

## KEY IDEAS OF HUME'S *ENQUIRY CONCERNING THE PRINCIPLES OF MORALS*

[Ed. L.A.Selby-Bigge, revised P.H.Nidditch, *Oxford University Press*]

Item	Idea	Sect
1.	The existence of moral standards is an obvious fact which only a fool will deny	133
2.	More interesting is whether they are based on <b>reason</b> (as moderns prefer) or <b>sentiment</b> (ancients)	134
3.	Reason makes morals the same for all rational beings, but sentiment makes them relative to humanity	134
4.	It is claimed that morals are rational, since they involve argument, evidence and <b>proof</b>	135
5.	Defenders of sentiment say reason can never reach moral conclusions, and offers <b>no motivation</b> to act	136
6.	A combination of both seems the correct view, though <b>sentiment must be the natural basis of morals</b>	137
7.	The role of reason is to guide and refine moral sentiment, as it does in the 'fine arts'	137
8.	We must observe and analyse the qualities in men which are admired or despised to find their origin	138
9.	Moral study must not start from 'general abstract principle', but from actual observation of people	138
10.	<b>Benevolent feelings</b> are universally admired, in eminent people and (even more) in humble people	139
11.	A vital part of this admiration is that society is made happier by the person's benevolence (its ' <b>utility</b> ')	141
12.	People always admire what is useful, and even religion might be based on worship of what is useful	142
13.	Charity, assassination, generosity and luxury are all judged by whether or not they bring benefits	143
14.	Part of the merit of benevolence is its utility, but why is this, and has benevolence other merits?	144
15.	The virtue of <b>justice would be quite unnecessary</b> if there was a <b>total abundance</b> of everything	145
16.	Even now justice is irrelevant for abundant things like air, water, the seas and (sometimes) land	145
17.	Justice would also be irrelevant if we were totally benevolent (as we sometimes find in families)	146
18.	Also in <b>catastrophes</b> it is 'every man for himself', and justice again becomes irrelevant	147
19.	Justice is needed <b>to preserve order</b> , but only where order is wanted, and seen as worthwhile	147
20.	Justice is suspended in event of shipwreck, famine, crime, punishment and war, because it is useless	147-8
21.	Even the rules of war are suspended when fighting barbarians who don't observe them	148
22.	We now admire justice because we are between the two extremes, and <b>property</b> is a necessity	149
23.	The fiction of a beautiful 'golden age' or horrible 'state of nature' (Hobbes) both show justice as irrelevant	150-1
24.	We should be humane to weak people, but justice presupposes some <b>equality</b> in the participants	152
25.	The dealings of men with animals, primitive people and women shows that justice <i>can</i> be abandoned	152
26.	Totally self-sufficient people are incapable of justice, but justice expands along with social relations	153
27.	<b>Laws</b> , too, are made to benefit society, especially concerning property	154
28.	The ideal society (run by a god) would give rewards precisely matching people's virtues	154
29.	Unfortunately virtue is subject to confusion and lies, and in practice such a society would collapse	154
30.	Similar attempts to equate rewards with Christian virtue (e.g. in the Civil War) were unsuccessful	154
31.	<b>Equality</b> of possessions is possible, eliminates most injustice, and has sometimes been practised	155
32.	But equality can only be maintained by force, and leads to laziness, tyranny and loss of authority	155
33.	It benefits society if people own what they make, bequeath it, and exchange it by contracts	156
34.	The principle of <b>ownership</b> is agreed by all political writers, no matter what principles they start from	156
35.	In problem cases possession is decided rather arbitrarily, but always aims at 'the safety of the people'	157
36.	Laws appear either sensible because they benefit society, or ridiculously <b>superstitious</b> if they don't	158
37.	One might argue that property laws are equally arbitrary and superstitious, but that ignores their benefits	159
38.	Justice either comes from <b>thought</b> or from helpful <b>instinct</b> ; property rights clearly result from thought	160
39.	Property can't be an instinct, because ideas of acquisition, inheritance and contract are too complex	161
40.	Many other variations and complexities show that <b>justice cannot be an innate idea or instinct</b>	161
41.	Like house-building, the variations show thought, even though there is a common aim for houses	161
42.	Education makes us think injustice is innately wrong, and we forget its practical origins	162
43.	As justice is the most highly esteemed virtue, it seems that virtues in general are based on <b>usefulness</b>	163
44.	We only form civil societies because we lack sufficient wisdom and strength of will on our own	164
45.	Rules of justice exist between separate states, but only in so far as they are useful	165
46.	<b>Adultery</b> (especially for women) is a vice only because human childhood is so long and dependent	166
47.	We extend rules beyond their immediate use (chastity of older women) because they set an example	167
48.	Rules against <b>incestuous marriage</b> exist to prevent undue intimacy in families (as in Athenian laws)	168
49.	Rules of <b>privacy</b> , secrecy and good manners are also practical means of making life run smoothly	169
50.	<b>Constancy</b> in friendship is vital for stable society, but is not required in holiday resorts	170

51.	Even <b>thieves</b> and drunkards have found that they need certain rules for their groups to function	170
52.	Even in frivolous <b>games</b> , passing on the road, or violent sports, people follow rules that are useful	171
53.	We commonly praise men, <b>ships</b> and buildings because of the usefulness of their design or character	172
54.	Perhaps philosophers don't admit the value of utility because they can't explain it	172
55.	( <i>note</i> ) We don't usually praise the utility of inanimate things because our sentiments don't work that way	172
56.	Sceptics say that because morality is useful <b>it was invented</b> and encouraged by clever politicians	173
57.	It is true that sentiments can be increased or diminished (and occasionally invented) by education	173
58.	Such education couldn't begin, though, if we didn't naturally like virtue (from generosity or self-interest)	173
59.	It is possible that morality results from <b>self-love</b> , when we accept social rules because they benefit us	174
60.	But we admire virtue in <b>the remote past</b> , or performed by enemies, when it doesn't help us at all	175
61.	If only self-love mattered, we would ask <i>What is that to me?</i> of every mention of virtue	175
62.	We do not <i>imagine</i> benefits to ourselves when we hear of distant examples of virtue	176
63.	Imagination is easily ignored (e.g. on a cliff-top), but we learn of virtue and vice from direct experience	176
64.	We admire virtues because people benefit, so we must care about those people, no matter how remote	177
65.	When our private interests are separate from public interests, we still care about the public ones	178
66.	( <i>note</i> ) It is futile to try to discover <b>why</b> we care about the public interest and other people's problems	178
67.	<b>In solitude</b> we lose most of our human pleasures, which involve sympathy with the lives of others	179
68.	It gives me happiness to meet a <b>happy family</b> , and I <b>resent people</b> who cause suffering to others	179
69.	In <b>the theatre</b> we sympathise with the audience and the characters, and poetry has the same effect	180
70.	Similarly we care about political and <b>historical events</b> , especially when a writer highlights the dangers	181
71.	People are obedient, feel for <b>stutterers</b> , and admire well-made clothes, all through sympathy	182
72.	<b>Cold people</b> who lack sympathy also lack moral standards, and warm people have them	183
73.	<b>Everyone</b> feels some sympathy, and cares about others (they wouldn't tread on a gouty foot!)	183
74.	If we all feel <i>some</i> sympathy, then sympathy must always have <i>some</i> influence on all our actions	183
75.	A person with no sympathy at all would presumably want evil all the time, which seems impossible	184
76.	We <i>feel</i> modern benefactors to be better than past ones, but our <b>judgement</b> ranks them equally	185
77.	( <i>note</i> ) Our sentiments focus entirely on consequences, but our judgement recognises <b>excuses</b> for error	185
78.	Our <b>language</b> is for general use, and therefore expresses general interests rather than private ones	186
79.	Even very selfish people are forced by language and conversation to consider the general good	186
80.	( <i>Note</i> ) Nature rightly makes us <b>self-interested</b> (which is productive), but judgement sees things equally	186
81.	Remote virtues (like stars) impress us little, but bring them close (like the sun) and we admire them	187
82.	If we doubt the sympathy and blame in our own natures, it is still obvious in society at large	190
83.	<b>Qualities of character</b> are considered faults if they harm the person or their social activities	191
84.	Even the Aristotelian 'mean' (e.g. between <i>slow</i> and <i>hasty</i> ) is judged by how useful it is	191
85.	We can hardly be selfish when we admire good qualities of character, as they don't benefit us	191
86.	( <i>note</i> ) We all admire good qualities (even misers admire miserliness!) but only the generous <i>do</i> anything	191
87.	A totally neutral person would lack morality, but concern for usefulness always leads to morality	192
88.	Many historical examples show that <b>discretion</b> and good judgement are virtues because they are useful	193
89.	<b>Industriousness</b> is obviously a virtue, and <b>wastefulness</b> a vice, for the same reason	194
90.	Virtues aid society first and the individual second, and are often complex (e.g. the virtue of <b>chastity</b> )	195
91.	Another virtue praised for its usefulness is <b>strength of mind</b> , in pursuing goals and ignoring temptation	196
92.	Of all insults, to call someone ' <b>a fool</b> ' is universally thought the worst, because it means <i>useless</i>	197
93.	In deciding what are the best qualities in <b>intelligence</b> , we look to see which are the most useful	198
94.	Some intellectual virtues are not so useful, but are still admired for other reasons, such as nobility	198
95.	<b>Memory</b> was thought a great virtue in ancient times, but now less so, because it is needed less	198
96.	Public spirit and benevolence are sometimes attacked by sceptics, but individual virtues are undeniable	199
97.	We might praise public spirit because of our own self-love, but <b>private virtues</b> of others don't affect us	199
98.	On the whole bodies are thought <b>beautiful</b> if they look fit and energetic, and are well balanced	200
99.	We admire <b>wealth</b> because the owner enjoys it, and respect good birth because it is linked to wealth	201
100.	( <i>Note</i> ) Of course <b>envy</b> is mixed with our respect for wealth, but normally we have good feelings about it	202
101.	Monarchies prefer birth (leading to military virtue), but republics prefer wealth (encouraging industry)	202
102.	<b>Cheerfulness</b> and a relish for pleasure are virtues which have no real utility, but are greatly admired	203
103.	We also respect <b>dignity</b> , proper pride and greatness of mind, which inspire us	204
104.	<b>Courage</b> has utility, but is mainly an inspiration (excessively so in less civilised countries)	205
105.	We admire the <b>tranquillity</b> of ancient philosophers, but they would envy the humanity of modern society	206

106. <b>Benevolence</b> has obvious utility, but is also uplifting to behold (just as we dislike anger)	207
107. When benevolence reaches extremes we criticise it (kindly), even though it is obviously useful	208
108. And we admire great love or courage, even when they actually harm a person's cause	208
109. Athenians sentiments admired war, even though their achievements in law and agriculture were greater	209
110. The unique talent of <b>poets</b> commands greater admiration than the achievements of emperors	209
111. Thus <b>pleasant virtues with no utility are still admired</b> , and the same sentiment is found in utility itself	210
112. Though expressed in varied ways, <b>good manners</b> are a virtue immediately agreeable to others	211
113. A sharp wit, a willingness to converse, and a tendency to speak the truth, are all valued in company	212
114. Modesty, especially in the young, is immediately agreeable, though discreet self-value is admired	213
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116. Decent behaviour (fit for one's rank and sex) and cleanliness are also virtues agreeable to others	215
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119. In common life virtue is analysed into what is useful or agreeable, to the person themselves, or to others	218
120. Men of sense reject 'monkish virtues' (e.g. self-denial) because they are not agreeable or useful	219
121. Never mind whether we are <b>naturally benevolent</b> ; we all have <i>some</i> generous feeling, however small	220
122. <b>Feelings of self-love are not part of morality</b> , as they don't lead to principles (unlike benevolence)	221
123. We call people <b>enemies</b> for personal reasons, but appeal to common judgements in the term <b>vicious</b>	222
124. Personal feelings such as ambition vary enormously, but humanity is the same in everyone	222
125. Selfish feelings are private and ignore humanity, but humane feelings respond to all ages and places	223
126. Moral feelings are agreed on by everyone, but selfish feelings concern only ourselves	223
127. Eventually these universal feelings are built into the language, and become abstract rules	223
128. ( <i>Note</i> ) Primitive people follow selfish passions, but civilisation makes us sympathise even with enemies	223
129. Moral feelings are spread by <b>social influence</b> , just as widely as riots and civil wars are	224
130. A vital influence in keeping us virtuous is awareness of our own public image	225
131. We can try to imagine the theory wrong, but it is just obvious that virtues bring pleasure and utility	226
132. The theory seems correct (though it is dogmatic), and it is baffling that people don't agree about morals	227
133. It is necessary to enquire whether each person's interests will be best served by doing their moral <b>duty</b>	228
134. There is little point in proposing a moral theory (even if it is true) if it doesn't improve life	228
135. Nothing could improve life more than the theory proposed, which simply aims at happiness and utility	228
136. Virtue simply requires a " <b>just calculation</b> " and "a steady preference of <b>the greater happiness</b> "	228
137. No moral theory has any chance unless it can help "the true interest of each individual"	228
138. It is hardly necessary to offer proof that health and popularity are desirable	229
139. Our failures to be virtuous result from lack of education, lack of ability, or perversity of character	229
140. Benevolence is not opposed to self-interest, because it is the indulgence of one of our personal feelings	230
141. If we could choose to be dominated by one passion, benevolence would be the obvious choice	231
142. <b>Vice</b> is never preferable to virtue when pursuing self-interest, with the possible exception of dishonesty	232
143. It is hard to answer this claim, yet it seems obvious that an honest life is in every way more desirable	233
144. Money and luxury seem worthless compared to peace, integrity, and enjoyment of good character	233

## GUIDE TO HUME'S ENQUIRY CONCERNING THE PRINCIPLES OF MORALS (TEXT 9)

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**Background:** Hume was aware of classical philosophy (e.g. the debate between benefit and pleasure in *Gorgias*). He was also aware of Hobbes' defence of a social contract theory based on self-interest (in *Leviathan Book I*). In Hume's own time there was extensive debate on the basis of morals, in which the main schools were becoming clear: 1) reason, 2) contract, 3) intuition and conscience, 4) benevolence, 5) general welfare. Hume favoured 4 and 5; Kant later developed 1; Bentham preferred 5.

#### Main ideas in the text

- Morality is based on **sentiment** rather than reason, and the particular sentiment is our feeling of **benevolence**
- The feeling of benevolence is admired and labelled as **virtue** because it is incredibly **useful** in society
- Benevolence is even **more basic** in us than the desire for benefit, because we feel benevolent even when it is useless
- Benevolence is the only thing which will **motivate** us to help others, unlike pure reason or exclusive self-love
- **Justice** is the greatest virtue, and it proves the point - we want it almost entirely because it is useful in the real world
- **Reason** makes a contribution, by taking us beyond self-interest, and making us weigh people's intentions before judging them
- Every virtue and every vice can be understood clearly if we analyse the extent to which it is useful to society

#### Key examples in the text:

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|--|--|
| assassination (13) - we judge it by any possible benefits                  | friendship (50) - loyalty ceases to be a virtue in holiday resorts   |
| land (16) - justice of ownership depends on availability                   | theatre (69) - this depends on our natural sympathy for characters   |
| shipwreck (20) - justice becomes irrelevant in such crises                 | stutterers (71) - we feel natural sympathy for their awkwardness     |
| house-building (41) - variations in design (like justice) show rationality | gouty foot (73) - no one would willingly tread on one                |
| adultery (46) - it is a vice because children benefit                      | stars/sun (81) - like virtues, stars impress us when they are nearby |

#### Hume's Influence

Utilitarianism - he repeatedly emphasises that we seek virtue because of its benefit and 'utility' (43); he explicitly denies the social contract view, based on self-love (60-66); he rejects high ideals (19,46); he denies the centrality of reason (6). This leaves him committed to consequentialism, but based on benefit rather than pure pleasure. Bentham pursued pleasure as the only worthwhile consequence. Modern utilitarians incline towards Hume's broader notion of benefit (e.g. survival, even without pleasure).

Emotivism - Hume identifies the nature of virtue as benevolence (which is pursued because of its benefit) (72); he is adamant that this is not a rational attitude (5); only feelings can motivate us to actually act (5,86); he thinks it is impossible to explain or justify our benevolence (66). This leads to the view that morality is a purely contingent matter, and we might (like most animals) live without it. Hume cannot show that benevolence is *innately* good, as any feeling which brought benefit would be equally admirable (e.g. personal greed). Emotivists in the twentieth century (e.g. A.J.Ayer) take the final step of saying that morality is just 'whatever we happen to feel', which may not be benevolent. This is caricatured as the 'boo-hooray' theory.

#### Criticisms of Hume

- He is wrong about reason (4,5) and cold people (72,75), who might follow Kant (and Mr Spock) in doing good deeds
- By conceding relativism, he has no objection to useful vice (51,142)
- It is purely contingent that we feel benevolence (66)
- If we could achieve utility without morality (and religion), we would abandon it (12,134)
- His adherence to principle and duty are very superficial (21,24,25)
- He concedes the social contract theory before trying to reject it (59), and a 'contract-in-our-genes' would explain benevolence
- He selfishly values benevolence as indulgence of a feeling (140), but this would justify sadism