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Contributed Paper

Hume's Self-Love

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Introduction: self-love and reflection

The purpose of this paper is to clarify some characteristics of Hume's "self-love" and thereby to consider the role of "reflection" in his theory of passion. Hume sometimes discusses reflection in connection with self-love. The examination of self-love, therefore, will enable us to analyze reflection in more detail, and further, may contribute to the argument about Hume's concept of deliberation.

Self-love is one of the significant components in Hume's moral theory, particularly in his theory of justice, but here I will limit the discussion to his theory of passion. What I will discuss first is the passion of self-love itself, and it is also a prerequisite for the understanding of his moral theory. In this sense, it is also an attempt to link Hume's theory of passion with that of morals.

The point I want to make is that Hume's self-love is essentially a calm passion assisted by reflection, and that Hume's reflection involves balancing interests or weighing advantages, and forming rules of conduct and measures of preference.¹

Aspects of self-love

First of all, we have to look into the usage of self-love in Hume's work. His official view is found in Book II of *A Treatise of Human*

¹ Abbreviations in this paper are as follows.

THN: David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, D. F. Norton and M. J. Norton (eds.), Oxford University Press, 2000. [Book. Part. Sect. Paragraph / page]

EHU: David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, T. L. Beauchamp (ed.), Oxford University Press, 1999. [Section. paragraph / page]

EPM: David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, T. L. Beauchamp (ed.), Oxford University Press, 1998. [Section. paragraph / page]

Nature, where he says, "Our love and hatred are always directed to some sensible being external to us; and when we talk of *self-love*, 'tis not in a proper sense."² According to Hume, as the object of love is some other person, "self-love" is an abuse of the word love. This is his official view on self-love, and, perhaps for that reason, it is hardly used in Book II. However, Hume never denies its existence. In the same Book II, he insists that self-love approaches the power and exercise very near each other.³ In Book III, he holds that self-love is the source of all injustice and violence when it acts at its liberty.⁴ He also states that it is the real origin of those rules by which properties, rights, and obligations are determined,⁵ or that it produces the rules of justice and is the first motive of their observance.⁶ Moreover, he says, "each person loves himself better than any other single person."⁷ Although Hume does not acknowledge self-love in the strict sense of the word, he admits that there exists such a passion.

What is self-love for Hume, then? Firstly, he treats it as one of various particular passions,⁸ or as the source of these passions.⁹ Secondly, he considers it as a general term of some particular passions. "Avarice, ambition, vanity, and all passions" are, he says, "vulgarly, though improperly, comprized under the denomination of self-love."¹⁰ Thirdly, he regards it as a general (not particular) passion. Self-love is identified with "a concern for our private interest or

² THN 2.2.1.2/214.

³ THN 2.2.5.9/233.

⁴ THN 3.2.1.10/309.

⁵ THN 3.2.6.6/339.

⁶ THN 3.2.8.5/348.

⁷ THN 3.2.2.6/313.

⁸ EHU 8.7/150.

⁹ EPM 9.8.note/150.

¹⁰ EPM 9.5/147. Cf. EPM 9.8/148.

reputation,”¹¹ “a regard to private interest,”¹² “a concern for our own individual happiness.”¹³ Fourthly, he describes it as “a principle in human nature,”¹⁴ though it is not clear whether it means a particular principle or a general one. Thus there are various aspects of Hume's self-love, and it seems difficult to determine its meaning.

Some related notions

What we must consider next is some notions related to self-love, such as selfishness and self-interest. Hume maintains that though selfishness, acting at its liberty, disqualifies people for society,¹⁵ it is one of the origins of justice.¹⁶ He also regards it as one of various particular passions.¹⁷ In so far as this, selfishness is the same as self-love; yet it is, in Hume's words, a “natural temper,”¹⁸ and “inseparable from human nature, and inherent in our frame and constitution.”¹⁹ Hume seems, therefore, to use “selfishness” especially when he discusses human nature.

Self-interest, as well as selfishness, is similar to self-love in many respects. It is “the original motive to the establishment of justice”²⁰ or “the first motive of the invention,”²¹ and is also a passion or a principle²²; still it is different from self-love in one significant point. When Hume uses such expressions as “self-interest, and the prospect

¹¹ THN 3.2.1.10/309.

¹² EPM 5.6/106.

¹³ EPM 5.10/107.

¹⁴ EPM 5.16/108. Cf. EPM 5.17/109.

¹⁵ THN 3.2.2.24/320.

¹⁶ THN 3.2.2.18/318.

¹⁷ THN 3.2.2.15/317, EPM 3.14/37.

¹⁸ THN 3.2.2.5/313, 3.2.3.3/322.

¹⁹ THN 3.3.1.17/372.

²⁰ THN 3.2.2.24/320-1.

²¹ THN 3.2.8.5/348.

²² THN 2.3.3.10/268, 3.2.2.13/316.

of advantage,"²³ "considerations of self-interest,"²⁴ "regards to self-interest,"²⁵ "a view to self-interest,"²⁶ and "a view to happiness and self-interest,"²⁷ self-interest is regarded as an idea (or a perspective) rather than as a passion. It is nothing but the idea of private interest. This may lead us to emphasize the difference between self-love and self-interest. We must consider whether the latter is a passion or an idea; although significant, the difference is not decisive if we take into account Hume's view that there exists the close relation between an idea and a passion. In fact, Hume sometimes regards even "interest" as a passion.²⁸

Butler's self-love

Now, keeping in mind the similarities among self-love, selfishness, and self-interest, we shall analyze self-love more closely. Hume discusses it in one of the appendixes of his book, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*. This appendix, titled "Of Self-Love," must be a clue for our inquiry. Many commentators have pointed out that it was influenced by Joseph Butler's view of self-love. Then let us look into Butler's self-love in order to make Hume's view clearer.

Butler defines self-love as a general desire of private happiness, and distinguishes it from particular passions.

Every man hath a general desire of his own happiness; and likewise a variety of particular affections, passions and appetites to particular external objects. The former proceeds from, or is self-love; and seems inseparable from all sensible creatures, who can

²³ THN 3.3.5.5/393.

²⁴ EPM 5.4/106.

²⁵ EPM 5.45/117.

²⁶ THN 3.2.5.8/333, EPM 9.17/153, EPM 9.22/155.

²⁷ EPM 9.19/154.

²⁸ THN 3.2.2.12/316, THN 3.2.7.1/342.

reflect upon themselves and their own interest or happiness . . . The object the former pursues is somewhat internal, our own happiness, enjoyment, satisfaction . . . The principle we call self-love never seeks anything external for the sake of the thing, but only as a means of happiness or good . . .²⁹

According to Butler, while particular passions (affections, appetites) move toward particular objects as such, self-love aims at them as means of happiness. He stresses on the distinction between "the passions and appetites themselves, and endeavouring after the means of their gratification."³⁰ He also divides "selfishness" into two kinds, "passionate or sensual" selfishness and "cool or settled" one. The latter is self-love, and the actions proceeding from it are called "interested." The former are not love to oneself, but "particular movements towards particular external objects."³¹

It is also remarkable that self-love is inseparably connected with reflections on private interest or happiness. Butler regards self-love as the principle of an action, proceeding from "cool consideration" that it will be to one's own advantage,³² and identifies "cool self-love" with a "reasonable concern" for oneself.³³ He frequently calls self-love "cool" or "reasonable."

Furthermore, in Butler's view, this cool or reasonable self-love is superior to particular passions.

. . . there must be some other difference or distinction to be made between these two principles, passion and cool self-love, than what I have yet taken notice of. And this difference, not

²⁹ Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, T. A. Roberts (ed.), S. P. C. K., 1970, Sermon 11, paragraph 5, p. 100.

³⁰ *Fifteen Sermons*, Ser. 1, par. 7 note, p. 20.

³¹ *Fifteen Sermons*, Preface. par. 35, pp. 12-13.

³² *Fifteen Sermons*, Ser. 11, par. 7, p. 101.

³³ *Fifteen Sermons*, Ser. 1, par. 14, p. 25.

being a difference in strength or degree, I call a difference in nature and in kind . . . if passion prevails over self-love, the consequent action is unnatural; but if self-love prevails over passion, the action is natural: it is manifest that self-love is in human nature a superior principle to passion. . . . So that, if we will act conformably to the economy of man's nature, reasonable self-love must govern.³⁴

In short, by the constitution of human nature, self-love ranks higher than particular passions, and has the authority to control them.

Self-love as a calm passion

The influence of Butler's view is evident in the following passage from the Appendix "Of Self-Love."

There are bodily wants or appetites, acknowledged by every one, which necessarily precede all sensual enjoyment, and carry us directly to seek possession of the object. Thus, hunger and thirst have eating and drinking for their end; and from the gratification of these primary appetites arises a pleasure, which may become the object of another species of desire or inclination, that is secondary and interested. In the same manner, there are mental passions, by which we are impelled immediately to seek particular objects, such as fame, or power, or vengeance, without any regard to interest; and when these objects are attained, a pleasing enjoyment ensues, as the consequence of our indulged affections. Nature must, by the internal frame and constitution of the mind, give an original propensity to fame, ere we can reap any pleasure from that acquisition, or pursue it from

³⁴ *Fifteen Sermons*, Ser. 2, par. 11, p. 32.

motives of self-love, and a desire of happiness . . . there is a passion, which points immediately to the object, and constitutes it our good or happiness; as there are other secondary passions, which afterwards arise, and pursue it as a part of our happiness, when once it is constituted such by our original affections.³⁵

Hume makes a distinction between "primary" passions and "secondary" ones. Primary passions directly or immediately seek their objects for their ends, without any regard to interest. On the other hand, secondary passions, which are called "motives of self-love," arise after the gratification of primary ones, and pursue their objects as a part of happiness.

Thus far Hume's view resembles Butler's. What is their difference then? Most remarkable is that Hume never gives self-love the superiority in rank to particular passions. He writes:

Men often act knowingly against their interest . . . Men often counter-act a violent passion in prosecution of their interests and designs . . . In general we may observe, that both these principles operate on the will; and where they are contrary, that either of them prevails, according to the general character or present disposition of the person. What we call strength of mind, implies the prevalence of the calm passions above the violent; tho' we may easily observe, there is no man so constantly possess'd of this virtue, as never on any occasion to yield to the solicitations of passion and desire.³⁶

Interest [self-love] and a violent passion [particular passions] are treated equally here. It depends on character or disposition (not the constitution of human nature) whether interest prevails over the

³⁵ EPM Appendix 2, par. 12/168.

³⁶ THN 2.3.3.10/268.

violent passion. Moreover, what is evident in the quotation above is that Hume regards interest as one of “calm passions,” and that the relation between self-love and particular passions is the same as between calm passions and violent ones. In other words, while Butler believes self-love is different from particular passions in nature or kind, and is over them, for Hume self-love is the same passion as them, and is on a level with them.³⁷

Calm passion and reflection

According to Hume, a calm passion, though it is a real passion, operates calmly, produces little emotion in the mind, causes no disorder in the soul, and therefore, is often mistaken for reason, which judges of truth and falsehood.³⁸ When reason is said to oppose passions, it is “nothing but a general calm determination of the passions, founded on some distant view or reflection.”³⁹

What is important here is that Hume connects calm passions with reflection. This can be seen clearly in the following passage.

Generally speaking, the violent passions have a more powerful

³⁷ One of the reason Hume does not admit the superiority of self-love over particular passions, seems that he understands both dynamically whereas Butler sees them statically. Hume says, “a calm passion may easily be chang’d into a violent one” (THN 2.3.8.13/280). He also writes to Hutcheson, “These Instincts you mention seem not always to be violent & impetuous, more than Self love or Benevolence. There is a calm Ambition, a calm Anger or Hatred, which tho’ calm, may likewise be very strong, & have the absolute Command over the Mind. The more absolute they are, we find them to be commonly the calmer. As these Instincts may be calm, without being weak, so Self-love may likewise become impetuous & disturb’d, especially where any great Pain or Pleasure approaches” (J. Y. T. Greig ed., *The Letters of David Hume*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, vol. 1, p. 49. [Letter 19, To Francis Hutcheson].)

³⁸ THN 2.3.3.8/268. Cf. THN 2.3.8.13/280.

³⁹ THN 3.3.1.18/372–3.

influence on the will; tho' 'tis often found, that the calm ones, when corroborated by reflection, and seconded by resolution, are able to controul them in their most furious movements."⁴⁰

Thus we see that calm passions are assisted (in Hume's words, corroborated) by reflection. This is true of self-love (or self-interest). Self-love, except when treated as particular passions or a general term of them, is a calm passion assisted by reflection.

Now let us turn to Hume's reflection, which for him is nearly the same as reason.⁴¹ In his view, reflection or reason has several functions. Firstly, by reflection we correct the appearance of objects, and arrive at a constant and established judgment concerning them.⁴² In this sense, reflection may also alter passions toward them.⁴³ Secondly, where passions are founded on false suppositions, or choose means insufficient for the end, reason directs the passions.⁴⁴ "The moment we perceive the falsehood of any supposition, or the insufficiency of any means, our passions yield to our reason without any opposition."⁴⁵

This is Hume's official view on the functions of reflection or reason. In addition, two more functions can be pointed out. One is suggested in his famous discussion concerning the alternation of direction of passion.

There is no passion, therefore, capable of controlling the interested affection [the love of gain], but the very affection itself, by an alteration of its direction. Now this alteration must necessarily take place upon the least reflection; since 'tis evident that

⁴⁰ THN 2.3.8.13/280.

⁴¹ For example, "calm reason and reflection" (EPM 7.25/138).

⁴² THN 3.3.3.2/384-5. Cf. THN 3.3.1.15/372, EPM 1.9/76.

⁴³ Cf. THN 2.3.9.31/286.

⁴⁴ Cf. THN 2.3.3.3/266, 2.3.3.6/267.

⁴⁵ THN 2.3.3.7/267.

the passion is much better satisfy'd by its restraint, than by its liberty, and that by preserving society, we make much greater advances in the acquiring possessions, than by running into the solitary and forlorn condition, which must follow upon violence and an universal licence.⁴⁶

In this case, the passion is neither founded on false suppositions, nor chooses means insufficient for its end. Rather, by reflection, the advantage of satisfying the passion by its restraint is compared with that of its liberty. We can find this third function in the two quotations below.

... however single acts of justice may be contrary, either to public or private interest, 'tis certain, that the whole plan or scheme is highly conducive, or indeed absolutely requisite, both to the support of society, and the well-being of every individual. ... Tho' in one instance the public be a sufferer, this momentary ill is amply compensated by the steady prosecution of the rule, and by the peace and order, which it establishes in society. And even every individual person must find himself a gainer, on balancing the account...⁴⁷

We ought always to weigh the advantages, which we reap from authority, against the disadvantages...⁴⁸

It is evident that balancing interests or weighing advantages is counted among the functions of Hume's reflection.

The fourth function is concerning general rules or measures. Hume asserts:

⁴⁶ THN 3.2.2.13/316.

⁴⁷ THN 3.2.2.22/319.

⁴⁸ THN 3.2.10.1/354.

Our affections, on a general prospect of their objects, form certain rules of conduct, and certain measures of preference of one above another: And these decisions, though really the result of our calm passions and propensities . . . are yet said, by a natural abuse of terms, to be the determinations of pure reason and reflection.⁴⁹

Indeed decisions are finally made by calm passions, but it is hard to think that affections alone form rules of conduct and measures of preference. This also ought to be numbered among the function of reflection or reason.

Some Problems

There remain some significant problems concerning Hume's self-love and reflection. Let us make a brief examination of them.

Firstly, Hume takes "the general appetite to good" as an example of calm passions.⁵⁰ It may, in a literal sense, seem similar to or the same as self-love. Unfortunately Hume scarcely discusses it. Some commentators interpret it as a secondary and direct passion.⁵¹ On the other hand, self-love is a secondary but indirect passion, according to Hume's "double relation of ideas and impressions": the idea of an object causes an impression [a pleasure], and is converted into the idea of happiness or interest, and the latter in turn causes another impression, from which arises the passion of self-love. Moreover, the word "good" is not clear. It could include every kind of good, whether to oneself or to another, natural or moral. It is, therefore,

⁴⁹ EPM 6.15/123.

⁵⁰ THN 2.3.3.8/268.

⁵¹ Ex. P. S. Árdal, *Passion and Value in Hume's Treatise*, Edinburgh University Press, 1966, pp. 10–11, John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, Barbara Harman (ed.), Harvard University Press, 2000, pp. 26–27. Rawls discusses it in detail. See, *ibid.*, pp. 43–50.

difficult to identify the general appetite to good with self-love.

Secondly, Hume occasionally discusses “a general idea.” This is related to the idea of self-interest or interest rather than to the passion of self-love. He states that a particular and determinate idea has more influence (on imagination) than a general and obscure idea, illustrating it with an example of “the general notion of advantage.”⁵² If so, then the influence of self-interest or interest as a general idea may also come into question. Hume himself, however, contends that general ideas can be measures, abstract rules, or universal principles, and control or limit particular passions.⁵³ Although Hume talks about virtue and vice here, his view could be applied to all of the general ideas, including self-interest or interest.

Thirdly, we must take the influence of “custom” into consideration. Hume argues that custom makes a certain passion “settled principle of action” or “predominant inclination of the soul,” which directs actions without any opposition,⁵⁴ and that custom or habit makes reflection and deliberation unnecessary.⁵⁵ These arguments may be inconsistent with Hume’s own view on calm passions such as self-love, but here he only analyzes some of the facts concerning custom. He does not contradict himself, though the relation between reflection and custom in calm passions still has to be still examined more.

Finally, there remains the problem of Hume’s view of human beings. He often takes up “strength of mind.” It implies the prevalence of calm passions above violent ones.⁵⁶ In other words, it enables people to resist the temptation of present ease or pleasure, and carry them forward in the search of more distant profit and enjoy

⁵² THN 2.3.6.2-4/272-3.

⁵³ EPM 9.8/148.

⁵⁴ THN 2.3.4.1/268-9.

⁵⁵ THN 1.3.12.7/91.

⁵⁶ THN 2.3.3.10/268.

ment.⁵⁷ Hume regards this strength of mind as a virtue, and suggests that it is difficult to keep this virtue.⁵⁸ The problem here is the authority of reflection. As Hume's self-love, in contrast with Butler's self-love, has no superiority over particular passions, it may seem that the reflection attending self-love also has no authority. In Hume's view, however, "men are, in a great measure, govern'd by interest," which is a strong passion.⁵⁹ That is, interest can authorize the reflection. But another problem arises here. Is the person with strength of mind identical with a rational egoist? Indeed Hume criticizes the view that "every man ought to be supposed a knave, and to have no other end, in all his actions, than private interest,"⁶⁰ but he seems not to discuss the difference between the knave and the person with strength of mind. In order to consider this problem, we have to examine his moral theory.⁶¹

⁵⁷ EPM 6.15/123.

⁵⁸ THN 2.3.3.10/268. Hume also discusses prudence, discretion, or sagacity. Cf. THN 3.2.3.3/322, 3.3.4.5/389.

⁵⁹ THN 3.2.7.1/342.

⁶⁰ "Of the Independency of Parliament," in David Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, Revised Edition, E. F. Miller (ed.), Liberty Classics, 1985, Part I, Essay IV, par. 1, p. 42.

⁶¹ This paper was presented at "Panel Session 3: Passions, Powers and Interests" in 31st Annual Hume Society Conference (Keio University, Tokyo, Japan, August 2-7, 2004). I wish to express my gratitude to Francis W. Dauer, Charlotte Brown, and Jane McIntyre for valuable comments and criticisms.