that are not reflected in our moral judgments. It is true that sympathy's effect does require abstracting away from, or at least ignoring, one's personal interest; to that extent, the account is able to model our normal discounting of our own interests. Nonetheless, sympathy remains parochial and variable in ways moral judgment is not. Hume (in both the Treatise and the Enquiry) calls attention specifically to two aspects of sympathy that seemingly make it ill-suited to explaining why we make the moral judgments we do.

First, sympathy's effect is variable according to contiguity and vividness of presentation, so that we are more engaged by a character brought nearer, either "by our acquaintance or connexion with the persons, or even by an eloquent recital of the case" (E. 230). Yet we hold that two people with the same character are equally virtuous regardless of their connection to us, even as we are more engaged by one than the other.<sup>17</sup> "A statesman or patriot, who serves our own country in our own time," Hume points out, "has always a more

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<sup>16</sup> See also, for instance, Enquiry, p. 267.

<sup>17</sup> See Treatise, p. 582. As Hume emphasizes, all sentiments "whence-ever they are deriv'd, must vary according to the distance or contiguity of the objects...," so the first is a problem not just for the appeal to sympathy: "if the variation of the sentiment, without a variation of the esteem, be an objection, it must have equal force against every other system, as against that of sympathy" -- assuming, as Hume does, that "[t]he approbation of moral qualities most certainly is not deriv'd from reason, or any comparison of ideas" (*ibid.*, p. 581).

passionate regard paid to him, than one whose beneficial influence operated on distant ages or remote nations;," because the latter "affects us with a less lively sympathy." Still, Hume acknowledges, "[w]e may own the merit to be equally great, though our sentiments are not raised to an equal height, in both cases" (E. 227). Similarly, "[o]ur servant, if diligent and faithful, may excite stronger sentiments of love and kindness than *Marcus Brutus*, as represented in history; but we say not upon that account, that the former character is more laudable than the latter" (T. 582).

Second, sympathy's influence is sensitive to the actual effects of someone's character, so that we are more engaged by a character that actually does benefit people.<sup>18</sup> Yet we hold that two people with the same character are equally virtuous regardless of whether they actually contribute to the welfare of others, even as we are more engaged by one than the other. "Where a person is possess'd of a character, that in its natural tendency is beneficial to society, we esteem him virtuous,... even tho' particular accidents prevent its operation and incapacitate him from being serviceable to his friends and country."<sup>19</sup> We praise equally, for instance, the character of people equally honest, despite knowing that the honesty of one actually benefits people while the honesty of the other does not. In the first case, Hume admits, when "a good disposition is attended with good fortune...it gives a stronger pleasure to the spectator, and is attended with a more lively sympathy. We are more affected by it; and yet," he emphasizes, "we do not say that it is more virtuous, or that we esteem it more" (T. 585).

In short, when it comes to explanation, the fickleness of sympathy (and indeed any sentiment) runs afoul of the stability of moral judgment. *If* our moral judgments were simply a reflection of sympathy, they would fluctuate along the same dimensions in the same way -- but they don't.

As Hume also recognizes, when it comes to justification, the account fails to provide a picture of morality that can enlist our hearts and command our allegiance. It provides no "rule of right" (E. 272) and so conflicts straight away with our conviction that in morality not everyone's view is equally valid. And, in the face of disagreement, the theory (as it stands) allows no nonarbitrary way

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<sup>18</sup>. This is because sympathy interests us in the welfare of others and "[t]he goodness of an end can bestow a merit on such means alone as are compleat, and actually produce the end." This means that "when the cause is compleat, and a good disposition is attended with good fortune, which renders it really beneficial to society, it gives a stronger pleasure to the spectator, and is attended with a more lively sympathy" (*Treatise*, pp. 584-85; see also the footnote in the *Enquiry*, p. 228).

<sup>19</sup>. The same point is made in the *Enquiry*: "[T]he tendencies of actions and characters, not their real accidental consequences, are alone regarded in our moral determinations or general judgements; though in our real feeling or sentiment, we cannot help paying greater regard to one whose station, joined to virtue, renders him really useful to society, than to one, who exerts the social virtues only in good intentions and benevolent affections" (*Enquiry*, p. 228).

to distinguish "a *right* or a *wrong* taste in morals" (T. 547). It provides no good grounds for criticizing either the monkish virtues of celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, and solitude that are "everywhere rejected by men of sense" or the acts of "treachery, inhumanity, cruelty, revenge, bigotry" that do in fact (according to Hume) secure the praise of those who are admirers and followers of the Alcoran.<sup>20</sup>

"It is natural," Hume recognizes, "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" (*Taste*, 229). Yet this natural desire might well seem hopeless on a sentimentalist view. After all, while the determinations of the understanding answer to and can be measured against matters of fact, the deliverances of sentiment have a reference to nothing beyond themselves, represent nothing in the object, and only mark (as Hume puts it) "a certain conformity or relation between the object and the organs or faculties of the mind." If, as Hume thinks, morality is grounded in sentiment, it seems only reasonable that "every individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others."<sup>21</sup>

Hume's single solution to these explanatory and justificatory problems lies not with rejecting sentiment's role, but with identifying the nonarbitrary way we regulate sentiment's influence. He argues both that *we do*, and that *we have good reason to*, adjust the deliverances of sympathy according to a "steady rule of right" that simultaneously explains the relative stability (and intersubjectivity) of moral judgment and serves to characterize "a just sentiment of morals" (*Taste*, 229). Our moral judgments, Hume holds, are usually, and are appropriately, guided not by how we individually feel at any given time, but instead by how we all would feel were we to take up a general point of view.<sup>22</sup> And, it turns out, the general point of view he relies upon and advocates is not, I'll argue, one taken by an Ideal Observer.

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<sup>20</sup>. "Of the Standard of Taste," p. 229. The great uniformity in the *general* sentiments of mankind regarding the value of virtues might seem to reduce the importance of being able to distinguish a right taste from a wrong one. However, as Hume rightly points out, once we turn to particulars, dramatic differences emerge and loom large. The almost universal consensus concerning the value of the virtues masks deep differences concerning which particular character traits constitute the specific virtues. What one person counts as bravery, another sees as foolhardiness, etc.

<sup>21</sup>. "Of the Standard of Taste," p. 230. This goes a bit far, I think, since in the absence of any standard there seems no particular reason to refrain from regulating the sentiments of others to the extent one can.

<sup>22</sup>. Hume's appeals to "points of view," not just in ethics but elsewhere, suggest that he sees a point of view primarily as a way of seeing or thinking of something, and not as the occupying of a particular position in the viewing of something. See, for instance, his appeal to the idea in the *Treatise* at pp. 169, 220, 356, 389, and 440. See also "Of the Standard of Taste," p. 239.

## Explaining Our Practice

The distinctively *moral* sentiments that call for correction come in the first place, Hume says, "only when a character is considered in general, without reference to our particular interest" (T. 472; see also 517). That is, those sentiments arise at all only if we take (what he calls) the "general survey," by leaving aside our particular interest, and allowing sympathy its influence.<sup>23</sup> To take the general survey, however, is not yet to adopt the general point of view. Recognizing that it is not important to seeing how Hume is able to mark the difference between merely having moral sentiments and having the correct ones. Moreover, simply abstracting from our particular interest does not sufficiently eliminate variation in our view. For even as we limit our responses to those prompted by sympathy, we find ourselves differentially affected in a way that we are not in our moral judgments. The moral sentiments we feel as a result of sympathy upon the general survey will vary in intensity as our perspectives change. In fact, Hume observes not only that "all sentiments of blame or praise are variable, according to our situation of nearness or remoteness, with regard to the person blam'd or prais'd," but also that they are variable "according to the present disposition of our mind" (T. 582).

To explain why it is that our judgments do not vary along with these sentiments, Hume notes that we control for the effects of distance, vividness, and fortune, on sympathy and thus on our moral sentiments of approbation and disapprobation, even after we have abstracted from our self-interest. In doing this, we in effect privilege a point of view that both holds constant the distance from, and fixes attention on, the disposition (rather than the actual effects) of the character being judged. And we "confine our view to that narrow circle, in which any person moves, in order to form a judgment of his moral character. When the natural tendency of his passions leads him to be serviceable and useful within his sphere, we approve of his character" (T. 602).<sup>24</sup> Our moral judgments (as opposed to our sentiments) do not fluctuate with changing

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<sup>23</sup> Hume's particular account of (uncorrected) moral sentiments, as having a distinctive qualitative feel and being the product only of sympathy is, I believe, quite implausible. But it plays an important role in his sentimental theory of morality, since any such theory must have an account of which sentiments come into play and which do not. In "A Humean Theory of Moral Judgment" (manuscript), I argue that a Humean, even if not Hume, can provide such an account. Relying on Hume's account of the indirect passions, the suggestion there is that a Humean can make sense of the relevant sentiments as responses-for-reasons (e.g., being angry-because-he-hurt-you) where the cognitive features of the reactions are not at the start moralized, but become so as those responses are themselves approved of by a judge properly situated.

<sup>24</sup> We confine our view in this way, according to Hume, in response to, and in recognition of, the limits nature has placed on the scope of human affections (Treatise, p. 602, and Enquiry, p. 225n.). The role played here by Hume's appeal to the "narrow circle" is in other places played by an appeal to those "who have a connexion" with the person judged (Treatise, pp. 591 and 602). Which group comes within our view depends on the context and character of the person judged.

perspective and differences in the actual effects of the people judged, because the standard we rely on is insensitive to these differences.

The process, of course, sometimes fails to have a fully effective influence on what we actually feel. So when it comes to what we *say*, when it comes to the pronouncements and admonishments we make, we also abstract from how we happen to feel even after our attempts to correct for distortion.<sup>25</sup> "The passions," Hume recognizes, "do not always follow our corrections; but these corrections serve sufficiently to regulate our abstract notions, and are alone regarded, when we pronounce in general concerning the degrees of vice and virtue" (T. 585). By making this last correction and guiding our moral judgments by *what we would feel from a certain mutually accessible point of view*, we establish a stable and common ground for evaluation.

The situation is, on Hume's view, perfectly analogous to all the others where we judge of things discovered by sense -- e.g. taste, smell, beauty, color, size, shape, etc.<sup>26</sup> In each case, we draw the distinction between how things seem and how they are, by appeal to how they would seem from a certain point of view. And we find that our senses (of taste, smell, beauty, color, size, morality) are all subject to variations not "authorized" by, nor reflected in, our judgments. So, for instance, what color something appears as having depends on the ambient lighting as well as our own condition, whereas our judgments of color do not vary in the same way, and our standard of correctness is found in how things would appear to a normal observer in daylight. "[T]he appearance of objects in day-light, to the eye of a man in health, is denominated their true and real color, even while color is allowed to be merely a phantasm of the senses" (Taste, 234). Certainly, we cannot without changing the conditions change how the thing appears, but we can and do, in judging the color of things, "correct" the momentary appearances.

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<sup>25</sup> Hume, I should add, is extraordinarily (and uncharacteristically) careful about respecting the difference between what we feel and what we say. (See pp. 582 and 603 of the Treatise.) His point is not that people are sometimes hypocrites, but that our moral judgments, though grounded in sentiment, are not a mere reflection of how we happen to feel. His account thus allows some slip between occurrent sentiments and occurrent judgments. This distinction raises some interesting complications when it comes to interpreting Hume's arguments against the rationalists. Elizabeth Radcliffe presses these difficulties in "Hume on Motivating Sentiments and Moral Reflection" (manuscript). I try to address them in "Practical Morality and Inert Reason" (manuscript).

<sup>26</sup> See Treatise, p. 603: "The case is here the same as in our judgments concerning external bodies. All objects seem to diminish by their distance: But tho' the appearance of objects to our senses be the original standard, by which we judge of them, yet we do not say, that they actually diminish by the distance; but correcting the appearance by reflexion, arrive at a more constant and establish'd judgment concerning them." Hume makes the same point, with the same example, in the Enquiry, pp. 227-28.

The same holds for features not commonly allowed to be merely a phantasm of the senses: what shape a coin on the table appears to have depends on the angle from which we are viewing it, yet our judgments concerning its shape do not similarly vary, and our standard of correctness is found in how the coin would look to a normal observer from straight-on and not too far away.<sup>27</sup> Again, we cannot without changing the conditions change how the coin appears, but we can and do, in judging the shape of things, "correct" the momentary appearance to take into account the effects of perspective.

When it comes to morality, there is one important difference. Because we can change our position in the relevant way simply through reflection, we can come to have the appropriate sentiments without having to change our external circumstances. This allows moral reflection itself to effect how things appear to us and makes it (frequently) practically efficacious. Nonetheless, when reflection fails to have that effect, we can and do, in judging of people's characters, still "correct" the momentary appearance to take into account the effects of perspective.

Importantly, these "corrections" are not imposed because the momentary appearances are false or inaccurate. Things do, after all, actually cause the sensations or sentiments they do, under the given circumstances. What is subject to evaluation as true or false, correct or incorrect, are the judgments we make based on these experiences. And such evaluations make sense, Hume maintains, only after a standard has been introduced and adopted.

In all these cases, we define a set of standard conditions occupied by a standard observer and then take her reactions (her sense perceptions or sentiments) as setting the standard for ours. This then gives us the resources we use to distinguish, at least in principle, between how things seem and how they are -- they are as they would seem to a suitably qualified person under appropriate conditions. Who counts as qualified, and under what conditions, depends of course on what is being judged. The emergence of some particular standard will reflect both the nature of what is judged and the needs and circumstances of those doing the judging.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>. It is worth emphasizing that the analogy is not just with "secondary properties," but with all properties "discovered" by sense. See Simon Blackburn's discussion of the dangers of stressing an analogy between secondary properties and moral properties in interpreting Hume in "Hume on the Mezzanine Level," *Hume Studies*, vol. 14 (forthcoming, 1993).

<sup>28</sup>. That we have settled, in making ordinary color judgments, on normally sighted human observers in daylight conditions, is no accident, though presumably it could have been otherwise. Were we to evolve so as to be visually sensitive to ultraviolet light, or were we to establish prevailing lighting conditions that allowed (with relative ease) a more articulate range of discriminations, we might well shift the standard we use in regulating our color judgments.

When it comes to morality, Hume holds that virtually all of us are qualified to judge, so long as we take into account only our sympathetic responses to people's characters, control for distortions of perspective, and focus on the tendencies rather than the actual effects of the characters judged on those in the "narrow circle." In taking up that point of view, we need know neither all the actual effects of the person's character nor the usual effects on all. So while an Ideal Observer, being fully informed, and equi-sympathetic, responds to all the actual effects on all, a person taking up the general point of view leaves out of account both those who bear no connection to the person and the actual (as opposed to usual) effects on those who do bear a connection. Extra information (about the actual consequences for all affected by the person) is not only of no help, it is actively put to one side in judging the person's character.<sup>29</sup>

That we do in fact regulate our moral judgments according to how we would feel were we to take up the general point of view explains why those judgments do not vary directly with our occurrent sentiments. And it explains why we approve of particular people's characters without regard to their actual effect. Moreover, it allows Hume to explain how we mark a difference between appearance and reality and thus enables him to construct an account of moral *judgment* that sees those judgments as distinct from, but built upon, moral sentiment.

These all count as the explanatory advantages Hume secures by introducing the general point of view into his sentimental account of morality. According to Hume, though, the specific features of the general point of view answer also to the reasons we have for establishing and respecting it, and, in the process, they work to meet Hume's justificatory goals as well.

### Justifying Our Practice

If Hume is right, if we have good reason to regulate our moral judgments according to how we would feel were we to take up the general point of view, we will be well positioned to justify our approving of the characters we do (assuming we approve of them in the way Hume says we do). At the same time, it would mean we have a *nonarbitrary* rule of right that we might properly endorse as a standard of taste in moral matters.

Of course, for anyone advancing an account like Hume's, the justification for adopting particular conditions and responses as standard cannot be that those conditions are conducive to veridical perception. In the absence of the standard, there is no sense to be given to the claim that the perceptions are veridical.

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<sup>29</sup>. "We know, that an alteration of fortune may render the benevolent disposition entirely impotent," but this reduces not at all our regard for the benevolent person, since "we separate, as much as possible, the fortune from the disposition" in reflecting on the value of the benevolent character (Treatise, p. 585).

There must, therefore, be some other reason(s) for adopting the particular conditions and responses as standard.

What reasons are there for adopting the general point of view Hume describes, as the standard for moral judgment? At the core of Hume's answer is his conviction that adopting the general point of view solves a problem we share. The problem that threatens is nicely captured in the children's story The Phantom Tollbooth. Milo, the young hero of the story, comes upon a grand vista only to find himself face to foot with a small boy about his own age who is standing in midair.

"How do you manage to stand up there?" asked Milo, for this was the subject which most interested him.

"I was about to ask you a similar question," answered the boy, "for you must be much older than you look to be standing on the ground."

"What do you mean?" Milo asked.

"Well," said the boy, "in my family everyone is born in the air, with his head at exactly the height it's going to be when he's an adult, and then we all grow toward the ground. When we're fully grown up or, as you can see, grown down, our feet finally touch. Of course, there are a few of us whose feet never reach the ground no matter how old we get, but I suppose it's the same in every family."..."You certainly must be very old to have reached the ground already."

"Oh no," said Milo seriously. "In my family we all start on the ground and grow up, and we never know how far until we actually get there."

"What a silly system." The boy laughed. "Then your head keeps changing its height and you always see things in a different way? Why, when you're fifteen things won't look at all the way they did when you were ten, and at twenty everything will change again."

"I suppose so," replied Milo, for he had never really thought about the matter.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>. Norton Juster, The Phantom Tollbooth (New York: Random House, 1961), pp. 104-5.

Hume, in contrast, has clearly thought about the matter, although his concern is as much with all the variations we might find among people as with the variations we might each face within ourselves as our perspectives change. "Besides, that we ourselves often change our situation..." he writes, "we every day often meet with persons, who are in a different situation from ourselves, and who could never converse with us on any reasonable terms, were we to remain constantly in that situation and point of view, which is peculiar to us."<sup>31</sup> Hume worries, in effect, that if we each judged of others without taking into account the effects of perspective, we would be faced constantly by the frustrations that would come of each speaking from her own point of view. As Hume sets out the problem, two distinct considerations emerge, one having to do with our ability even to communicate with one another, the other having to do with our communicating in a way that might resolve conflict.

Hume emphasizes that we need some fixed standard or other simply to be able to talk intelligibly to one another about our evaluations: "[T]were impossible we could ever make use of language, or communicate our sentiments to one another, did we not correct the momentary appearances of things, and overlook our present situation" (T. 582; see also E. 228). We cannot get a public language without a shared standard of some sort.<sup>32</sup> So to the extent we need to communicate about our moral sentiments, we need to establish some standard that we might share.

This point about the need for a shared standard, however, holds for talk about self-interest, and pain, no less than it does for color, shape, and morality. As a result, reflecting on our need to communicate does not yet tell us what particular point of view we ought to privilege as standard, and it certainly does not justify the really quite specific general point of view which Hume thinks regulates our moral thought. Any number of standards would be sufficient to make us intelligible to each other -- even one that allowed us simply to talk the language of idiosyncratic and variable sympathy. Such a standard would

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<sup>31</sup>. Treatise, p. 603. Virtually the same sentence occurs on p. 228 of the Enquiry.

<sup>32</sup>. Even to communicate concerning how things seem, we need a shared standard for distinguishing how things seem from how they are. For instance, for me to understand your report that a box looks red, I need to know what it is for something to look red. And to do this, we need to have picked out a class of things we together denominate "red" and to have privileged certain conditions as setting the standard. We can then (but only then) understand what it is to look red as looking the way these things do to an appropriate observer under those standard conditions. The same shared practice allows us to communicate successfully under nonstandard conditions and without knowing the particular situation we each face as long as we both can figure out how the things we do see would look under standard conditions. We introduce a standard for distinguishing how things are from how they seem, and then "correct" how they seem in making judgments about how they are, in order to communicate effectively. And it is against that background that we can say that a box that is red will look brown under certain light, or that a coin that is circular will look elliptical when viewed from a certain angle.

parallel, in its sensitivity to the peculiar situation of the speaker, the standard we use to make talk of self-interest intelligible to one another. And there is clearly an intelligible language of self-interest -- a language we can and do use to describe the tendency of people's characters to our own benefit. Thus, the concern for intelligibility alone will not be sufficient to justify adoption of a *general* point of view that abstracts away from, or controls for, our particular situations.

We need to ask: What, over and above the need to speak intelligibly to one another, would justify our adopting the particular standard set by the general point of view? Why should we abstract from our own interests and our particular situations, focus on the tendencies of a person's character rather than its actual effects, and limit our view to those with whom the person has some connection? Hume's answer turns on recognizing the purposes that motivate the introduction of moral thinking in the first place.

As Hume would have it, introducing moral thought and the general point of view that goes with it, is absolutely crucial to a harmonious social life. Without it, he says, we would be faced constantly by those "contradictions" that come of each speaking from her own point of view. "In order, therefore, to prevent those continual *contradictions*, and arrive at a more *stable* judgment of things," Hume suggests, "we fix on some *steady* and *general* points of view; and always, in our thoughts, place ourselves in them, whatever may be our present situation."<sup>33</sup> Hume thinks that "[w]e are quickly oblig'd to forget our own interest in our judgments of this kind, by reason of the perpetual contradictions, we meet with in society and conversation, from persons that are not plac'd in the same situation, and have not the same interest with ourselves."<sup>34</sup> The right point of view, whatever it is, must be one that works to eliminate or at least mitigate effectively the continual contradictions that come from each speaking, acting, and agitating from her own point of view (as when she speaks either the language of self-interest or the language of uncorrected sympathy).

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<sup>33</sup>. *Treatise*, pp. 581-82. Hume talks of general points of view here, rather than of the general point of view, because the problem he is pointing to is not unique to morality but arises "with regard both to persons and things." In different areas, different points of view will be relied upon to resolve the "contradictions" that inevitably emerge. In any case, "[w]hen we form our judgments of persons, merely from the tendency of their characters to our own benefit, or to that of our friends, we find so many contradictions to our sentiments in society and conversation, and such an uncertainty from the incessant changes of our situation, that we seek some other standard of merit and demerit, which may not admit of so great variation" (*Treatise*, p. 583, see also pp. 228 and 272 of the *Enquiry*).

<sup>34</sup>. *Treatise*, p. 602. Hume observes that "every particular person's pleasure and interest being different, 'tis impossible men cou'd ever agree in their sentiments and judgments, unless they chose some common point of view, from which they might survey their object, and which might cause it to appear the same to all of them" (*ibid.*, p. 591). Hume makes the same point on p. 272 of the *Enquiry*.

The contradictions that threaten, of course, are not propositional contradictions.<sup>35</sup> There is obviously no (literal) contradiction in your saying, for instance, that you like someone, and my saying that I do not, or in your denominating my ally your enemy. Still, although our sentences do not contradict, our attitudes conflict. And it is such conflict Hume is focusing on when he highlights the threat of continual contradictions that come from each living and leading her life from her own point of view.

Exactly why these conflicts in attitude are a threat, however, is unclear. Why do they raise a *problem*? We can and do, after all, live with conflicts or at least differences in attitude all the time and we sometimes benefit from them -- as when your preference for white meat complements my own for dark. But, then, there are other circumstances and contexts in which the differences are patently not complementary. In these cases, depending on the strength and "direction" of the attitudes, the conflicts can be serious and unmistakably problematic. Hume's sense of what is problematic and why is found, I think, in recognizing that our approbation and disapprobation for people's characters plays a distinctive and profound role not simply in how we treat them (when we have the opportunity) but also in shaping the lives we try, and try to get others, to live. Because our sentiments of approval and disapproval take within their scope not simply isolated actions, but "durable principles of the mind," they are tied quite directly and reliably to characteristics that shape in fundamental ways how people live their lives (T. 575). To the extent these sentiments prove unstable, unpredictable, and idiosyncratic, and to the extent they conflict, so to will the plans and projects we and others undertake at their prodding.

Hume's worry is basically a civilized version of Hobbes's more nightmarish vision of unregulated self-interest leading to destructive interaction.<sup>36</sup> The civilizing effect comes with the mollifications provided by sympathy's softening of self-interest. Yet the structure of conflict remains unless and until some method of adjudication, regulation, and coordination is put into place. It may be a kinder, gentler, conflict than Hobbes envisioned, but no less real, nor essentially different. Hobbes, of course, thought that only an absolute ruler, backed by absolute power, could eliminate the conflict he feared. Hume, in contrast, believes that a less draconian solution (to an admittedly less drastic problem) is ready to hand and is found in our ability to introduce, adopt, and pass on, a shared standard for regulating our evaluations.

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<sup>35</sup>. At least not at this point. Propositional contradictions will arise from each speaking from her own point of view once a regimented moral language is introduced -- for then when you say someone is virtuous and I say she is not, we will be contradicting each other. But the regimentation that makes sense of the propositional contradictions comes only with the introduction of the general point of view, so the threat of such contradictions cannot be the grounds we have for introducing the regimentation.

<sup>36</sup>. See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), esp. ch. 13.

To serve this purpose the standard, whatever its particular features, must not only be salient and mutually accessible, but must also somehow lead our sentiments to concur in their deliverances. Otherwise it could hardly regulate our thoughts and decisions in a way that stably coordinates choice. This means we have reason, first of all, to embrace a standard that engages our affective nature while it leaves to one side all those sentiments that are rare, or weak, or idiosyncratic in their recommendations. A number of sentiments are virtually universal and undoubtedly powerful in their influence. Ambition and avidity, for instance, both satisfy these requirements -- yet each leads to strife, not conciliation, when deployed by different people. Sympathy alone holds the promise of being not only sufficiently widespread, and suitably strong, but also acceptably univocal in its conclusions.

Uncorrected sympathy, though, cannot deliver on the promise, since it varies in ways that introduce conflict. Our sympathetic responses, only a bit less than our self-interested ones, reflect our own peculiar situation and lead us to be at odds with one another.<sup>37</sup> This means we have reason, second of all, to embrace a standard that controls for sympathy's variations without losing sympathy's appeal. The only way to do this, Hume argues, is to introduce a mutually accessible and stable perspective, a general point of view, from which we can all evaluate the world.

It will not do to settle simply on the point of view of our sympathetic selves responding proportionately to the perceived actual effects on everyone, even though it would control for variations due to our focusing on different people. Although individually accessible, that point of view is neither sufficiently stable nor acceptably univocal in its deliverances. Our predictably variable and often conflicting perceptions will lead to a lack of concurrence. If we each left aside our own interests and focused on (what we took to be) the character's effects on everyone, we would go some way toward resolving some of our differences, but neither far enough nor as far as we might.

Controlling for the variations, and correcting the perceptions, by settling instead on the Ideal Observer's point of view, the point of view of an unbiased, equi-sympathetic person responding with full knowledge to the actual effects on everyone of some particular person's character, will not do, either. Although stable, and presumably univocal in its deliverances, that point of view is not sufficiently accessible. *We* have neither the psychological equipment nor the knowledge required. Our estimates of the Ideal Observer's view of the effects of someone's character will differ in exactly the way our judgments of the actual

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<sup>37</sup>. My sympathetic engagement with my own child's welfare, for instance, may well lead me to object to your treatment of him, even as that treatment by you is prompted by your own sympathetic engagement with your child's welfare. The conflict that emerges, though it reflects our own peculiar positions, in no way depends upon either of us being moved in this instance by self-interest.

effects differ. As a result, an Ideal Observer sets an inappropriate standard, not simply because we cannot take up her position ourselves (though we cannot), but because we cannot begin to anticipate what her reactions might be. Ignorant as we all inevitably are of the actual, subtle, and long-term effects of each person's character on everyone who might be affected, even earnest attempts by all to determine how an Ideal Observer would respond would leave us without a common standard around which to coordinate our actions and evaluations. No longer each speaking from her own peculiar point of view, each would still be speaking from her own peculiar take on a point of view she cannot possibly occupy. And this means an Ideal Observer cannot play the role that needs to be filled.

In order to establish a standard that is accessible, stable, and sufficiently univocal, we need a point of view that relies on information that is generally accessible to all. This is accomplished, in part, by focusing on a character's effects on those who fall within a salient and readily identifiable group: "[I]n judging of characters," Hume argues, "the only interest or pleasure, which appears the same to every spectator, is that of the person himself, whose character is examin'd; or that of persons, who have a connexion with him."<sup>38</sup> In this way we eliminate not only the variations due to our own relative proximity to the person judged, but also those due to esoteric information about the effects (for instance) on distant lands or future people.

Even here, because people have differential access to the actual effects of a particular person's character on the "narrow circle," we need to focus on the effects the character in question would *normally* have on the relevant people, not on the effects it does happen to have. This leads to a focus on the character type rather than on its particular instance, and it recommends considering that type's effects under standardized conditions (which might well differ from those that are statistically most frequent). Just as we correct for the distortions of perspective in order to reach a common ground, "[f]or a like reason," Hume suggests, "the tendencies of actions and characters, not their real accidental consequences, are alone regarded in our moral determinations..." (E. 228n.). In this way we eliminate the variations due to our having different information about the actual effects of particular people's characters.

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<sup>38</sup>. *Treatise*, p. 591. Which group is relevant will of course depend both on which type of character is being evaluated and on what information is mutually accessible. Hume notes, for instance, that the character traits of statesmen, given their role, must often be evaluated with an eye to the welfare of whole countries (though only their own), even as he emphasizes that the relevant group will usually be those within a "narrow circle" (*Enquiry*, p. 225n.). Annette Baier suggests that the process of correction is one of selectively sympathizing either with those who are close (when we are distant) or with those who are distant (if we are close). I think, in contrast, that the object of our sympathy is supposed to be always the same group of people -- "the person himself, whose character is examin'd" and those "who have a connexion with him" (*Treatise*, p. 591). See Annette Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 181-82.

Thus, at least according to Hume, "[t]he only point of view, in which our sentiments concur with those of others, is, when we consider the tendency of any passion to the advantage or harm of those, who have any immediate connexion or intercourse with the person possess'd of it" (T. 602-3). And because we have compelling reason to seek a common ground with our fellows, we have reason to adopt that particular point of view as setting the standard for our moral judgment. According to Hume, "reason requires such an impartial conduct," because reason informs us that we will be unable to achieve a suitable consensus in evaluation without establishing a shared standard at least for our judgments, and sentiment makes attractive the end of achieving such a consensus. Reason here plays a role as "a general calm determination of the passions, founded on some distant view or reflexion" (T. 583).

So to the question: Why should we, when evaluating a particular person, focus on the usual effects of a character like hers on those typically affected by people with such a character? -- Hume answers: Because only then will we have found a standard of evaluation we can use to resolve the conflicts that would otherwise inevitably arise. And to the question: Why shouldn't we, when evaluating a particular person, adopt the point of view of an Ideal Observer as our standard? -- Hume answers: Because adopting that standard would not resolve the conflicts.

#### Taking the General Point of View

The most detailed account Hume offers of a standard of taste occurs in the context of discussing the qualifications of a "true judge in the finer arts," not in morality. The distinctive concerns that shape aesthetic judgments (and their relative distance from practical affairs) do in various ways influence the particular features of the standard Hume describes, especially by putting a premium on (what he calls) delicacy of taste. To the extent the standards differ, the differences reflect the roles the standards are to play in social life. Nonetheless, the general point of view, as it describes a standard of taste in morals, parallels to an extraordinary degree the point of view of a qualified critic.

As Hume describes the qualifications that serve to set the standard of taste in fine arts, the first he emphasizes is that a qualified judge must possess a *delicate* taste. Such a judge must be able to discern those qualities that "are fitted by nature" to produce sentiments of beauty or deformity (*Taste*, 235).

To make clear what he has in mind, Hume retells a story from Don Quixote. In the story, two brothers, asked to give their opinion of some wine, each compliment it, but with reservations. The first detects a small taste of leather, the second a taste of iron. Hume reports that they were ridiculed by others for their reservations until, at the bottom of the hogshead, was discovered "an old key with a leathern thong tied to it." The key confirmed their superior

sensibility. Yet if the hogshead had never been emptied, and the key never discovered, their sensibility would still have been superior to that of their fellows. In aesthetics and morals as well, the general rules systematizing our (collective) taste under appropriately conducive conditions, play the role of the key, in being that to which a delicate taste is sensitive. "To produce these general rules or avowed patterns of composition, is like finding the key with the leathern thong..." But even when the rules are not produced, "the different degrees of taste would still have subsisted, and the judgment of one man been preferable to that of another..." (*Taste*, 235-36).

Although people differ naturally when it comes to their sensibilities, being a fine judge of beauty, or morals, depends upon more than a gift of nature. Practice makes a significant difference to one's ability to detect relevant features of what one is judging, as does experience in drawing comparisons between different kinds and degrees of beauty. "By comparison alone we fix the epithets of praise or blame, and learn how to assign the due degree of each" (*Taste*, 238).

In addition, though, a judge, in order to be qualified, must be free from prejudice, and this entails being able to take up "a certain point of view" -- that of the intended audience of the production. "A person influenced by prejudice complies not with this condition, but obstinately maintains his natural position, without placing himself in that point of view which the performance supposes" (*Taste*, 239). In morals, on Hume's view, the performance is the character, and the intended audience is the person himself and those either within the "narrow circle" or who have a "connexion with him." And freedom from prejudice's influence is a matter of putting aside the concerns that reflect our natural position and focusing instead on those who bear a connection with the person judged.

Finally, a qualified judge is one who is concerned with and able to judge just how well-suited something is for serving its purpose. "Every work of art has also a certain end or purpose for which it is calculated; and is to be deemed more or less perfect, as it is more or less fitted to attain this end" (*Taste*, 240). The same is true of the virtues, according to Hume, in that their value is to be judged not by their actual effects but by their tendencies, by whether they are well-suited to the serving of certain purposes. Justice, for instance, counts as a virtue because it is well-suited to solving the problems that arise in circumstances of moderate scarcity, limited benevolence, and insecure possession. Even when (mis)fortune intervenes to undermine, in particular cases, the usefulness of a just person's character, that person still earns our approbation. "Virtue in rags," Hume observes, "is still virtue; and the love, which it procures, attends a man into a dungeon or desert, where the virtue can no longer be exerted in action, and is lost to all the world" (T. 584). Similarly, a person's vicious character is neither redeemed nor vindicated by its happening to have salutary effects. The value of a character turns not on whether it actually benefits the person himself

or those with whom he has some connection, but on whether it would, under standard conditions, benefit them.<sup>39</sup>

A true judge in matters of taste, whether moral or aesthetic, is thus fairly described quite generally as one who enjoys "strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice..." (*Taste*, 241). What is involved in having these qualities will of course vary according to what is being judged. A qualified judge of music may have no claim to a taste in food or sculpture, let alone in people. And a fine judge of character may lack the skills and experience required to evaluate art. Precisely who qualifies in any particular area is also, not surprisingly, often an issue. "Whether any particular person be endowed with good sense and a delicate imagination, free from prejudice, may often be the subject of dispute, and be liable to great discussion and inquiry" (*Taste*, 242). While few have the qualifications, when it comes to fine art, the fact that someone has them is often strikingly clear -- those who have them "are easily to be distinguished in society by the soundness of their understanding, and the superiority of their faculties above the rest of mankind" (*Taste*, 243). Perhaps less easy to distinguish, but also notably less rare, are the cases when someone has the qualifications for judging in moral matters. Here a rarefied delicacy in taste matters less than an effective ability to put aside one's own interest and a capacity for imagining how the character in question would normally affect the relevant group of people.

No doubt people differ in their sensitivity to the actual characters of those they judge, and, as a result, may make mistakes. But these mistakes of fact impugn only their judgment of the particular person, not their judgment of the kind of character they suppose that person to have. Who counts as a good judge of this person or that, will depend on the delicacy of taste they show in determining the person's real character. Yet who counts as a judge of whether one kind of trait or another is a virtue, will be a matter of public discussion and not the special province of an elite.

No doubt, too, people differ both in their willingness, and in their ability, to put aside their own interests and imagine how the character in question would normally affect those in the "narrow circle." But Hume is convinced, reasonably, that most people, in most circumstances, have the requisite abilities and also have reason to be willing to exercise them.

Hume is not, however, committed to holding that we always have reason actually to take up the general point of view, even as we have reason to use that point of view in regulating our moral responses. In some cases, at least, remaining in one's position of partiality, say with respect to one's family and

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<sup>39</sup>. In "Hume and the Bauhaus Theory of Ethics" (manuscript), I argue that Hume's functionalist account of morality in general, and the virtues in particular, accommodates the importance of utility while setting him apart from utilitarians in a distinctive and fundamental way.

friends or oneself, is appropriate and would itself secure the approval of those who do occupy the general point of view. It is no part of Hume's theory that we should always take up the general point of view in facing the world; nor does he hold that we should always act on those sentiments we would feel were we to take that point of view. Nonetheless, it is central to his account that we often do, and in any case should, act on those motives and with those sentiments that we would approve of from the general point of view. And his argument for thinking that this point of view sets the appropriate standard relies on emphasizing the interests we each have in establishing and maintaining a standard of moral judgment that is both stable and mutually accessible.

#### Pressing the Case for the Ideal Observer

In obvious and unsurprising ways, Hume's argument for introducing the general point of view, and for privileging a certain version of it, parallels the one he offers for introducing the rules of justice, especially in its appeal to mutual interest.<sup>40</sup> The guiding idea is that, given our nature and circumstances, we each have reason to regulate our moral responses to the world by a mutually accessible and steady "rule of right" that might serve to settle the conflicts that otherwise would inevitably arise.

It is worth considering, if only briefly, two kinds of problems the resulting view faces. On the one hand, by appealing to the mutual interest of those who rely on the standard, the theory invites, and seems to countenance, an unacceptable chauvinism. On the other hand, by insisting that the standard reflect our nature and circumstances, the theory risks, and seems (in any case) unable to rule out, a repugnant relativism. In both cases, it might seem as if the general point of view (as Hume describes it) faces problems that can be adequately resolved only if we adopt instead an Ideal Observer's responses as the standard for our own. The suggestion will be that reflection on the general point of view should lead us to overthrow it in favor of the Ideal Observer's. I shall take the worries in order.

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<sup>40</sup>. See *Treatise*, pp. 477-513, and *Enquiry*, pp. 183-204, 303-311. J. L. Mackie argues that a proper appreciation of the parallels undermines Hume's distinction between the artificial and natural virtues. But I think this is a mistake. Within this account of morality, it is still possible and important to mark the difference between artificial and natural virtues in just the way Hume does - that is, by noticing the difference between those character traits that one can specify and approve of only within the context of a set of conventions (e.g., justice) and those that one can specify and approve of absent an appeal to convention (e.g., benevolence). The natural virtues naturally engage approbation in a way that artificial virtues do not, although the natural virtues no less than the artificial ones count, in the end, as virtues only because they are properly approved of within a conventional system of approbation. See J. L. Mackie, *Hume's Moral Theory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 123. For an account that is more sensitive than Mackie's to the sort of artifice involved in moral judgment, see Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments*.

If the standard of moral judgment is motivated and limited by mutual interest, won't the result be a standard that reproduces the boundaries of those interests? Won't this kind of argument inappropriately endorse a standard that demands in the name of morality only what serves the interests of those who have adopted the standard? This seems an easy recipe for a morality that merely ratifies the power structures that are in place without proper regard for the interests and welfare of the disenfranchised.

In addressing this worry, it is important to recognize the difference between (for instance) the circumstances of justice, shaped as they are by our limited benevolence and selfish concerns, and the circumstances of morality (as we might call them), which are shaped by our sympathetic nature. While the argument for introducing the general point of view parallels that for introducing the rules of justice in its appeal to mutual interest, the interests at issue differ crucially. The rules of justice, on Hume's view, are meant to answer to our (relatively confined) self-interest, while the standard of moral judgment is meant to answer in no small part to those interests we have in the welfare of others (without regard to their relation to us) thanks to our sympathetic nature. Because we are capable of sympathy, and susceptible to its effects, we find ourselves with an interest not just in how well we do, but in what we ourselves and others do with themselves and to others. This difference brings to morality a breadth of scope and a generosity of concern not matched by, nor reflected in, the "cautious, jealous virtue of justice" (E. 184).

Nonetheless, the scope of morality will, on Hume's theory, remain bounded by the actual reach of our sympathetic responses. Exactly what that reach is, we might not be able to say, but that it falls short of engaging us equally in the welfare of all sentient beings is clear. And this, a defender of the Ideal Observer might argue, introduces an unacceptably arbitrary, blatantly chauvinistic, element into the standard Hume advocates. If, as Hume argues, we need to adopt some standard for our moral evaluations, isn't the only nonarbitrary standard the one set by an Ideal Observer who takes into account all equally without bias or myopia?

Hume never directly confronts this worry. Nevertheless, the structure of his theory recommends a response. It begins by noting that a standard is arbitrary only if it makes demands we have no reason to accept. So which standard is arbitrary, and which not, depends on what reasons we might have for adopting one or the other. We all do have good reason, Hume argues, to establish together a stable and mutually accessible standard we might appeal to in resolving our differences. The standard set by the general point of view will not, of course, successfully resolve all disagreements. Yet it will do better, Hume thinks, than any of its competitors<sup>41</sup> -- largely because we can each, often

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<sup>41</sup>. Whether embracing the general point of view, and not the Ideal Observer's, as the standard really does offer the best available solution is, certainly, open to debate. The Ideal Observer's

enough, actually take up the point of view and be moved by the sentiments we then feel. To recommend instead a standard that is inaccessible, in the name of the interests of those we take no interest in, is to advance a standard that will seem arbitrary in its demands, a standard we will reasonably see no reason to adopt. Moreover, were we, for instance, completely unmoved by the plight of cows, a standard -- even if accessible -- that insisted on giving weight to their welfare, would be a standard that could win neither our hearts nor our allegiance.<sup>42</sup> What chauvinism remains will be, on Hume's view, neither arbitrary nor surmountable. Whether it is nevertheless objectionable, is a question I shall address after raising the worries posed by the threat of relativism.

Relativism threatens in two ways. First, it seems that different people each taking up the general point of view might differ in their evaluations, either because they have different views of what the usual effects are on the "narrow circle," or because they simply differ in their affective natures.<sup>43</sup> This means we might be left with irreconcilable differences even at the point when people succeed in taking up the point of view that supposedly sets the standard for our judgments. Second, because human nature might have been other than it is, or our circumstances other than they are, Hume is committed to the possibility that his argument for the general point of view might instead (under those conditions) have recommended a different standard that would certify different and incompatible evaluations.

Which of the incompatible responses (in the first case) or standards (in the second case) is right? Hume apparently has no answer whatsoever -- unless he allows an appeal to an Ideal Observer's responses at this point. Were we to accept the general point of view as setting the standard, what the threat of relativism shows is that a second level of conflict in evaluation could easily

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inaccessibility does not automatically settle the issue, since it is possible, at least, that each of us doing the best we can to estimate the Ideal Observer's response might in itself be enough to resolve our conflicts. Still, Hume is on reasonably solid ground, I think, since our different perceptions of the actual effects of someone's character on everyone are virtually certain to find an echo in our estimates of what the Ideal Observer would perceive.

<sup>42</sup>. For someone already convinced of the value, say, of pleasure no matter whose, any standard for moral judgment that stops short of taking into account the pleasures and pains of all sentient beings will no doubt seem a standard we have reason to move beyond. The burden, though, falls on that person to explain the value of pleasure (or whatever). And Hume will press the issue. We are, as a matter of fact, concerned with the welfare of those with whom we can sympathize, and we have reason to regulate our judgments by how we would feel from the general point of view, but what reason is there for us to care, in the absence of sympathy or some other sentiment, about those who fall beyond the pale?

<sup>43</sup>. Or they might differ because they take as relevant different "narrow circles," though presumably this difference is fairly and easily handled within the theory as a case of the two not both succeeding in taking the general point of view.

emerge. Those new conflicts would be resolvable, some might argue, only if we embraced the Ideal Observer as the final arbitrator.

We need not, here, rely on an Ideal Observer who responds to all the actual consequences of someone's character. Hoping to avoid the problems faced by such an inaccessible standard, we might instead appeal to an Ideal Observer who responds to character types rather than their specific instances.<sup>44</sup> Still, if the observer is, in responding to the various character types, supposed to respond equi-sympathetically to all affected by that type of character, the observer continues to suffer the problem of setting an inaccessible, and for that reason unacceptable, standard. We do not and cannot know, of a given character type, what its actual effects on everyone are, since, to know this, we would have to know what the actual effects are of each of its instances. Suppose, then, that the observer is instead understood as responding sympathetically only to the standard effects of a character type on the "narrow circle" under standard conditions. Such an observer might well serve as a mutually accessible and suitably stable standard. Yet *this* observer is just one occupying the general point of view that Hume recommends. And such an observer is in no interesting way Ideal, since she need possess neither extravagant epistemic powers nor a superhuman engagement with the affairs of all. Moreover, hers is a point of view that we all might, and often enough do, occupy.

In any case, we have ended up just where we started, with no reply yet to the threat of relativism. Impressed by the threat, a defender of the Ideal Observer might insist that the pressures of accessibility that bring the observer down to earth must in the end be resisted if we are to secure a single fixed standard we might use in responding to the threat. So let us turn back to that threat.

Hume does not take seriously the possibility that two people who *succeed* in taking the general point of view would differ in their responses in any significant way. Given the specific characterization of the general point of view, that possibility does not really pose a threat. It might be that one person's heart beats more warmly in the cause of virtue than another's, but as they leave aside their own interests, and control for the distortions of perspective, they will inevitably approve of the same characters to roughly the same degree. Because the conditions imposed by the general point of view both fix attention on a common object (the usual effect of a person's character on the "narrow circle") and limit the basis of our response to sympathy, to succeed in taking up that point of view is to leave aside everything that might cause a difference in response. Once we take up the general point of view, and focus on the tendency

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<sup>44</sup> Simon Blackburn has pressed this suggestion in conversation. This would mark a significant divergence from standard Ideal Observer theories, since on those the proper standard is set by an observer *responding to all the actual consequences* of someone's character, rather than to that character type's consequences. Suppose, though, that the change is made in the name of avoiding unnecessary inaccessibility.

of the character in question, only our humanity comes into play, and that, Hume emphasizes, is the same in everyone.<sup>45</sup> As long as the distinctions are drawn in the same way, thanks to the workings of our shared capacity for sympathy, what differences there are in the strengths of the sentiments felt will not affect the judgments we make. Although one person, for instance, might feel a stronger sentiment of approbation toward benevolence than does another, they will both approve of benevolence over indifference over malice. And it is this common verdict, induced by our shared humanity when it is subject to the corrections imposed by the general point of view, that will serve as the standard for our judgments.

Hume does consider and take seriously, though, the possibility of "a creature, absolutely malicious and spiteful" who would actively disapprove of those whose characters had a tendency to the good of mankind.<sup>46</sup> Such a creature, because of his "inverted" sentiments and lack of sympathy, would of course be unable to take up the general point of view. Yet we can imagine a group of such beings coming together and establishing for their use a standard of evaluation that reflects their malicious dispositions. It would not be the general point of view (since sympathy would not be the guiding sentiment), but it would be a point of view they might each have reason to adopt and maintain. They might even offer in its defense just the arguments Hume marshals for the general point of view. What grounds could Hume possibly have for endorsing the standard set by his general point of view as against theirs?

Hume has a straightforward answer. Which standard is better depends on whether the adoption of one rather than the other has a greater tendency to benefit those within the "narrow circle." It may be, of course, that one is better in some circumstances and another in others. Hume might then have no grounds for criticizing their adoption of the malicious standard -- as long as its adoption by them, in their circumstances, does not have a tendency to hurt those "who have any immediate connexion or intercourse" with them (T. 602-3). It is conceivable, though only barely so, that in their circumstances, given their malicious nature, the standard that reflects their disposition would properly secure our approval. Their practice might, that is, be approvable from the general point of view. More likely, though, would be the discovery that their standard deserves our condemnation precisely because its adoption by them would tend to undermine the welfare of those affected. In any case, given our

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<sup>45</sup> "One man's ambition is not another's ambition: But the humanity of one man," Hume insists, "is the humanity of every one; and the same object touches this passion in all human creatures" (*Enquiry*, p. 273).

<sup>46</sup> *Enquiry*, p. 226. However, he thinks that "[a]bsolute, unprovoked, disinterested malice has never perhaps place in any human breast" (*ibid.*, p. 227). And he maintains that "none are so entirely indifferent to the interest of their fellow-creatures, as to perceive no distinctions of moral good and evil..." (*ibid.*, p. 225).

circumstances, and our nature, there is little question that regulating our judgments by appeal to the general point of view has a tendency to benefit us all. And it is this feature of the general point of view that makes it better than the alternatives -- better than the malicious standard because its adoption has a tendency to help rather than hurt, and better than the standard set by the Ideal Observer, given our circumstances and limitations, because its adoption is more likely to help more.

Of course, our having adopted the standard set by the general point of view will not, in each and every case, prove beneficial either to the individual who relies on that standard or to others. In particular cases, we might well wish that the voice of conscience could be silenced (temporarily). And we might wish this not for selfish motives but out of a regard for the welfare of those affected in the instance by scruples. Nonetheless, because the character of one who relies on the standard has a tendency to benefit both "the person himself" and "persons, who have a connexion with him" (T. 591), it will earn our approval despite our recognizing that sometimes fortune will frustrate its (usual) good effects. As Hume argues, "not only virtue must be approv'd of, but also the sense of virtue: And not only that sense, but also the principles from whence it is derived" (T. 619).

Hume can offer, in effect, the same answer to those who worry that his theory, and our practice, are objectionably chauvinistic. Here the concern is that the natural limits of our sympathy impose an unjustified boundary on the interests that are given weight in our moral reflections. Whether the boundary is unjustified turns, on Hume's view, on whether we would approve of extending it, were we to take up the general point of view. Reflection on what we would approve of from that point of view (were we to leave aside our selfish interests) might well succeed in leading us to give weight to the interests we otherwise ignore, but the shift involved will not (and indeed cannot) extend beyond the natural limits of our sympathy -- for it will be sympathy itself that prompts the change. If, as Hume thinks, no standard less susceptible to the chauvinism of our sentiments could serve as well the purposes that motivate the introduction of a standard of moral judgment, then whatever chauvinism remains cannot be objectionable.

As Hume sees it, given our circumstances and nature, we have reason to regulate our moral evaluations, and to do this effectively we must recognize our limitations, leave to one side our own interests, and then appeal only to what we all can know -- the tendency of characters of that kind to benefit or harm those "who have any immediate connexion or intercourse with the person possess'd of it." We must, that is, regulate our responses by how we would feel were we to take up the general point of view. Only then will we succeed in establishing a suitably stable standard *accessible to all of us*. "And tho' such interests and pleasures touch us more faintly than our own, yet being more constant and universal, they counter-balance the latter even in practice and are alone

admitted in speculation as the standard of virtue and morality" (T. 591). By adopting together this point of view as our shared standard, we will have formed "in a manner, the *party* of human-kind against vice or disorder, its common enemy" (E. 275). And that is a party we all have reason to join.