

Chapter 3

UTILITARIANISM AND PHENOMENOLOGY

Dallas Willard

University of Southern California

Utilitarianism is a general tendency within ethical theory that may or may not incorporate a significant phenomenological element, depending on how its basic ideas are developed. At its center is the view that moral distinctions are to be defined in terms of the causal role of actions or character traits. In writers such as Richard Cumberland (1631–1718), Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), and J. J. C. Smart, ethical theories of a specifically utilitarian type are developed by a priori analysis, by hypothetical reasoning, or simply by the specifying and application of definitions. Of such theories we shall have little to say here. Other writers, such as David Hume (1711–1776), John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), and Henry Sidgwick (1838–1900) advance utilitarian ethical theories that contain essential phenomenological components. It is upon theories of this type that we shall focus. Many essentially utilitarian ethical theorists of the late 20th century, such as Stephen Toulmin, Charles Stevenson, and Richard Hare, actually do engage in what could justifiably be called phenomenological analyses of language and experiences thereof. But they prefer to call what they are doing “logic” or “semantics.”

When I say that an ethical theory contains phenomenological components, what I mean is that in the formulation and defense of that theory the *essences* of relevant experiences are presented on the basis of a, presumably, direct and full *acquaintance* thereof. This may be so—and in the history of ethical theory has most often been so—in cases where the one developing the theory does not explicitly acknowledge or does not fully understand that they are conducting “phenomenological” analyses in this precise sense. Nevertheless, an attentive examination of their statements may show that this is what they are doing. Or in many cases, if they are not doing phenomenological analyses, it is unclear what types of investigations and claims are involved in the development of their theory, i.e., what is the precise nature of their claims and of the evidence supporting them. In the case of many utilitarian as well as other types of ethical theorists, the phenomenological component is frequently more obvious from its absence where clearly needed than from its actual presence in the relevant analyses.

Here we shall concentrate mainly on relevant portions of the works of Hume, Mill, and Sidgwick. Because of limitations of space we cannot be systematically or

critically thorough with their ethical theories as a whole, nor can we deal with alternative interpretations thereof.

1. HUME

Utility is an essential component of David Hume's ethical theory, and he is properly included in any account of utilitarianism. He is, however, not a pure utilitarian, for as we shall see, there are, on his view, moral distinctions that are not based on utility in any way—which is not a subtle point in his theory. And he is not a hedonist in his theory of value, as tends to be the case with later utilitarians. That is, he does not hold that the specific utility involved in virtues and right actions is that of producing pleasure or happiness. On the other hand, he is in practice perhaps the most emphatically “phenomenological” of all the ethical theorists who regard utility as having an essential role in the moral life.

The primary moral distinctions, for Hume, fall between personal qualities or “qualities of mind,” such as benevolence, justice, courage, wit, chastity, modesty, etc. These are, he is very clear, internal states. Actions have a moral character only via their association with them. “The external performance,” he says, “has no merit. We must look within to find the moral quality...” (T, 477–78).¹

The distinction between the qualities of mind that are virtues and those that are not is an objective one, not dependent on how particular human subjects may think or feel about it, and it is universal, the same for all—at least for all rightly informed and thoughtful people. This is true in spite of the fact that distinctions between virtues and non-virtues are not constituted or conveyed to us by reason or understanding, but by feeling (passion, sentiment). The sentiments that determine moral boundaries are essential parts of human nature, and ultimately derive from “the original fabric and formation of the human mind, which is naturally adapted to receive them” (E, 172),² or “from the eternal frame and constitution of animals, <which> is ultimately derived from that Supreme Will, which bestowed on each being its peculiar nature, and arranged the several classes and orders of existence” (E, 294).

Far from fitting into such 20th century classifications as “social subjectivism,” “personal subjectivism,” or “emotivism,” Hume's theory more closely aligns with

¹David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955) (hereafter T).

²David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957) (hereafter E).

natural law theories, minus, of course, their emphasis upon the ability of reason to grasp ultimate ends and determine ultimate principles of morality.

Fundamental to Hume's theory is his distinction between reason (understanding), on the one hand, and sentiment (feeling) on the other. This distinction might properly be drawn on a phenomenological basis, but Hume presents it from within a mixture of a priori and descriptive observations. Both reason and sentiment are, of course, essential capacities of the human mind, not accidental ones. Both are, as such, directly inspectable by reflection. We know that they are by directly examining them, and then certain observations and deductions as to what they do and can do may be made as well.

Reason, for Hume, has only two functions: to discover the relations of ideas by comparing ideas to one another, and to infer the existence of matters of fact from given impressions and ideas (T, 463). It deals in truth and falsehood, which requires its ideas to be, not realities, but *of* realities. This much he offers us as description. Passions, volitions and actions, by contrast, are "original facts and realities, compleat in themselves, and implying no reference to other passions, volitions, and actions" (T, 458). This seems, again, to be phenomenological description: presenting the essence of types of experiences from a direct examination of them.

From these essential descriptions of reason and sentiment, Hume then deduces his well-known view that moral distinctions do not originate from reason unaided by sentiment. He also distinguishes certain "calm" sentiments that have been mistaken for reason in action (T, 417-18). And in a very abrupt phenomenological appeal, he describes our experience of vice in order to show that vice is no matter of fact, such as might exist apart from human attitudes and be inferred by reason:

Take any action allow'd to be vicious: Wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call *vice*. In whichever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, toward this action. Here is a matter of fact; but 'tis the object of feeling, not of reason. It lies in yourself, not in the object. So that when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it. (T, 468-69)

Here the nature or essence of an object is clearly to be settled on the basis of a descriptive claim about the experience of it, of where you "find it."

Hume continues on this phenomenological route by comparing vice and virtue to secondary qualities (sounds, colors, heat and cold, etc.), "which, according to modern philosophy, are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind."

(Misguided phenomenology is still phenomenology!) The appeal to the “breast” and what is found therein is characteristic of the type of quasi-phenomenological work routinely engaged in by British empiricism up through the 19th century.

Having concluded that moral distinctions originate from a natural sentiment, Hume then proceeds to explore which “qualities of mind” are picked out by the moral sentiment as virtues and therefore constitute “Personal Merit.” (Of course, there is a companion sentiment of moral aversion that determines the range of vices.) Here, he thinks, one “can never be considerably mistaken in framing the catalogue.... He needs only enter his own breast for a moment” (E, 174), and the topography of virtues and vices among qualities of mind will be clear.

Having in this way got “the catalogue,” Hume then tries to determine what it is about the particular mental qualities that evokes moral approbation or disapprobation. The by far greater part of both the *Treatise* Book III and the *Enquiry* is then devoted to reflection on and argument about this particular issue.

The outcome of his supposedly “empirical” survey of the lawlike regularities of the moral life is that a virtue must fall into one of four classes: traits that are useful to others, useful to the one who has them, immediately agreeable to others, or immediately agreeable to the one who has them. A virtue may fall into more than one of these classes, as does benevolence, but it may also fall into only one, as does justice. Thus in Hume’s own language, “Personal Merit <virtue> consists altogether in the possession of mental qualities *useful or agreeable to the person himself or to others.*” In this manner “the complete delineation or description of merit seems to be performed as naturally as a shadow is cast by the sun, or an image is reflected upon water” (E, 268; cf. 270, 277 and T, 590–91).

Now there can be no doubt that on Hume’s view, there are virtues with no touch of utility in their makeup. Cheerfulness is but one instance from “another set of mental qualities, which without any utility or any tendency to farther good, either of the community or of the possessor, diffuse a satisfaction on the beholders, and procure friendship and regard” (E, 250; cf. 263— concerning eloquence, genius, good sense, and sound reasoning, which “have a merit distinct from their usefulness”—and T, 611–13).

One might then well ask what is that unifying principle that allows us to bridge the gap between the four classes and find them all to be cases of, precisely, *virtue*. Here it is that we come upon what must be called a descriptive ultimate in Hume’s account: the sentiment of moral approbation itself. Hume’s view is that we can and do directly identify and differentiate a peculiar sentiment of being pleased with a mental quality, and that we can find by reflection that a certain group of mental qualities evoke or are objects of (he speaks in both ways) *that* sentiment or feeling. It is a “pleasing” feeling, as aversion to vice is painful. But the mental qualities are not virtues, nor discovered to be virtues, because of the pleasure. Instead, “in feeling that it pleases after such a peculiar manner, we in effect feel that it is

virtuous.... Our approbation is imply'd <involved> in the immediate pleasure they convey to us" (T, 471; cf. 296). The impressions by which moral good and evil are known are accordingly not merely pleasures or pains, but are "*particular pains or pleasures*" (T, 471, Hume's emphasis).

Hume's analysis says very little, however, about precisely *how* the pleasant feeling of moral approbation is distinct from other pleasant feelings. At this as well as other points one is painfully aware of how far Hume is from a carefully elaborated phenomenological viewpoint. His younger contemporary, Adam Smith (1723–1790), criticized Hume's use of utility as a moral concept at all, on the grounds that we should, if Hume were right, give *moral* approbation to anything that is useful, say, a convenient mechanical device or an intellectual technique. "It seems impossible," Smith said, "that the approbation of virtue should be a sentiment of the same kind with that by which we approve of a convenient and well-contrived building; or that we should have no other reason for praising a man than that for which we commend a chest of drawers."³

Hume's response to this type of criticism, though relegated to a footnote, is highly instructive of his actual reliance upon the phenomenological appeal in his ethical theory as a whole. He remarks that "We ought not to imagine, because an inanimate object may be useful as well as a man, that therefore it ought also, according to this system, to merit the appellation of *virtuous*" (E, 213 n.). And why not? "The sentiments, excited by utility, are, in the two cases, very different; and the one is mixed with affection, esteem, approbation, &c., and not the other.... There are a numerous set of passions and sentiments, of which thinking rational beings are, by the original constitution of nature, the only proper objects: and though the very same qualities be transferred to an insensible, inanimate being, they will not excite the same sentiments" (E, 213).

This is an obvious, if somewhat *ad hoc*, effort at a comparative phenomenological analysis. Hume continues on to say that though there is indeed a "species of approbation attending even inanimate objects, when beneficial, yet this sentiment is so weak, and so different from that which is directed to beneficent magistrates or statesmen; that they ought not to be ranked under the same class or appellation." And, finally, a more general phenomenological point: "A very small variation of the object, even where the same qualities are preserved, will destroy a sentiment. Thus, the same beauty, transferred to a different sex excites no amorous passion, where nature is not extremely perverted."

Two significant points emerge from this discussion, and are in fact found throughout Hume's discussions of the moral sentiment and moral distinctions.

³Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, selections in *British Moralists 1650–1800*, vol. 2, ed. D. D. Raphael (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 246.



<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4020-0770-5>

Phenomenological Approaches to Moral Philosophy
A Handbook

Drummond, J.J.; Embree, L. (Eds.)

2002, VII, 579 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-0770-5