

Moral Sentiment and the Role of Sympathy in David Hume

Sentimiento moral y la función de la simpatía en David Hume

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Abstract

According to Hume, moral life represents for human beings an order that must be maintained and upheld as one of the foundations of all human activity. Morality would be rooted in impressions, as the place where we can establish and perceive human actions; thus, moral sentiment does not derive from reason. In this regard, Copleston, when referring to Hume's theory, describes it as "ethical emotivism," defined as the idea that the human actions we witness awaken in us feelings and attitudes of approval or disapproval.

Keywords: Reason, Ideas, Facts, Passions, Moral sentiment, Conduct / Behavior, → Sympathy

Resumen

Según Hume, la vida moral representa para el ser humano un orden que se debe tener y procurar sostener como una de las bases de todo quehacer en el hombre. La moral arraigaría en las impresiones como el lugar en el que podemos instaurar y percibir las acciones humanas, así, el sentimiento moral es algo que no derivaría de la razón, exponiendo lo que a juicio de Copleston y haciendo alusión a la teoría Humeana denominará como el "emotivismo ético". Definido así, por ser las acciones humanas que presenciamos las que despiertan en nosotros sentimientos y actitudes de aprobación o desaprobación.

Palabras clave: razón, ideas, hechos, pasiones, sentimiento moral, conducta, simpatía.

1. Introduction

The approach made by Hume (1998) regarding morality unfolds an entire horizon of interpretation, giving rise to a positive stance that recognizes how feelings influence actions through their approval or censure. Likewise, in his book *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, the author refers to morality as a matter of unquestionable reality; in this sense, he admits that the human being is always related to others and that, in such relationships, we have all, in certain cases, been affected by what is conceived as just or unjust. Therefore, morality cannot be denied, since by being immersed in it, the subject is confronted daily with a series of impressions that shape him (Hume, 2006).

In this paper, the purpose is to understand the postulates regarding morality. As a first step, Hume's division concerning morality in relation to *matters of fact* and the *relations of ideas* will be considered, clarifying why the origin of morality does not derive from reason. As a second step, it is proposed to analyze the origin of morality as something that arises from sentiment when we perceive an action and

what it generates in us, revealing what, in the author's judgment, would be called sympathy.

2. Theoretical Framework

In an educational sense, ethics is highlighted as a guiding principle that guarantees social justice, equity, and human dignity in the construction of an inclusive social contract for higher education (Araque et al., 2024). Now, in a philosophical sense from David Hume's moral sentiment, since he began with the analysis of ideas, Hume states: "*In order, therefore, to judge of these systems, we need only consider whether it is possible, from reason alone, to distinguish between vice and virtue, or whether there must concur some other principles to enable us to make that distinction*" (1998, p. 296). The systems to which he alludes are those that, in the author's judgment, conceive or affirm that virtue is nothing more than conformity with reason, and that morality, like truth, is known only through ideas and their comparison.

Morality, from practical philosophy, is seen as that which influences our passions

and actions and which goes beyond the calm and indifferent judgments of the understanding. Quoting the author, he states: *“Since morals have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows, that they cannot be derived from reason; and that because reason alone, as we have already proved, can never have any such influence. Morals 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”* (Hume, 1998, p. 296).

According to Guillermo Fraile (2011) in his book *History of Philosophy: From Humanism to the Enlightenment*, interpreting Hume, he states that morality is “(...) as the science of the rules that must be followed to achieve good and happiness through the practice of virtue” (pp. 851–852). According to this definition, morality is rooted in what would be impressions of sentiment, and since it intervenes in or has applicability to the facts and affections of the subject, it cannot originate from reason. Morality excites affections and produces or prevents actions; thus, according to the author, morality is a feeling that resides in

man and explains his conduct. Morality is properly felt.

Thus, in Hume we find a stance completely contrary to rationalism, since he admits, according to his postulates, the subordination of reason to the passions. The argument Hume provides is evidenced when he demonstrates that actions cannot derive from conformity with reason nor from their demerit in opposition to it. Likewise, he shows that reason, in itself, cannot immediately produce or prevent an action, opposing or approving it; hence, in the author’s view, reason is not the source from which moral good or evil originates (Hume, 1998).

In reference to the above, Domingo Cabezas (2008), in his text *Reason Is and Ought Only to Be the Slave of the Passions*, states that one of Hume’s first steps in the understanding of passions is to clarify how human action is produced or what motivates it, since according to Hume, morality is the guide of human actions. Copleston, alluding to this topic, asserts the following:

“It is not reason but inclination and aversion, guided by the experience of pain or pleasure, that are the main sources of human action. Reason plays an

important role in man's active life, but as an instrument of passion and not as a sufficient and unique cause" (1999, p. 308).

In this way, Hume considers that if reason cannot oppose passion in any case, it is because reason, not being the originating principle of our actions, cannot play that role; rather, it is passion that can oppose another passion. Cabezas (2008) comments: *"In the same way that it is our desires that drive our actions, it is one desire that can oppose another desire"* (pp. 47–48).

In light of this study, the author argues that, although reason plays an important role in formulating judgments about facts, ultimately, when facing a condemnable or non-condemnable action, what ends up weighing on the action is the feeling that such a fact generates in us. Likewise, the assertion that moral notions do not derive from reason in what concerns relations is, according to Hume, proven when their lack of utility becomes evident, since before reason can perceive the evil of an act, the evil itself must already be there to be perceived.

The lack of reasoning may prevent animals from perceiving obligations and duties, but it cannot prevent such obligations and duties from existing, since they must exist prior to being perceived. Reason must discover them but can never produce them (Copleston, 1999, p. 310).

In the same way, Hume explains that when we speak of or refer to what we call vice, we find that such considerations can only be made when we direct that experience toward ourselves and discover in it a feeling of censure in relation to that action, where something is revealed—an event we attribute to sentiment and not to reason. Thus, when we consider or declare an action to be vicious, it is because, from our natural constitution, we experience a feeling or affection that ends up censuring what we have observed in the action itself. Copleston, alluding to this issue and continuing the illustration, states that the attributes of perceiving virtue as lovable and pleasant, and vice as odious, stem from the characteristics that constitute the expression of affections and sentiments, both of which have their root in human constitution (Copleston, 1999).

But reason in this case could not, by itself, promote action; passions and affections are the origin of conduct. Hume states: *“Nothing can be more real, or concern us more, than our own sentiments of pleasure and uneasiness; and if these are favourable to virtue, and unfavourable to vice, no more can be requisite to regulate our conduct and actions”* (1998, p. 304).

As a second point, Hume proposes the counterpart and justification of considering moral distinctions as something that derives from a moral sense: *“Our decisions concerning moral rectitude and depravity are evidently perceptions; and as all perceptions are either impressions or ideas, the exclusion of the one is an evident argument for the other”* (1998, p. 304).

This idea proposed by Hume is further developed by Antonio Cano (2001) in his text *Hume’s Theory of the Passions*, highlighting that the idea of passion contains within itself an immediate character, meaning that passion is perceived through the degree of force and vivacity with which it presents itself, whereas in ideas this intensity is much weaker. Thus, what is virtuous or vicious

depends strictly on the feeling of pleasure or displeasure derived from the action witnessed. In his definition, José Luis Tasset Carmona, in *Dissertation on the Passions and Other Moral Essays*, affirms: *“The most plausible system that has been proposed to explain the difference between vice and virtue is that, whether by an original constitution of nature, or by a sense of public or private interest, the mere sight or contemplation of certain characters produces uneasiness, while others produce pleasure”* (pp. 95, 97).

Hence, moral sentiment is one of approval or disapproval toward actions and is therefore disinterested, being considered as moral good or evil when it transcends particular interest and is regarded in a general sense. This generality, according to the author, is seen from the perception to the analysis of moral sentiments and their consideration as natural, in the sense that no human being in any nation of the world has ever been entirely deprived of them, nor has there been one who has not felt or shown at least the slightest approval or disapproval regarding a conduct. For this reason, they are called natural, because

they are definitively rooted in our constitution and temperament (Hume, 1998).

Consequently, if with respect to moral distinctions we find that they stem more from sentiment than from reason, the agreement among those very sentiments is of utmost necessity and importance, since in moral judgment there is expressed the sentiment of approval or disapproval that man issues according to the action or character he witnesses, denoting the Humean theory of “ethical emotivism” (Copleston, 1999, p. 312).

This, according to Hume, is an argument that would explain the origin of morality as a principle of human nature, since, when analyzing sentiments and inclinations on the human plane, we would be connected through sympathy as a key or operative element which, according to Sofía Calvente, “allows us to receive from others, when we communicate with them, their inclinations and feelings, however different and even contrary to our own” (2022, p. 4). For within the observation we make of others, their behaviors never go unnoticed, becoming complex impressions since they are accompanied by the reflective act

upon what the other is feeling and makes us feel.

3. Method

The research was conducted under a qualitative approach, of a hermeneutic nature, aimed at the critical review of David Hume’s philosophical texts, as well as of authors who interpret his ethical thought (Copleston, 1999; Fraile, 2011; Calvente, 2022).

4. Results

The study showed that, for Hume, morality does not derive from reason but from sentiment, which underpins his theory known as ethical emotivism. It was also identified that sympathy functions as an operative principle that connects individuals through the transmission of affections, enabling the approval or disapproval of human actions. The findings reveal a break with the rationalist tradition, since Hume subordinates reason to the passions, asserting that it is the latter that guide

conduct and moral decisions. Finally, it is concluded that morality is a natural and universal fact that is manifested in social life through shared feelings.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, it can be inferred that the author's purpose in implementing this scheme of study around the ethical-moral approach reveals a horizon of importance and relevance in everything related to human passions, sensations, and emotions as that which is inherent—that is, that from which there can be no radical detachment, and upon which human actions themselves depend as part of the very nature of feeling things. When Hume breaks with the rationalist view that reason is the measure of all that concerns human action and conduct, he liberates man, giving him a new possibility and perspective that instead leads to determining his conduct from those sentiments that accompany our actions, with sympathy as a

fundamental element that makes it possible to share the affections or pleasures of others. Hence, the schemes of coexistence and mutual agreement regarding vice and virtue become of utmost importance as guides for conduct and social interests.

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