

# Hume's Decisive Turn Away From Egoism

## Hume's Decisive Turn Away from Egoism



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## 1. Psychological Egoism, and Hume's Ultimate Rejection of It

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## Psychological Hedonism and Egoism

- The question here is *what typically motivates our actions*.
- *Psychological hedonism* is the theory that humans are fundamentally motivated (always, or nearly always, and either directly or indirectly) by *the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain*.
- Psychological hedonism is also *egoist* if the pleasure and pain in question are *my own* (rather than other peoples').

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## Ultimate and Instrumental Aims

- The Psychological Egoist need not deny that we have non self-interested desires, e.g. for the benefit of our family, friends, country, favourite sports teams etc.
- However any such desires are claimed to be merely *instrumental*: we desire these things for the benefit (pleasure etc.) they bring to us.
- The crucial claim is that the only thing we desire *ultimately* – rather than for the sake of something else – is our own benefit.

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## Human Fallibility

- Even if all my intentional actions are motivated ultimately by self-interest (pursuing my pleasure, and avoiding my pain), this does not imply that I will *succeed* in these aims:
  - I might calculate wrongly (especially, perhaps, if I am in an emotional state and carried away by "violent" passions);
  - Even if I calculate correctly, I might be unlucky;
  - I might not know what will bring me benefit;
  - My attempts might be frustrated by other people's actions, pursuing their own interests.

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## Removing Potential Confusions

- Doing something *to satisfy my desire for X* need not be self-interested (e.g. suppose I desire to eliminate malaria in Africa).
- Nor need the actual achievement of X imply any *psychological satisfaction* (e.g. I might leave money in my will, in the hope of achieving the elimination of malaria).
- When I do get pleasure from some action, this does not imply that the action was *motivated* by anticipation of that pleasure.

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## Remote and Posthumous Desires

- Many desires are such that we shall never know whether they are fulfilled:
  - that David Hume meant what I think he did;
  - “Henceforth, the Author desires, that the following Pieces may alone be regarded as containing his philosophical sentiments and principles”;
  - that my papers will still be read in 50 years;
  - that my children (and their children) will live long and happy lives after I have died;
  - that my sacrifice will help to defeat the invader;
  - that humans will travel beyond the solar system.

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## Hume and Joseph Butler

- In 1737-8, Henry Home (later Lord Kames) gave Hume – just back from France – an introductory letter to Joseph (soon to be Bishop) Butler, who by then was famous as author of *The Analogy of Religion* (1736). Unfortunately, however, Butler was away when Hume called in March 1738.
- This connection might very naturally have led Hume to consult Butler's *Fifteen Sermons* (1726, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition 1736).
  - Sermon XI “Upon the Love of our Neighbour” is the classic source for Butler's celebrated attack on psychological egoism.

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## Butler: The Cart Before the Horse

- Suppose I insure my life so that my wife and children will prosper after my death.
- The Egoist may claim that I do this for my own interest, to avoid the pain of personal anxiety about their potential future suffering etc.
- Butler points out that this sort of account gets the cause and effect the wrong way round:
  - It is not that concern for my family is motivated by my desire to avoid personal anxiety;
  - rather, the personal anxiety results from the fact that I am concerned for my family.

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## “Of the Dignity or Meanness of Human Nature” (1741)

“In my opinion, there are two things which have led astray those philosophers, that have insisted so much on the selfishness of man. In the *first* place, they found, that every act of virtue or friendship was attended with a secret pleasure; whence they concluded, that friendship and virtue could not be disinterested. But the fallacy of this is obvious. The virtuous sentiment or passion produces the pleasure, and does not arise from it. I feel a pleasure in doing good to my friend, because I love him; but do not love him for the sake of that pleasure.” (DM 10)

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## Butler's Influence Confirmed

- A significant footnote occurs in the 1748 and 1750 editions of the first *Enquiry*:

“ \* ... It has been prov'd, beyond all Controversy, that even the Passions, commonly esteem'd selfish, carry the Mind beyond Self, directly to the Object; that tho' the Satisfaction of these Passions gives us Enjoyment, yet the Prospect of this Enjoyment is not the Cause of the Passion, but on the contrary the Passion is antecedent to the Enjoyment, and without the former, the latter could never possibly exist; ...” (1748, 1.14 n.)

\* See *Butler's* sermons

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## *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751)

“Nature must, by the internal Frame and Constitution of the Mind, give an original Propensity to Fame, 'ere we can reap any Pleasure from it, or pursue it from Motives of Self-love, and a Desire of Happiness. If I have no Vanity, I take no Delight in Praise: If I be void of Ambition, Power gives no Enjoyment: If I be not angry, the Punishment of an Adversary is totally indifferent to me.”  
(M 1751, 2.12 – moved in 1777 to Appendix 2)

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# Hume's Decisive Turn Away From Egoism

## 2. Psychological Egoism in the *Treatise*

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## Locke's Hedonism and Egoism

- "happiness and that alone ... moves *desire*";
- "Happiness ... in its full extent is "the utmost Pleasure we are capable of";
- "what has an aptness to produce Pleasure in us, is that we call *Good*, and what is apt to produce Pain in us, we call *Evil*, for no other reason, but for its aptness to produce Pleasure and Pain in us, wherein consists our *Happiness and Misery*" (*Essay II xxi 41-2*)

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## Hedonism in Hume's Direct Passions

- "By direct passions I understand such as arise immediately from good or evil, from pain or pleasure." (*T 2.1.1.4*, cf. *2.3.1.1*, *2.3.9.1-8*)
- "Tis *obvious*, that when we have the prospect of pain or pleasure from any object, we feel a consequent emotion of aversion or propensity" (*T 2.3.3.3*, my emphasis – clearly means *our* pain/pleasure)
- "Tis *easy to observe*, that the passions, both direct and indirect, are founded on pain and pleasure ... Upon the removal of pain and pleasure there immediately follows a removal of ... desire and aversion ..." (*T 2.3.9.1*, cf. *Locke Essay, II vii 3-4*)

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## But "Hume is No Egoist" !!

- "Certainly, Hume is no egoist, ... Hume also believes that humans possess 'natural' virtues, many of which are inherently sociable" (Gill 2000, p. 90)
- "Hume is no egoist: the operation of sympathy guarantees that human beings are concerned for the pleasures and pains of others as well as their own, and he recognises other basic instinctual desires and aversions." (Garrett, 2014, p. 114)

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- "Hume is no egoist. He allows that human beings care for family and friends as well as for themselves. Indeed he maintains that they have a greater affection for those close to them, taken together, than for themselves. [*T 3.2.2.5*]" (Owens 2011, p. 72)
- "However, not all our behaviour is driven by the prospect of personal pleasure and pain, and Hume is no psychological egoist. Various direct passions '... [arise naturally] ... The desire of punishment to our enemies, and of happiness to our friends; hunger, lust, and a few other bodily appetites' [*T 2.3.9.8*]" (Millican 2012, p. 128)

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## Four Aspects of Hume's Alleged "Non-Egoism"

- Natural virtues that are inherently sociable;
- Sympathy or fellow-feeling;
- Benevolence ("desire of happiness") to family and friends; anger ("desire of punishment") to our enemies;
- Other basic instinctual desires and aversions: "hunger, lust, and a few other bodily appetites".

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# Hume's Decisive Turn Away From Egoism

## Natural, Sociable Virtues

"That many of the natural virtues have this tendency to the good of society, no one can doubt of. Meekness, beneficence, charity, generosity, clemency, moderation, equity, ... are commonly denominated the *social* virtues, to mark their tendency to the good of society. ... moral distinctions arise, in a great measure, from the tendency of qualities and characters to the interest of society, and ... 'tis our concern for that interest, which makes us approve or disapprove of them. Now we have no such extensive concern for society but from sympathy; and consequently 'tis that principle, which takes us so far out of ourselves, as to give us the same pleasure or uneasiness in the characters of others which are useful or pernicious to society as if they had a tendency to our own advantage or loss." (T 3.3.1.11)

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## The Function of Humean Sympathy

- Humean sympathy is a *mechanism* that replicates other people's perceived emotions in our own, e.g. causing pity:

"We have a lively idea of every thing related to us. All human creatures are related to us by resemblance. Their persons, therefore, their interests, their passions, their pains and pleasures must strike upon us in a lively manner, and produce an emotion similar to the original one; since a lively idea is easily converted into an impression." (T 2.2.7.2)

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## Sympathy's Theoretical Role

- Sympathy thus enables our concern for others' wellbeing to be accommodated within an egoist framework, saving it from evident refutation.
- Accordingly, once I become aware that others' pain and pleasure impacts on my own (through sympathy), I will start to care about these:  
"Tis from the prospect of pain or pleasure that the aversion or propensity arises towards any object: And these emotions extend themselves to the causes and effects of that object, as they are pointed out to us by reason and experience." (T 2.3.3.3)

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## A Speculation Regarding the General Point of View

- In the *Treatise*, the "steady and general points of view" that characterise moral judgement (T 3.3.1.15) are confined to "that narrow circle, in which any person moves" (T 3.3.3.2; cf. also 3.3.1.18, 29, 30; 3.3.2.17). Why?
- An obvious hypothesis is that Hume thinks only thus can *sympathy* get a purchase: sympathy with abstract humanity in general is not psychologically possible (cf. 3.2.1.12).

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## 3. Complications, and Developmental Hypotheses

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## Admitting Unselfish Benevolence and Anger

- "Love is always follow'd by a desire of the happiness of the person belov'd, and an aversion to his misery: As hatred produces a desire of the misery and an aversion to the happiness of the person hated." (T 2.2.6.3)
- resentment against someone who injures me "often ... makes me desire his evil and punishment, *independent of all considerations of pleasure and advantage to myself*" (T 2.3.3.9, emphasis added)

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# Hume's Decisive Turn Away From Egoism

## A Contingent Blending

- At *T* 2.2.6.3-6, Hume is analysing how the passion of love characteristically blends with benevolence (and hatred with anger). He concludes that the two passions are, in fact, quite distinct, "and only conjoin'd ... by the original constitution of the mind" (*T* 2.2.6.6).
- So we *happen to be* constituted in such a way that we naturally feel unselfish benevolence (or anger) towards those we love (or hate).
  - Isn't this proof that the *Treatise* considers us *not to be* pure egoists? **Yes it is**, but the immediately preceding paragraph seems significant ...

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## Belated Recognition, and a Theoretical Cost

"... I begin to be sensible ... of a misfortune, that has attended every system of philosophy, with which the world has been yet acquainted. 'Tis commonly found, that in accounting for the operations of nature by any particular hypothesis; ... there is always some phaenomenon, which is more stubborn, and will not so easily bend to our purpose. ... the difficulty, which I have at present in my eye, is no-wise contrary to my system; but only departs a little from that simplicity, which has been hitherto its principal force and beauty." (*T* 2.2.6.2)

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- It is striking that Hume's only other topic-specific mentions of theoretical "simplicity" (cf. *T* 1.3.16.3 and *E* 4.12) occur in connection with egoism:

"The most obvious objection to the selfish hypothesis, is, that, ... it is contrary to common feeling and our most unprejudiced notions ... All attempts [to reduce benevolence etc. to selfish motives] have hitherto proved fruitless, and seem to have proceeded entirely, from that love of *simplicity*, which has been the source of much false reasoning in philosophy" (*M App* 2.6, cf. 2.7)

"the hypothesis, which allows of a disinterested benevolence, distinct from self-love, has really more *simplicity* in it, and is more conformable to the analogy of nature, than that which pretends to resolve all friendship and humanity into this latter principle" (*M App* 2.12)

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## Confused Acceptance

- Having belatedly recognised this phenomenon of unselfish benevolence etc., Hume seems to have attempted to adjust his theory so as to preserve the connection with pleasure and pain:

"Beside good and evil, or in other words, pain and pleasure, the direct passions frequently arise from a natural impulse or instinct, which is perfectly unaccountable. Of this kind is the desire of punishment to our enemies, and of happiness to our friends; hunger, lust, and a few other bodily appetites. These passions, properly speaking, produce good and evil, and proceed not from them, like the other affections." (*T* 2.3.9.8, cf. 2.1.1.4 above)

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## A Developmental Hypothesis

- Hume started from Lockean hedonist egoism (tempered by sympathy), but modified his view when he came to consider:
  - Benevolence and resentment, which can outrun any plausible sympathetic explanation (*T* 2.2.6);
  - "The amorous passion" (2.2.11), recognising the phenomenon of bodily appetite, and describing hunger as a "primary inclination of the soul" (§3);
  - "The love and hatred of animals" (*T* 2.2.12), noting the "peculiar instinct" for love of offspring (§5), and also the tendency of animals towards affection or enmity depending on how they are treated (§3).

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## 4. Conclusion (for the present)

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## The Zeal of a Convert

- In the first edition of the second *Enquiry* (1751), Hume devoted the first half of Section II, "Of Benevolence" (p. 11-22), to a systematic attack on the selfish hypothesis, distancing himself completely from it. (We now know this as the second Appendix to the moral *Enquiry*.)

"An *Epicurean* or a *Hobbist* ... may attempt, by a philosophical Chymistry, to resolve the Elements of this Passion [friendship] ... into those of another, and explain every Affection to be Self-love, twisted and moulded into a Variety of Shapes and Appearances. (M 1751, 2.4)

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## The Fundamental Egoism of the *Treatise*

- a) The *Treatise* shows clear signs of having started from Locke's egoist hedonism.
- b) Sympathy is often considered contrary to egoism, though in fact it supports it.
- c) Genuine benevolence to those we love is contrary, but highlighted by Hume as theoretically awkward.
- d) Several of Hume's works show a very clear historical progression away from egoism.

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## INTERLUDE

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## Response to John Wright

- As John stresses, Hume clearly recognises a distinction between overtly self-interested and moral motivation (the latter involving sympathy, a general point-of-view etc.).
- But at the beginning of his attack on "the selfish hypothesis" in the second *Enquiry*, Hume himself points out that "An Epicurean or a Hobbist" can readily draw such distinctions too. So such recognition does not imply adoption of a non-egoist theory.

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## From Butler, Sermon XI

[6] "all particular appetites and passions are towards external things themselves, distinct from the pleasure arising from them, ... there could not be this pleasure, were it not for that prior suitability between the object and the passion: there could be no enjoyment or delight from one thing more than another, ... if there were not an affection or appetite to one thing more than another."

[7] "Every particular affection, ... is as really our own affection as self-love; ... And if, because every particular affection is a man's own, ... such particular affection must be called self-love; according to this way of speaking, no creature whatever can possibly act but meerly from self-love; ... But then this is not the language of mankind; or ... we should want words to express the difference between ... an action, proceeding from cool consideration that it will be to my own advantage; and an action, suppose of revenge or of friendship, by which a man runs upon certain ruin, to do evil or good to another. ... the principle ... in one case is self-love; in the other, hatred or love of another."

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## Sympathy: Selected Passages (of many!)

- T 2.2.5.17: "this is an advantage, that concerns only the owner, nor is there any thing but sympathy, which can interest the spectator."
- T 2.2.9.9: "Our concern for our own interest gives us a pleasure in the pleasure, and a pain in the pain of a partner, after the same manner as by sympathy we feel a sensation correspondent to those, which appear in any person, who is present with us."
- T 2.2.9.13: "Sympathy being nothing but a lively idea converted into an impression, ... we may enter into [another's future condition] with so vivid a conception as to make it our own concern; and by that means be sensible of pains and pleasures, which neither belong to ourselves, nor at the present instant have any real existence."

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- T 3.2.1.12: "In general, it may be affirm'd, that there is no such passion in human minds, as the love of mankind, merely as such, ... [our concern for others' happiness or misery when represented to us in lively colours] proceeds merely from sympathy, and is no proof of such an universal affection to mankind"
- T 3.2.2.24: "when the injustice is so distant from us, as no way to affect our interest, it still displeases us; because ... We partake of their uneasiness by sympathy;"
- T 2.2.9.20: "Custom and relation make us enter deeply into the sentiments of others; and whatever fortune we suppose to attend them, is render'd present to us by the imagination, and operates as if originally our own. We rejoice in their pleasures, and grieve for their sorrows, merely from the force of sympathy. "

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- T 3.3.1.8: "Now the pleasure of a stranger, for whom we have no friendship, pleases us only by sympathy. ... Wherever an object has a tendency to produce pleasure in the possessor, ... it is sure to please the spectator, by a delicate sympathy with the possessor."
- T 3.3.1.9: "Now as the means to an end can only be agreeable, where the end is agreeable; and as the good of society, where our own interest is not concern'd, or that of our friends, pleases only by sympathy: It follows, that sympathy is the source of the esteem, which we pay to all the artificial virtues."
- T 3.3.1.11: "... we have no such extensive concern for society but from sympathy; and consequently 'tis that principle, which ... give[s] us the same pleasure or uneasiness in the characters of others which are useful or pernicious to society as if they had a tendency to our own advantage or loss."

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- T 3.3.1.25: "The person is a stranger: ... His happiness concerns not me, farther than the happiness of every human, and indeed of every sensible creature: That is, it affects me only by sympathy."
- T 3.3.2.3: "The sentiments of others can never affect us, but by becoming, in some measure, our own"
- T 3.3.6.2: "Means to an end are only valued so far as the end is valued. But the happiness of strangers affects us by sympathy alone. To that principle, therefore, we are to ascribe the sentiment of approbation, which arises from the survey of all those virtues, that are useful to society, or to the person possess'd of them. These form the most considerable part of morality."

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## The Passage at T 2.2.6.2

"... I begin to be sensible ... of a misfortune, that has attended every system of philosophy, with which the world has been yet acquainted. 'Tis commonly found, that in accounting for the operations of nature by any particular hypothesis; ... there is always some phaenomenon, which is more stubborn, and will not so easily bend to our purpose. ... the difficulty, which I have at present in my eye, is no-wise contrary to my system; but only departs a little from that simplicity, which has been hitherto its principal force and beauty." (T 2.2.6.2)

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## John says ...

- "The stubborn phenomenon which Hume identifies in the fifth paragraph is that while the passions of love and hatred normally mix entirely with their associated desires, benevolence and anger, the passions can last for a time without the desires ... He argues that this 'clearly proves' that the associated ideas of benevolence and anger 'are not the same as love and hatred, nor make any essential part of them' (T 2.2.6.5)"

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## Rejecting One Hypothesis, ...

"The conjunction of this desire and aversion with love and hatred may be accounted for by two different hypotheses. The first is, that ... love is nothing but the desire of happiness to another person, and hatred that of misery. The desire and aversion constitute the very nature of love and hatred. They are not only inseparable but the same.

But this is evidently contrary to experience. For ... these desires ... are not absolutely essential to love and hatred. ... The passions may express themselves in a hundred ways, and may subsist a considerable time, without our reflecting on the happiness or misery of their objects; which clearly proves, that these desires are not the same with love and hatred, nor make any essential part of them." (T 2.2.6.4-5)

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## ... and Embracing the Other

"We may, therefore, infer, that benevolence and anger are passions different from love and hatred, and only conjoin'd with them, by the original constitution of the mind. ... This order of things, abstractedly consider'd, is not necessary. Love and hatred might have been unattended with any such desires, or their particular connexion might have been entirely revers'd. If nature had so pleas'd, love might have had the same effect as hatred, and hatred as love. I see no contradiction in supposing a desire of producing misery annex'd to love, and of happiness to hatred." (T 2.2.6.6)

- The loss of simplicity that Hume bemoans, therefore, is apparently the need for this new original principle.

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- It is striking that Hume's only other topic-specific mentions of theoretical "simplicity" (cf. T 1.3.16.3 and E 4.12) occur in connection with egoism:

"The most obvious objection to the selfish hypothesis, is, that, ... it is contrary to common feeling and our most unprejudiced notions ... All attempts [to reduce benevolence etc. to selfish motives] have hitherto proved fruitless, and seem to have proceeded entirely, from that love of *simplicity*, which has been the source of much false reasoning in philosophy" (M App 2.6, cf. 2.7)

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