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TALENTS, ABILITIES AND VIRTUES

ROBIN ATTFIELD

HUME REGARDS it as a mere "Verbal Dispute"¹ whether or not various "natural abilities" should be regarded as moral virtues. In his *Treatise* he complains that "good sense and judgment", "parts and understanding" are classed in all systems of ethics of the day with bodily endowments and ascribed no "merit or moral worth".² Yet if compared with the received virtues, they fell short in no material respect, both sets being "mental qualities" and each equally tending to procure "the love and esteem of mankind".

But Hume's opponents saw the distinction as of great importance. "Those who represent the distinction betwixt natural abilities and moral virtues as very material . . . say that the former are entirely involuntary and have therefore no merit attending them, as having no dependence on liberty and freewill."³ Hume is thus denying that there is any important difference not only between natural abilities and moral virtues, but also between mental qualities not in any way dependent on choice and mental qualities dependent on choice. For it is his view not only that there are some natural abilities which might just as easily be included in the list of the virtues as excluded from it, but also that non-voluntariness is no bar to inclusion, and that inclusion is just as possible whether a quality is in some way voluntary or not. But since this view implies that people may justly be blamed for what is no fault of their own, as well as praised for what is no merit of their own, Hume would seem to be wrong in holding that the dispute about the classification of the "natural abilities" is merely verbal. At the same time Hume seems to be right and his opponents wrong in holding that some qualities, currently not regarded as virtuous, might equally well be so regarded.

Hume's first reply to his opponents is to the effect that not even for qualities traditionally virtuous is voluntariness necessary. Thus "constancy, fortitude and magnanimity" are just as involuntary as "the qualities of the judgment and the imagination".⁴ Now certainly few can change their character at will, and these qualities of the "great man" may be harder to attain by trying than most. Yet we do ordinarily suppose that a man deserves credit for his own character and is in some measure responsible for it, having acquired it in part as a result of his own past choices.

So to make this reply stick, Hume would have to adduce grounds for supposing that a man has no share in forming his own dispositions. Now there is certainly a special difficulty in the case of virtues not accessible to all. Over the classical concept of "magnanimity" Hume could point out that appropriate conduct is not within the reach of the majority, since wealth and status are prerequisites. But even this does not show that voluntariness may be absent from magnanimity in the cases of those who do attain it. Nor is lack of magnanimity held to be a vice in those who lack the wherewithal. Yet Hume may, paradoxically, be right over one matter here: for, since certain qualities of the judgment and the imagination, such as discretion and moral sensitivity, may plausibly be held to be affected by a man's past choices, they are thus voluntary to exactly the same degree as constancy, fortitude and magnanimity. Thus, when, in Appendix IV of the *Inquiry*, Hume holds that there is no bar to holding certain intellectual qualities, "prudence, penetration, discernment, discretion"⁵ as virtues there need be no objection in point of voluntariness. For

these qualities, as also "constancy, fortitude and magnanimity", are much more voluntary than Hume supposes.

Hume's second reply runs as follows. "I would have any one give me a reason why virtue and vice may not be involuntary, as well as beauty and deformity. These moral distinctions arise from natural distinctions of pain and pleasure; and when we receive those feelings from the general consideration of any quality or character we denominate it vicious or virtuous. Now I believe no one will assert, that a quality can never produce pleasure or pain to the person who considers it, unless it be perfectly voluntary in the person who possesses it".

We can probably assume here that by pain and pleasure, Hume intends disapproval and approval. And Hume is, if so, maintaining that a quality habitually and generally approved is a virtue and a quality habitually and generally disapproved is a vice. He then adds that voluntariness is not necessary in qualities for them to be approved. This point has some plausibility: for we praise many qualities which are in no way due to the credit of the person who bears them, e.g. beauty, artlessness, flair, intelligence (in at least one sense), and generally gifts of all kinds. Indeed we often praise the bearers of these qualities, as Hume himself points out at the end of *Inquiry*, Appendix IV.⁶ But this is only possible because not all praise is moral praise, nor all approval moral approval. Were every case of our approval and disapproval a case of moral approval or disapproval, people could justly be berated for misfortunes such as nervousness, ignorance or uncultivatedness of upbringing. It is therefore important that these misfortunes are not vices.

To be fair to Hume, he has the consistency to consider at *Treatise* Book III, Part III, Section V⁷ whether physical attractiveness as well as mental qualities should be regarded as a virtue: but he is led to this kind of position by his own theory that a virtue is any quality which occasions pleasure through either its utility or agreeableness either to its possessor or to others. It should be admitted that Hume sees some of the difficulties: "A convenient house and a virtuous character cause not the same feeling of approbation, even though the source of our approbation be the same, and flow from sympathy and an idea of utility".⁸ This variation Hume finds inexplicable: had he followed it up he would have discovered that of these qualities which we disapprove only some are qualities logically appropriate for indignation, while others are rather matters of regret or pity instead. Hume is effectively proposing a conceptual reform by which the underprivileged could legitimately be censured. Again the distinction Hume is disputing emerges as hardly trivial.

Hume's third reply is that free will is irrelevant among possible requirements for a quality to be a virtue, for to be voluntary, actions do not have to be free. Hume is here appealing to his own attempted refutation of libertarianism at *Treatise* Book II: Part III: Section I and II.⁹ There he maintains that praise, blame, rewards and punishments are only conceivable let alone just, if the actions of the persons so treated are caused by the character of the person concerned. The theory that free will involves determinism has been adequately discussed by Mrs. Foot,¹⁰ and I do not mean to discuss it here. For even if Hume is right voluntariness, though not freedom, could still be required of a quality by his opponents before it was recognized as a virtue. Thus all Hume's replies miscarry.

The passage which follows reveals the identity of Hume's opponents.¹¹ It is observed by sundry legislators, divines and moralists that natural abilities admit of little improvement whatever rewards punishments,

praise or blame are essayed, whereas the so-called moral virtues do respond to this treatment. And this accounts for the invention of the distinction between virtues and natural abilities. Wherever incentives and deterrents are of use, moralists devise an artificial distinction to legitimize their activities. Hume now derides the narrowness of the theologians' list of virtues by pointing out how in the ancient world prudence headed the list of the cardinal virtues.

At this point both Hume and, if he reports them aright, his opponents, seem to be labouring under a misapprehension. For, as noted above, certain intellectual qualities such as discretion are just as voluntary as virtues like constancy. It may be pointless to exhort men to be prudent, but there is no reason why such exhortation, whenever it occurs, should not succeed. Thus if voluntariness were the sole difficulty, the theologians could have joined Hume in regarding his list of mental qualities, "industry, perseverance, patience, activity, vigilance, application, constancy" as a list of virtues.¹² Most probably the theologians' real objection was to the self-regardingness of these intellectual qualities, and not to their supposed lack of voluntariness.

On this score, we should perhaps do well to side with Hume. If, as has been argued by R. S. Downie and Elizabeth Telfer,¹³ there is a duty to respect the distinctive human endowment as we find it in ourselves, then there are self-regarding virtues such as self-control and fostering one's own rationality. Indeed some opportunities for prudence will involve the duty of being prudent, such as when we have the chance to develop our own talents, and are under no obligation to anyone else to desist or do something else instead. Moreover any exercise of our own rationality will be *ceteris paribus* a mark of virtue. Hume, in a footnote in Appendix IV of his Inquiry, notes that were Cicero "now alive, it would be found difficult to persuade him that no qualities were to be admitted as virtues or acknowledged to be a part of personal merit, but what were recommended by 'The Whole Duty of Man'" (a devotional handbook by a royalist divine, probably Allestree). We have now seen grounds for agreeing with Cicero, whose list of virtues includes intellectual as well as "moral" ones.¹⁴

It now becomes clear why Hume thought it was only arbitrariness which prevented the natural abilities being regarded as virtues. Most of the examples he had in mind, e.g. "good sense and judgment" "parts and understanding", were intellectual qualities which were despised by contemporary theologians but for not dissociating which from the virtues there were good grounds. These examples might be classed as "intellectual dispositions whose acquisition involves effort and beneficial to oneself". Hume unfortunately misclassified them as natural abilities (too wide a category and misleading because it includes talents), or, in his Inquiry, as talents (the wrong category altogether). For some natural abilities like charm and (in at least one sense) intelligence do not involve effort, and talents are unlike the intellectual dispositions mentioned above in precisely this same respect. Again, certain misfortunes such as dullness of character or lack of polish do not reflect adversely on the past choices of their possessors: as qualities they may be disapproved, but we do not in justice or in logic blame these unfortunate people because of these deficiencies. On the other hand the intellectual dispositions mentioned above may fitly be classed as virtues, without our at the same time including among the virtues capacities and talents whose possession is asset but not merit, and whose absence misfortune but no reproach.

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¹An Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, Appendix IV, Of some verbal disputes. Ed. Charles W. Hendel, Bobbs-Merrill, 1957.

²A Treatise of Human Nature, Book III, Part III, Section IV, in Hume's Philosophical Works, Vol. II, p. 391. (Edinburgh, 1854).

³*Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 393.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 393.

⁵An Inquiry, p. 129.

⁶An Inquiry, pp. 138–39.

⁷Works, Vol. II, pp. 400 f.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 404.

⁹*Ibid.*, 148–63.

¹⁰"Freewill as involving Determinism", Philosophical Review, 1957.

¹¹Cf. P. 138 of An Inquiry, Appendix IV.

¹²Works, Vol. II, p. 396.

¹³R. S. Downie and Elizabeth Telfer, Respect for Persons, Allen and Unwin, 1969, Ch. 3.

¹⁴An Inquiry, p. 135.