The Artificiality of the General Point of View in Hume's Ethics

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to show that David Hume's "general point of view" (hereafter abbreviated to GPV) is derived from "convention". According to Hume, by taking up the GPV, we can evaluate other people's moral quality impartially. Also, convention enables us to establish fundamental social rules cooperatively. For example, rules of justice (or property), language and currency are all derived from convention (T 3.2.2.10).[1]

Although Hume never explicitly says that convention is necessary for establishing the GPV, but the formation process of the GPV seems to be very similar to that of justice. Therefore, I argue that the GPV is also derived from convention and, as a result, impartial moral evaluation is another social artifice.

In the first section, I give the standard interpretation of Hume's theory of moral evaluation. In the next section, I show that the GPV cannot be acquired without convention, and in the following section, I explain why impartial moral evaluation based on the GPV is nothing but social artifice.

2. Hume's Theory of Moral Evaluation

According to Hume's *Treatise*, it is our sentiment that immediately makes us distinguish between moral good and evil. However, not every sentiment does so. Only "*particular* pains or pleasures" (T 3.1.2.3) are moral sentiments. There are two necessary conditions under which such sentiments are excited. As Hume says:

> [It] is only when *a character* is consider'd in general, *without reference to our particular interest*, that it causes such a feeling or sentiment, as denominates it morally good or evil. (T 3.1.2.4; my emphasis)

Thus, moral sentiment is excited in the mind of an evaluator only when the evaluator (1)

considers someone's character and (2) does so without reference to the evaluator's own interest. Then, if she feels pleasure, she will regard the evaluee as virtuous, or if she feels pain, vicious.

How can we fulfil the two conditions and where does such a pleasure or pain come from? Basically, we can answer these questions by combining two sources of moral sentiment, which Hume found in human nature, that is, *four types of moral qualities* and *sympathy*.

Although there are many different qualities regarded as virtuous by people, Hume classifies them into four categories, that is, qualities that are useful or immediately agreeable to others or us (T 3.3.1.30). For example, benevolence is useful to others, diligence is useful to us, wit is agreeable to others and good humour is agreeable to us. All these qualities produce pleasure in the mind of those who are affected by them, whereas qualities that are harmful or disagreeable produce pain, in a like manner.

However, such pleasures or pains that a person produces are only felt by a limited number of people who actually receive some benefit or damage. In fact, the rest of the people do not feel any pleasures or pains directly. Therefore, if sentiment from interest was the foundation of moral evaluation, we would never evaluate those people who have never directly affected us. Of course, this is not the case. For instance, when we hear about an utter stranger who devoted all her energy to helping the deprived, we often praise her. But why do we do this?

What occurs here is the sympathy which means our natural "propensity […] to receive by communication [others'] inclinations and sentiments" (T 2.1.11.2). Hume thinks that sympathy depends on our causal inference and imagination (T 2.1.11.7). Although we can never directly perceive another's sentiment (such as grief), we can observe its cause (such as watching a tragedy) or effect (such as tears), from which we can infer and imagine the sentiment, and in cases where the idea of the sentiment is vivid and lively enough, it is converted into the sentiment itself and touches our mind.[2]

Therefore, by sympathizing with those who are directly affected by a quality of an evaluee, we can receive the same pleasure or pain that they felt or will feel. Since the pleasure or pain is irrelevant to our own interest, by referring to the feeling we are able to evaluate someone who has never directly affected us.

According to Hume, however, we have a natural tendency to sympathize more easily

with those who have three types of relationship with us: the relations of cause and effect (of blood), of resemblance and of contiguity (T 2.1.11.8).

> Therefore, we sympathize more with persons contiguous to us than with persons remote from us: with our acquaintance more than with strangers – with our countrymen more than with foreigners. (T 3.3.1.14)

and also,

> Our situation, with regard both to persons and things, is in continual fluctuation; […] besides, every particular man has a peculiar position with regard to others. (T 3.3.1.15)

Consequently, our evaluations of the same quality can *never* reach an agreement, because of incessant variations in our relations to possessors of the quality. For example, an enemy's heroism is useful to his fellow soldiers and harmful to our soldiers. In this case, since enemy aliens sympathize more with their soldiers, they praise him, but since we sympathize more with our soldiers, we blame him.

In this way, variations in our sympathy make the universality of moral evaluation impossible. However, Hume thinks, in practice "we give the same approbation to the same moral qualities" wherever and whenever they appear (T 3.3.1.14). So how can our moral evaluation, at least sometimes, reach an agreement? Here Hume introduces the general point of view.

> [It is] impossible we cou'd ever converse together on any reasonable terms, were each of us to consider characters and persons, only as they appear from his peculiar point of view. In order, therefore, to prevent those continual *contradictions*, and arrive at a more *stable* judgment of things, we fix on some *steady* and *general* points of view; and always, in our thoughts, place ourselves in them, whatever may be our present situation. (T 3.3.1.15)

To evaluate someone from our "peculiar point of view" is to sympathize more with those

who have a stronger relation to us. In this case, the objects of our sympathy are different from each other, so the pleasures or pains we receive are also different. As a result, our evaluations are subject to partiality and are completely relative.

On the other hand, the "steady and general points of view", which are restated as the "common point of view" (T 3.3.1.30), can be shared by every evaluator. According to Hume, such a viewpoint is nothing but the viewpoint of "the person himself, whose character is examin'd" and "persons, who have a connexion with him" (T 3.3.1.30). The pleasures or pains these people receive from an evaluee are common to every evaluator. Therefore, if every evaluator sympathizes with those people around an evaluee, that is, her "narrow circle" (T 3.3.3.2), the pleasures or pains every evaluator receives should be in common. Consequently, every evaluator's moral evaluations also reach an agreement.

However, at this point, some famous problems arise. Why do we try to take up the GPV? Why do we regulate our natural tendency to sympathize partially? In order to answer these questions, the motive for taking up the GPV needs to be shown.

3. Criticism of the Natural Motive Interpretation

What is the motive for taking up the GPV?[3] If the GPV can be acquired without convention, we need to find a natural motive that is strong enough to repress our tendency to sympathize partially.[4] Here, I will examine Korsgaard's interpretation, which seems to be the most plausible of the "natural motive" interpretations.

Although Hume says that without sharing a viewpoint "we find so many contradictions to our sentiments in society and conversation" (T 3.3.1.18), they cannot be logical contradictions as Korsgaard points out (Korsgaard 1999, 25). For example, if an evaluator says, "He is kind" and another evaluator says, "He is not kind", then, what is the problem? There are many conflicting perspectives in daily life, but our society or conversation does not always collapse in each case.

However, the fact that our evaluations do not match means that each evaluator receives different pleasures or pains from the same evaluee. And when the evaluators express the sentiments to each other, they naturally sympathize with each other (Korsgaard 1999, 24). Then each evaluator possesses different pleasures or pains in response to the same person. This emotional turmoil, that is, "the opposition betwixt the passion, which is natural to

them, and that receiv'd by sympathy" (T 2.1.11.19) produces an unbearable pain. "A violent lover […] is very much displeas'd when you blame and condemn his love; tho 'tis evident your opposition can have no influence, but by the hold it takes of himself, and by his sympathy with you" (T 2.1.11.19). Therefore, each evaluator must try to take up a shared point of view in order to avoid the pain (Korsgaard 1999, 25-6).

I agree with Korsgaard because Hume says, "The chief spring or actuating principle of the human mind is pleasure or pain" (T 3.3.1.2). However, there is a problem. Why should a shared view be the GPV, that is, the viewpoint of a narrow circle of the evaluee? Korsgaard ignores this problem because she argues that the evaluation from such a viewpoint is more refined and presupposes that "we take the judgments we make from the general point of view to be normative" (Korsgaard 1999, 15).[5]

However, the motive for the GPV, which she showed, is an aversion to strong pain, and not any normative forces. That is to say, we only try to take up a shared point of view *with reference to our own interest*. Then, for example, I may think it is better for me to force others to take up my peculiar point of view. If we can even take up the viewpoint of our enemy as Hume said, it should also be possible for all evaluators to take up my viewpoint every time they evaluate someone, at least in theory. Or someone may think it is better to force others to take up the viewpoint of someone he or she likes. In any case, whatever viewpoint we share, since the people we sympathize with are common to all of us, our evaluations of any evaluee should reach an agreement.

I do not think these examples are unusual. We can observe similar cases in ordinary life. Indeed, it is especially possible if we have some authority, status or some other significant factor. However, we never believe that such points of view are the moral point of view. Therefore, it seems likely that we have a normative consciousness regarding moral evaluation. What is the source of this consciousness? Why should a shared point of view be the viewpoint of an evaluee's narrow circle? And again, why can we take up this viewpoint? We only have recourse to our own interest, which encourages us to try to take up a mere shared point of view or, more likely, our favourite point of view. So, the answer is not in nature. Instead, it is time to examine the "artificial motive" interpretation.

4. Why the GPV is derived from convention

4. 1 Analogy between the society and the GPV

Although there are many types of "artificial motive" interpretations, no researcher have shown why convention, which is essential for the social artifice, is requisite for the GPV, as far as I know.[6] I will show that we can explain the origin of the GPV in the very same manner as the explanation of society that Hume gave. In fact, we cannot explain the origin of the GPV unless we appeal to convention.

First of all, let's see why convention is introduced in *Treatise*. In the state of nature, or the pre-social state, man is suffering from an imbalance between "the numberless wants and necessities" and "the slender means" (T 3.2.2.2). "[It is] by society alone he is able to supply his defects" (T 3.2.2.3) because society enables us to cooperate with each other. And people come to notice "the advantages, which they may reap from society" through the cooperation in a natural family. However, our "*selfishness*" (T 3.2.2.5) "must necessarily produce an opposition of passions, and a consequent opposition of actions" (T 3.2.2.6). Moreover, we encounter "our outward circumstances", that is, "the instability of [goods'] possession, along with their scarcity" (T 3.2.2.7). As a result, "[this] avidity alone, of acquiring goods and possessions for ourselves and our nearest friends, is insatiable, perpetual, universal, and directly destructive of society" (T 3.2.2.12).

In short, despite the fact that social cooperation is vital to our happiness, there is nothing stronger and more uncontrollable in human nature than "passion of interest", which incessantly makes us conflict with each other (T 3.2.2.12). Because of this contradiction which nature imposes on us, "[the] remedy, then, is not deriv'd from nature, but from *artifice*", which is "a convention" (T 3.2.2.9) that makes us create rules of justice or property and follow them.

We can show why convention is also necessary for the establishment of the GPV in the same manner. In the pre-GVP state, we are suffering from pain produced by a disagreement of evaluation. Only by a shared point of view are we able to avoid the pain, because a shared point of view enables us to reach an agreement. And we begin to notice the pleasure which we may reap from a shared point of view through the agreements of evaluation that were often achieved among people who are close on multiple occasions. However, our selfishness must necessarily produce opposition of passions and a consequent opposition of actions. Moreover, we encounter the fact that there can be countless different shared points of view. As a result, our desire alone to force others to

take up our favourite points of view is destructive to a shared point of view.

At this point, I add a supplementary explanation for the following question: Why do we feel pleasure when our evaluations have reached an agreement? Because, according to Hume, we naturally love those who resemble us (T 2.2.4.6) and loving someone in itself is agreeable to us (T 2.2.1.6). Furthermore, such agreements and love should make society and conversation more pleasant and stable. This is indispensable to our happiness because "company is naturally so rejoicing, as presenting the liveliest of all objects, *viz*. a rational and thinking being like ourselves" (T 2.2.4.4) and "[e]very pleasure languishes when enjoy'd apart from company, and every pain becomes more cruel and intolerable" (T 2.2.5.15).[7] Therefore, when we feel pain because of moral disagreements, we are strongly motivated to take up a common point of view.

However, this motive is still nothing but self-interest. We are only trying to avoid pain and seek pleasure. Therefore, even if we all try to take up a common point of view, the attempts will result in creating another reason to fight. Then, we cannot help but resort to something non-natural in order to solve this predicament.

That is when convention comes into play. Let us see whether we can apply it to the GPV.

> [Convention] is only a general sense of common interest; which sense all the members of the society express to one another, and which induces them to regulate their conduct by certain rules. […] the actions of each of us have a reference to those of the other, and are perform'd upon the supposition, that something is to be perform'd on the other part. (T 3.2.2.10)

Clearly, we all have a general sense of common interest regarding a shared point of view, which enables us to reach an agreement. But this viewpoint can never be achieved as long as we pursue our own interests. Therefore, we create and follow certain rules, which determine what *the best or most realistic* common point of view is, in the same manner that we create and follow the rules for justice or property. Then, when we evaluate someone, we expect others to take up this viewpoint with reference to a common interest and we ourselves also do so, based on this expectation.

Of course, in the case of the GPV, it is not necessary for "all the members of the

society" to participate in convention. It is enough for those who actually have a conversation with each other to find a common interest in taking up the GPV together. However, this difference never undermines the analogy I employed, for the sphere of convention is thought to vary depending on the purpose: rules of justice, language, currency or the GPV. For example, it is usual for people in different societies to speak the same language or for people in a society to speak different languages. Therefore, it follows that although all the members of an actual society do not determine rules of language, language is still derived from convention according to Hume (T 3.2.2.10).

Common interest may be more precisely defined as *self-interest redirected by convention*. Our convention creates a new interest that is common to everyone, and so we have good reason to pursue the new interest even in terms of *our self-interest*. Therefore, common interest can be strong enough to motivate us to take up the viewpoint, which the rules determined. Hume calls this redirected-interest "*natural* obligation" (T 3.2.2.23). Furthermore, once the sense of this interest has been established, we find that violation of the rules is harmful to all members of society. As a result, a "*moral* obligation, or the sentiment of right and wrong" (T 3.2.2.23) is naturally excited in our minds according to the observance or violation of rules. As I mentioned above, we usually have a normative consciousness regarding moral evaluation. We believe moral evaluation should be as impartial as possible and distinguish it from mere likes or dislikes. Now we can claim that this sense is nothing but moral obligation as to moral evaluation.

By the way, Hume says, "[Our] sense of some virtues is artificial, and that of others natural" (T 3.1.2.9). This claim seems to contradict my interpretation because the GPV relates to not only the evaluation of artificial virtues, but also that of natural virtues. However, his distinctions between natural and artificial are only concerned with our motives for virtuous actions, not with our evaluations of them.[8] Indeed, in the centre of the explanation of artificial virtues, he says, "[It will] first be requisite to examine the natural virtues, before we can give a full and satisfactory account of [the sentiment of right and wrong]" (T 3.2.2.23). This means that he thinks the mechanism of moral evaluation is common to both types of virtues. Therefore, even if the GPV is artificial, we can maintain the difference between natural and artificial virtues.

4. 2 The rules of the GPV

The remaining question is why the best or most realistic viewpoint is the viewpoint of an evaluee's narrow circle, and not other possible viewpoints. How do *certain rules* determine it? As Hume says, "Some method must be shown, by which we may" determine the best viewpoint.

Fortunately, some researchers have already found a hint in Hume's text. The rules of the moral point of view are based on the "natural and usual force of the passions".[9] All that remains is to apply it to my interpretation.

> [It is] according to their general force in human nature, that we blame or praise. […] we always consider the *natural* and *usual* force of the passions, when we determine concerning vice and virtue; and if the passions depart very much from the common measures on either side, they are always disapprov'd as vicious; (T 3.2.2.18)

And the specific information of the expression "natural and usual" is as follows,

> [In] the original frame of our mind, our strongest attention is confin'd to ourselves; our next is extended to our relations and acquaintance; and 'tis only the weakest which reaches to strangers and indifferent persons. This partiality, then, and unequal affection, must not only have an influence on our behaviour and conduct in society, but even on our ideas of vice and virtue; (T 3.2.2.8)

In short, human beings are intrinsically partial, and our moral evaluation depends on this partiality. For example, even if someone is only useful or agreeable to people close to her, we praise her because her behaviour is natural. Otherwise, we blame her. This may seem inconsistent with or irrelevant to Hume's moral theory based on sympathy, but this criterion is essential for setting the location and sphere of the GPV as the evaluee's narrow circle.[10]

> Being thus acquainted with *the nature of man*, we expect not any impossibilities from him; but confine our view to that *narrow circle*, in which any person moves, in order to form a judgment of his moral character. (T 3.3.3.2; my emphasis)

The fact that partiality is a tendency that is common to all human beings means that we observe the tendency everywhere and every time. Therefore, we can easily share this general rule. As a result, if we must create the most realistic rules for a common point of view, it is natural for us to build partiality into them. In fact, Hume never thinks artifice can reform our natural tendency. Rather, artifice always adopts "the most natural expedient" (T 3.2.3.4).[11]

Finally, we are able to take up the viewpoint of the narrow circle, that is, the general point of view, and not one of a possibly shared point of view. If my argument is valid, the GPV is nothing but social artifice based on convention.

However, this doesn't mean that the GPV is complete and ideal. The boundary of the narrow circle is determined by our recognition of human partiality, but this recognition will be fine-tuned every time we observe a counterexample.[12] In addition to this, it seems obvious that our partiality is changing gradually. That may be why we abolished slavery and eliminated discrimination to some extent. This means that we can revise the boundary of the narrow circle and that there is no fixed GPV. But then, is it not difficult for us to reach an agreement in fact? Perhaps, yes. The truth is, unless we tried to take up the GPV, we could never reach any agreement.

5. Conclusion

What I have tried to show in this paper is that the "general point of view" is derived from "convention", and that impartial moral evaluation is another social artifice. The main reason for needing convention is that we could never share the same point of view without convention because of our self-interests. Convention regulates our self-interests and creates a new common interest so that we can cooperate with each other in establishing the GPV. Also, the rules of the GPV depend on our intrinsic partiality. Our concern is normally limited to the people in our "narrow circle", so when we evaluate someone, we should confine our eyes to her narrow circle. This is how we determine the scope of the GPV.

Hume says, "not only virtue must be approve'd of, but also the sense of virtue" (T 3.3.6.3). In my interpretation, it is because to evaluate someone from the GPV is to follow the artificial rules of moral evaluation. Of course, we sometimes violate the rules and

evaluate someone partially because "we may frequently lose sight of that interest, which we have in maintaining order, and may follow a lesser and more present interest" (T 3.2.2.24). However, for this very reason, we praise those who evaluate others impartially.

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[1] All citations of Hume's *Treatise* are following *A Treatise of Human Nature*, eds. Norton, D. F. & Norton, M. J. (Oxford University Press, 2007) with "T", followed by book, part, section and paragraph numbers.

[2] The reason we can infer another's passion is because Hume presupposes, "'tis obvious, that nature has preserv'd a great resemblance among all human creatures, and that we never remark any passion or principle in others, of which, in some degree or other, we may not find a parallel in ourselves" (T 2.1.11.5).

[3] For "natural" interpretation, see Korsgaard (1999), Radcliffe (1994), Davie (1998). For "artificial" interpretation, see Ardal (1966), Mackie (1980), Baier (1990), Magri (1996).

[4] What I mean by "natural motive" is "what could be considered constitutive passions of human nature" (Lecaldano 2008: 258). If we can find such a passion in human nature, it follows that the GPV is derived from nature.

[5] I agree with her claim itself although the explanation I will give later is completely different from hers.

[6] For example, Baier says, "[S]ome artifice, in the sense of thoughtful design and contrivance, seems involved in that point of view itself" (Baier 1991, 177). Ardal indirectly explains the artificiality, based on convention of language (Ardal 1966). Mackie and Magri clearly insist that convention is a requisite for the GPV, but they have recourse to elimination, that is to say, they think it's impossible to explain the GPV without social artifice (Mackie 1980, Magri 1996).

[7] For more details see Brown (1994, 28-9).

[8] See O'Day (1994).

[9] See Baier (1990), Brown (1994), Magri (1996).

[10] For more details, see Magri (1996). Also, I agree with Brown that "in the case of the natural virtues there is a coincidence between what is normal and natural in human nature and what is pleasant and useful" (Brown 1994, 35).

[11] See Baier (1988).

[12] This recognition is thought to be formed by "general rules" which sometimes lead us to a biased view but can also "correct" it. (T 1.3.13.7-12)

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