

Is the Self in Hume Overmoralized?

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Abstract

Despite being averse to moral extravagance, Hume's own conception of morality threatens to be too demanding and his view of human life to be too moralistic. The problem lies in the scope (and concomitantly the content) Hume assigns morality, the effect of which is the apparent exclusion of the morally indifferent and the morally supererogatory. This threatens to render the normative dimension of Hume's account problematic. Sufficiently problematic to overmoralize the self? That is the question this essay seeks to motivate.

Keywords: Hume, Self, Overmoralization, Extravagance, Demandingness, Comprehensiveness, Scope, Content, Virtue, Duty

Is the self – the moral, or social self – in Hume overmoralized?

For decades now, philosophers have wondered whether one can be too moral and if so in what being too moral might consist. On the whole, the discussion has centered on the normative dimensions of Kantianism and Consequentialism: on the demandingness and moral comprehensiveness these theories entail or imply. Almost never, however, has attention turned to Hume. Then again, why would it? To friends of his, Hume is no moral purist and no stringent moralist; he is a spirited model of moral moderation in which the threat of overmoralization is manifestly absent. To critics, on the other hand, he is of even less consequence; he is the proponent of a metaphysical naturalism that promotes a deflationary account of human agency and moral motivation, such that if anything the self (as Hume construes it) is at risk of being *undermoralized*. Either way, Hume is rendered less than relevant – which

might in part be why those concerned that modern moral theories are too demanding and render human life too comprehensively moral have bypassed him.

In what follows, I propose two reasons why bypassing Hume has been a mistake, and by extension, why the self in Hume might be at risk of being overmoralized.

The first is simply this. The nature of morality and its place in our lives is a major concern of Hume's – he is highly critical of accounts that fail to integrate the two and at pains to provide one that does. Indeed it is this concern, I claim, that lies behind his relentless critique of what he variously calls “extravagance”, a phenomenon comparable to our own contemporary (if controversial) conception of overmoralization. It is also what motivates the formulation of his own, alternative account of morality, to which extravagance often functions as a foil.

Second, and the paper's focus, there is reason to think that in at least one way Hume's own conception of morality threatens to be too demanding and his view of human life to be too moralistic. The root of the problem, I contend, lies in the *scope* (and concomitantly the content) Hume assigns morality (construed in terms of either virtue, duty or utility). It is a problem, I suggest, initially motivated by his postulation of the far-reaching criteria of usefulness and agreeableness (such that there is no non-moral dimension left to life). This, however, only sets the stage for the possibility of an overmoralized self. As we'll see, the threat finds its more substantive expression within Hume's wide view of the virtues (in which he assigns many typical character traits and abilities a moral significance that is not readily apparent to us or his contemporaries) and his broad view of moral obligation (in which he assigns individuals as rigorous an obligation to “humanity” as to “justice”). The combined effect, I suggest, is Hume's apparent exclusion of the morally indifferent, on the one hand, and the morally supererogatory, on the other. The net result, I conclude, is a case for asking, “Is the self in Hume overmoralized?”

Needless to say, a separate essay on each aspect above could be written, and my discussion of each will therefore be somewhat cursory. But the advantage of taking them together is that doing so helps highlight the overall threat of overmoralization in Hume, at least with respect to scope. That said, I don't claim to be comprehensive. I at no point attempt to critique the general idea that one can be too moral or to assess except in passing related dimensions of morality that bear on the issue of overmoralization, such as its authority, overridingness, or susceptibility to maximization.¹ Nor do I concentrate on historically contextualizing Hume's tenets or on comparing them with those of philosophers of today. Nothing so complete is at

¹ For these topics, see Robert B. Loudon, “Can We Be Too Moral?”, *Ethics*, January 1988, and Samuel Scheffler, *Human Morality*, Oxford, 1992. For Hume on stringency and overridingness, see my “Hume on Morality and Partiality” (manuscript); for Hume on moral motivation and the authority of morality, see my “From Freud to Hume”.

hand. My aim is limited to broaching an under analyzed dimension of Hume's ethics, by following out a certain line of thought. Its subject is morality's scope (and concomitantly its content) in Hume, and how, insofar as it threatens to render morality too demanding and our lives too comprehensively moral – not because its constraints are too costly or confining but because its reach is too extensive – the normative dimension of Hume's account may be problematic. Sufficiently problematic to overmoralize the self? *That* is the question.

I.

Consider first Hume's concern with the matter of overmoralization. Although he never invokes the term - it is our term - he is anything but uninterested in the phenomenon to which it refers. He repeatedly draws attention to cases that seem to exemplify it's meaning.² And to those cases, he consistently applies the unique term "extravagance". Moreover, he uses it to call attention not only to wayward agents with disfigured moral psychologies but to the "extravagant" forms of conduct and character certain moralities encourage or require of them.³

Case in point. At EPM 9.3 Hume charges the Church with promoting the practice of life defying "monkish virtues".⁴ The Church, he asserts, celebrates self-abasement and self-denial; it imposes on people ever-stranger prohibitions and obligations; it even "perverts" that which is customarily taken to be normal and natural. Indeed adherence to Church morals, he insists, so stupefies the understanding, so hardens the heart that it renders devotees unfit for both "intimacy and society". And yet acolytes keep coming, drawn in by "the delusive glosses of superstition and false religion", which insidiously play to the idea that morality represents an ideal of radical self-transcendence, distinguished by its remoteness from normal or natural common life patterns of human interest, fortune, agency and motivation.⁵ An ideal, in short, of "extravagance", a commitment to which relegates adherents to "a different element from the rest of mankind" (EPM, D 57).

Hume levies a similar line of attack at EPM, D 53, this time inveighing against Christianity's claim to have moral passport into every nook and cranny of our lives.

² That is, as it is commonly conceived and exemplified if not defined. For our purposes, let us take it to be a "fluid concept": either an *open textured concept* (one with a minimal core that calls for indeterminate filling in) or a *family resemblance concept* (one with no essential features, only those we extrapolate from paradigmatic examples).

³ This essay focuses mainly on the latter.

⁴ *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Tom Beauchamp, Oxford, 1998. Henceforth *EPM*, followed by the paragraph number. The addendum to *EPM – A Dialogue* and the *Appendices* – are respectively cited as, *EPM D* and *EPM Appx*.

⁵ For Hume's original complaint, see *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig, Oxford, 1932, Vol. 1, pp. 13-16. For a contemporary expression of the complaint, and one from which I draw, see Scheffler, p. 129.

He objects to the degree to which it “inspects our whole conduct, and prescribes an universal rule to our actions, to our words, to our very thoughts and inclinations”; he recoils at how far down its moral assessment would go, such that “no infraction of [morality] can ever be concealed or disguised”; and he implies that, at last, an “extensive influence” of this magnitude is too costly and should not be suffered. Why? Because it is not conducive to human well-being. Why? Because to be always under a watchful moral eye, to be always busy resisting or conforming to its demands, is to lead an “extravagantly” moral life.

Needless to say, Hume’s hostile take on Christian morality may put some out – and perhaps rightfully so. In many ways it is a caricature, and in some ways an unfair one. But for our purposes, this is beside the point. What is relevant is Hume’s manifest concern with the phenomenon of moral “extravagance” – his term, more or less, for the unusually heavy or exceedingly stringent or motivationally challenging or overwhelmingly invasive and extensive demands a morality may make of an individual, as well as the high costs a moral agent may have to incur or the unusual and unhealthy lengths she may be willing to go to meet these demands. That is a mouthful. The point, though, is that extravagance, for Hume, is a worry. And insofar as it and our notion of overmoralization overlap, the question to consider is this: How does Hume propose to diminish its degree and incidence?

II.

The basic story is well known. Roughly, Hume’s strategy is to recast morality in an “altogether” different light – to render morality more reasonable, more humane, less radically disengaged from the nature and concerns of human agents (EPM 9.1). In his view, a proper description and normative conception of morality and its place in our lives is, among other things, one according to which the scope and content of morality is on the whole compatible with, and in general conducive to, individual human happiness or well-being. Indeed it is this, Hume concludes the *Treatise*, which commends his own account.⁶ True, as Hume is well aware, morality must also regulate our conduct, and in doing so it may sometimes contradict individual self-interest and communal well-being (T 479-83, 497). But, at bottom, morality must be livable, not perfectionist; and its content and regulative role must, in general, be capable of being integrated into an individual human life in a coherent and attractive way.⁷ Morality, therefore, not only must regulate behavior, it must reflect our psychological needs, engage our fundamental emotions, and structure

⁶ Insofar as his “system may help us to form a just notion of the *happiness*, as well as of the *dignity* of virtue, and may interest every principle of our nature in the embracing and cherishing that noble quality”. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Selby-Bigge-Nidditch, Oxford, 1978. p. 620. Henceforth *T*, followed by the page number.

⁷ See *The Letters*. For a contemporary view, see Scheffler, p. 4.

and promote our social endeavors. What, according to Hume, would guarantee as much? That morality be reasonable and humane. What would best guarantee this? That morality be read off our life experiences as “men of the world”. And so it is, writes Hume, that the most “natural understanding” of the criteria upon which to base a normative doctrine that can ground moral considerations, assessments and obligations (be they “natural” virtues such as friendship or “artificial” virtues such as justice) is in terms of what we perceive as useful or agreeable to ourselves or others.⁸ The result: the beginnings of an accessible, reasonable, humane naturalistic account of morality.

About which we might wonder: Where in this is there a problem? Where in this is morality too demanding – too confining in its constraints or too costly in its requirements? In short, where in this is there a threat of overmoralization?

III.

It begins, I suggest, in this. Granted that Hume is on guard against moral extravagance – granted that he aims to diminish morality’s demandingness by making its constraints less confining and their fulfillment less costly. In his attempt to naturalize morality and render it less remote by construing it in terms of the reasonable and the humane, Hume, I suggest, renders its scope remarkably extensive. Alarmingly extensive? It is too soon to say. But his account does appear to render highly attenuated the range of that which can be viewed with moral indifference (in the care-free, not careless sense). The worry here is not that Hume takes human psychology and social relations to be shot through with moral motives and beliefs (though he may do so, and perhaps be right to do so). It is that his account appears to render the criteria of usefulness and agreeableness, upon which he bases the “class or appellation” of virtue and vice, applicable anywhere, at anytime and to almost anything.⁹ And the worry, or at least the question, is: so understood, might *this* degree of moral extensiveness be thought alarming? Might the net result of this sort of extensiveness constitute a kind of moral *overexposure*?

Perhaps. On the other hand, talk of “moral overexposure” is admittedly metaphoric and, as such, vague. More important, even if its meaning were clear, why should the recognition of what’s useful and agreeable alone suffice to make one’s considerations and assessments *moral* considerations and assessments, let alone make one’s life overly moral? In Hume it is not. In Hume, a number of addi-

⁸ Primarily with respect to mental qualities, as reflected in motives and attitudes, actions and reactions (EPM 9.1).

⁹ So much so that Hume feels compelled to explicitly exclude inanimate objects (EPM 5.1, fn. 17), arguing that our approbation of them is “so weak, and so different” (presumably because it is directed at that which lacks moral sense and agency) that it “ought not” be classed as moral approbation. That said, the moral field remains for Hume remarkably wide.

tional ingredients are necessary, including the adoption of a “distinct” standpoint (T 581, EPM 9.6), the experiencing of a “peculiar kind” of pleasure or sentiment upon approving something (T 472), and the evaluating or fixing upon a particular kind of “object”: not a concrete person, but the usefulness or agreeableness of his or her qualities (and derivatively, actions and reactions) (T 603). In short, unless one fulfills at least some of these further conditions, one is not, in Hume, at risk of being moralistic, let alone overly so.

But Hume is not yet in the clear, insofar as the addition of these conditions does not entirely remove the threat of overmoralization, understood here as the tapering of the range of moral indifference and the broadening of moral concern. For, all things being equal, isn't life likely to present us with endless situations that invite us to meet the above conditions? That is, aren't there endless occasions, both in principle and in practice, for properly socialized adults not only to consider what is useful or agreeable to ourselves or to others, but to do so in a morally relevant way, and so to wonder, in light of what is useful and agreeable, what our moral duty is to ourselves and others?

So Hume appears to think. For one thing, we've been inculcated with the “constant habit of surveying ourselves” and our behavior, and this ingrained habit in us “keeps alive all the sentiments of right and wrong” (EPM 9.10). For another, just about everything in our lives seems to invite moral consideration and evaluation, if not action. In characterizing the source and scope of our moral approbation of and active interest in utility, for example, Hume writes: If the “extensive energy” of self-love is limited, and if “usefulness be a source of moral sentiment...it follows, that *every thing*, which contributes to the happiness of society, recommends itself directly to our approbation and good will”; while what doesn't do so recommends itself to our disapprobation (EPM 5.16-17 my italics). And just a few paragraphs later: “...*wherever* we go, *whatever* we reflect on or converse about, *every thing* still presents us with the view of human happiness or misery, and excites in our breast a sympathetic movement of pleasure or uneasiness. In our serious occupations, in our careless amusements, this principle still exerts its active energy” (EPM 5.23, my italics). In these passages, Hume's point is not just that we have a non-egoistic side or that what engages our properly cast, unbiased (non-egoistic) approbation merits the appellation of virtuous. His point is that anything and everything is open and available to being assessed – morally assessed – in terms of its usefulness (EPM 5.17). Nor is that all. Insofar as we have a concern and a duty to exercise virtue and avoid vice, not only must the scope of what we approve of as useful be quite wide, so perhaps must be the scope of what we are required (and one hopes morally motivated) to do. Add to this that what goes for usefulness also goes for agreeableness, and moral considerations and appellations would appear to apply quite broadly. Broadly enough to exhaustively divide all our actions, mental qualities and social

relations into those that are virtuous and those that are not? That would be pretty broad. Would it be *too* broad?

So Hume, perhaps, should think. Recall his critique of the Church's overextended moral purview. There Hume balked at modern religion's limitless moral inspection of "our whole conduct", implying that a life that comprehensively moral was likely to be "extravagant" and unlikely to be successfully integrated within an attractive human life. Nor, as he elsewhere implies, would such comprehensiveness be true to life, for not all of life seems to be morally liable. Sometimes, for instance, we gossip and even reveal its source to ill effect; yet even then, writes Hume, our doing so might best be "regarded as a piece of indiscretion, not of immorality" (EPM 4.11). But then morality must have limits; life must have non-moral margins.

How, though, to square qualms such as these with the extensive, limitless scope Hume's account otherwise seems to advance? It's not immediately clear.¹⁰ What is clear is that by the *Enquiry's* end Hume is prepared to extend morality's scope without apology. Indeed, he concludes EPM by advocating a morality whose scope is not just extensive, but effectively equally "extensive" with, if not more so than, the Church's. No act or motive, he asserts, is beyond the "sphere" of moral sentiments, assessments or considerations; "nor is there anyone whose conduct and character is not, by their means, an object, to every one, of censure or approbation" (EPM 9.7). Every act, everyone is moral game, be they in the past, present or future. For no conduct and "no character can be so remote as to be wholly indifferent to me" – i.e., so historically or geographically or impersonally remote from me as to be a matter of *moral* indifference. Nor is this so only in principle. It is also so in fact, as "every quality or action, of every human being, must be ranked under some class or denomination, expressive of general censure or applause" (ibid.).¹¹ Thus, for Hume, not only is every aspect of every one of our lives wholly susceptible to being in principle morally assessed. Judging from morality's comprehensiveness, our lives *in fact* are exhaustively divisible into that which is virtuous and vicious, obligatory, permissible or forbidden (ibid; see also T 517). Morality, in short, is *pervasive*.¹²

IV.

Is the self, in turn, overmoralized – or at least at risk of being so? That, recall, was our original query. And at this point it might be tempting to conclude, yes. Between the criteria useful and agreeable; our "constant habit of surveying ourselves"; the fact that "...wherever we go, whatever we reflect... every thing still presents us with the view of human happiness or misery, and excites in our breast a sympathetic movement"; and the evident in-principle and in-practice pervasiveness

¹⁰ Hume certainly does not say. But below, in section IV, I outline three suggestions.

¹¹ My italics.

¹² Again, not just *in principle* but *in fact*. cf. Scheffler, p. 6.

of moral considerations: between all this, our lives would appear to be rather ripe with morality. And yet, to conclude at this point that the self is overmoralized would be rash; for a proper determination depends on first getting clear about just what pervasiveness entails. So let us ask: insofar as morality is pervasive, does its being so make it too demanding or our lives too comprehensively moral?

Independent of Hume, the answer among some contemporary philosophers is yes. To them, pervasiveness implies our having to answer morally for every motive we have and every move we make in every quarter we make it. And to them, this smacks of being overmoralized. Nor is it hard to see why. For, imagine being morally on guard 24/7. Wouldn't that render one more comprehensively moral than he or she should (need? can?) be? Many hold that this is a problem for utilitarianism. Hume suggests it's a problem for "modern religion". We might wonder: Is it a problem for *Hume*? Does the range of the scope he assigns morality render our lives overly comprehensively moral?

The answer to that depends in part on what the idea of comprehensiveness consists in, along with what it implies or assumes. If the scope Hume assigns morality implicitly requires that we, as agents, explicitly diagnose and morally evaluate everything that concerns us and moves us, then yes, his account might prove to be overly comprehensively moral and so overmoralizing. For, it might be thought too intrusive, and not just because of the 24/7, temporal comprehensiveness referred to above. It might also be thought categorially too complete. After all, as some of the same contemporary philosophers referred to above ask, aren't there parts of human life where moral considerations of either permissibility or justification simply do not – should not – arise?¹³ Aren't there acts, interests and relationships simply too trivial to warrant moral reflection and evaluation, let alone require moral permission. And on the other side, aren't there cares and concerns just too desperate, costly or important to us to be thought of as hanging in the moral balance?¹⁴ In short, maybe some things in life should be thought morally untouchable, lest morality be thought to intrude and oppress.

Perhaps. Then again: perhaps not. It is a controversial line of thought. More important: in Hume there are at least three reasons for resisting it – three reasons for thinking that morality's temporal and categorial comprehensiveness alone need not render or be experienced by agents as rendering human life morally extravagant.

First, as we've already seen, morality's content, in Hume, is ostensibly non-stringent. In contrast to the Church's morality, the content of Hume's account is so moderate (so reasonable and humane), that its limitless scope is of little or no consequence. Yes, its scope is extensive. But insofar as its content can be successfully integrated within an attractive human life – and as we've seen, Hume makes the

¹³ Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints", *Journal of Philosophy*, 1980, p. 436.

¹⁴ Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Harvard, 1985, p. 18.

case that it can be – most moral agents are not likely to register its pervasiveness as being too demanding or as making our lives overly comprehensively moral. Of course a threat of overmoralization may still come in from elsewhere; but insofar as it turns on the stringency of morality’s content, the threat would appear to be a red herring.

Second, even if morality’s scope is, in Hume, comprehensive, it does not follow that agents must therefore be on moral red-alert, at all times and at all places. Why? Because, in Hume, not all moral concerns have equal standing or command equal attention. They stand instead on a continuum. So Hume suggests while outlining the ways in which society is more or less morally rule-ridden (EPM 4).¹⁵ Some parts of our morally informed life, he holds, are more morally urgent than others; indeed, some parts merit moral judgment, others do not – e.g., the trivial parts, fixed attention to which would be unhelpful, indeed unbearable. Thus Hume’s hostility toward moral busybodies, who, he writes, “pry” and “play the spy upon [the] words and looks and actions” of others, and who, in making too much of too little, prove both socially “inconvenient” and morally “blameable” (EPM 4.12).¹⁶ That said, the failure of these meddling moralizers lies less in their taking non-moral matters for moral – “indiscretion” for “immorality”, as Hume at one point intimated¹⁷ – and more in their failure to distinguish along a moral continuum between “a kind of lesser morality” and a greater: a distinction that, however it gets fleshed out, enables Hume to affirm morality’s limitless scope while drawing levels and limits to moral assessment (EPM 4.13). The catch, of course, is that the levels and limits Hume identifies exist not in virtue of an extra-moral boundary, but in virtue of an extensive intra-moral infrastructure. About which we might once-again wonder: won’t this lead to a scope-based form of moral extravagance? Not necessarily. Indeed, morality, in Hume, won’t have it. Not unlike other areas in which he postulates a form of self-reflexive regulation – e.g., when avidity constrains avidity (T 492), or causal reasoning distills rules or norms by which to judge of causes and effects (T 150, 173-76) – so here, in Hume, morality appears to constrain morality.

Third, and not unrelatedly, is the matter of moral motivation and deliberation. Insofar as moral comprehensiveness does not entail that individuals must always engage in explicit moral deliberation or motivation, moral comprehensiveness need not make for moral extravagance. And in no case does Hume claim that a moral

¹⁵ Such that (utility-based) standards of right and wrong are a “necessity...wherever men have any intercourse with each other” (EPM 4.18).

¹⁶ “Inconvenient” insofar as their policing produces suspicions and fears among people, at length chipping away at our mutual sense of “trust” – the very trust the “greater” virtues of justice and fellowship presuppose (EPM 4.11-14); “blamable” insofar as we are sometimes “authorized by custom” and the rules that arise thereof to turn a moral blind eye to what may be less than morally upstanding (EPM 4.17).

¹⁷ A distinction we saw Hume flirt with above.

agent must always test her cares and concerns for moral permissibility or justification, or that she must always act, deliberate how to act, or be motivated to so act with explicit moral thoughts uppermost in mind (the mental content of which might range from explicit reflection on the morally salient features of a situation to relevant general moral rules and principles, to the sense that one simply ought to do what is right).¹⁸ Sometimes, of course, she must be morally explicit, as in the case of an *artificial virtue*, such as promising.¹⁹ But at other times moral explicitness is not required, as in the case of the *natural virtues*. With the latter, Hume holds, the content of her morally motivated thought or sentiment need not be *overtly* moral. Indeed, it will often be opaque to her.²⁰ And even when it is not wholly hidden, the agent who acts courageously or benevolently need not always be motivated to do so *because* she has overtly deliberated that acting so is virtuous (T 478) – not any more than because she has overtly concluded that acting so will advance her self-interest (EPM, Appx 2.8-9). In the case of the courageous or benevolent agent a description of the virtue that characterizes her action need not enter into how she describes her consideration to herself at the time she acts any more than the promise of the “gratification of an appetite” need do so (ibid). In fact, the benevolent woman who does benevolent things typically does them without first having deliberated herself into being benevolent or deliberated that benevolence into the forefront of her mind for consideration. Typically, a woman of this stripe simply does acts of benevolence because she has described to herself the object standing before her as “my child” or “in need” or as “suffering”.²¹

Consequently, insofar as there is a problem with respect to the extensive scope Hume assigns morality – insofar as it makes morality too demanding or our lives too comprehensively moral – the problem cannot come from the property of pervasiveness or comprehensiveness alone. Nor must it stem from any of the related assumptions or implications just rehearsed. In Hume, morality is not stringent; it is not insensitive to different degrees of moral importance; nor does it entail constant, explicit moral deliberation or justification by agents. So if, in Hume, there is a prob-

¹⁸ Scheffler, chapter 3.

¹⁹ The person who makes a genuine promise always consciously “expresses a resolution of performing it” and must always consciously intend to fulfill the promise she makes (T 522). Indeed, when she goes to fulfill her promise she must have “no motive” to doing so “distinct from a sense of duty” (T 518). Thus she must not only expressly resolve to keep her promise, in keeping it, she must be consciously motivated by the thought that she ought to do the act promised (and, by implication, that it would be wrong not to do this).

²⁰ As Hume asserts, “our predominant motive or intention is, indeed, frequently concealed from ourselves” (EPM, Appx. 2.7): we are frequently less than fully aware of what moves us. See also Hume’s *Essays*, ed. E. Miller, 2nd edn, *LibertyClassics*, 1987, p. 479.

²¹ Indeed, it is only because she has the virtue or disposition she has that certain facts become ethical considerations for her. Cf. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits*, p. 10.

lem with respect to scope, it must come in from elsewhere. In what remains, I outline two possibilities.

V.

Consider first Hume's "wide view of the virtues", as James Fieser refers to it.²² Hume assigns many typical character traits and abilities a moral significance that is not readily apparent. In particular, he blurs the distinction between genuine moral virtues, on the one hand, and intellectual abilities and personality traits, on the other. Moreover, as Peter Goldie notes, by blurring the difference between talent and virtue, defect and vice, personality traits and character traits, Hume "effaces what grounds the special kind of emotional response or attitude we normally reserve toward virtues and vices."²³ Why then, we might ask, does Hume take this line? Roughly, his argument for doing so is threefold: first, that both talent and virtue elicit more or less the same sympathetic moral feelings in the spectator (T 606-614); second, that there is no natural basis upon which to found a distinction between the two by contrasting that which is voluntary from that which isn't (EPM, Appx iv); and third, that in our ethical language we commonly employ moral injunctions to refer both to moral virtues and to natural abilities. From which Hume concludes that, any account of virtue that excludes natural abilities and personality traits must involve a "warped" view of both our language and our sentiments (EPM, Appx. iv.22, T 609).

Now, in taking this line, Hume *is* on to something. There is, after all, significant overlap between natural abilities and moral virtues, and we do sometimes take various traits to be virtues. But as critics (from both his day and ours) have noted, in effacing the differences Hume goes too far and fails to appreciate two criteria for distinguishing moral virtues from either intellectual abilities or personality traits.²⁴ First, he under appreciates the fact that where moral virtues (e.g., integrity) by themselves aim at a good end, intellectual ones do not necessarily do so. Second, and perhaps more important, he under appreciates the fact that while the failure to realize moral virtues (e.g., courage) may incite blame in a spectator, this is not so with respect to one's failure to have certain intellectual abilities (e.g., doing set theory).²⁵ Nor is it so with respect to one's possession of certain personality traits.²⁶

²² Fieser, James, "Hume's Wide View of the Virtues: an Analysis of His Early Critics", *Hume Studies*, 1998, pp. 295-311.

²³ Goldie, Peter, *On Personality*, Routledge, 2004, p. 86.

²⁴ Here I follow Fieser, p. 295.

²⁵ As Fieser makes plain, this is less clear when considering both benevolence and cleanliness as virtues (which Hume does do) than when grouping both malevolence and uncleanness as vices (which Hume doesn't do). A spectator's pleasurable response to the former pair may not vary much (T 608), but presumably her painful response would differ significantly were a malicious act contrasted with an unclean look.

²⁶ Here I draw from Goldie.

For example, someone who is “spacey” and suffers from an inability to remember facts and figures, birthdays and appointments may not make for much of an office administrator or oral historian and may make for much aggravation and disappointment. Still, she is not for this alone an appropriate object of moral attack, any more than her being, say, shy is. And the reason why is the same in both cases: in none is the trait in question “reason-responsive”. Yet many would argue that this is a necessary requirement for being held morally responsible. And insofar as moral agents are morally responsible only for those traits of theirs that involve a disposition to respond reliably to appropriate kinds of reasons, the elision of as much tells against Hume.²⁷

Indeed, it would seem to put him in an awkward spot – and in more than one way. On the one hand, insofar as Hume includes more than most would within the sphere of the non-cognitive, while insisting that what exists within this sphere is morally target-worthy, Hume appears to set the bar for being reason-responsive too *high*. Being morally responsible is too loosely linked to being reason-responsive. On the other hand, insofar as Hume admits a connection between moral responsibility and reason-responsiveness, he implicitly opens himself up to a less causal, more cognitivist view of moral thinking than his signature non-cognitivism may be able to accommodate. In which case, Hume (qua anti-Rationalist) may have set the bar for being reason-responsive too *low*, insofar as he has narrowed the gap between himself and the rationalists he opposes (at the expense of distinguishing himself from them).²⁸

This in turn opens up matters still further. Say Hume were to admit that moral responsibility requires reason-responsiveness. What follows? Must he also hold that our reasoning extends as far as our conception of responsibility does? Must he suppose that no rational person is morally immune with respect to her reason-responsive dispositions, of which he (Hume) includes an especially high number? Clearly, a proper investigation of these lines of thought concerning moral responsibility and practical reasoning would take us too far beyond the scope of this paper. But even just stating them is telling: for they suggest the extent to which the issue of overmoralization in Hume intersects with various dimensions of Hume’s thinking – indeed, that the issue in Hume might be more central than previously thought.

Which brings us back to our main topic: to what extent does Hume’s wide view

²⁷ Goldie, p. 13. As Goldie later puts it: “Character traits, such as kindness and vanity, are reason responsive; a personality trait, or a mere action-tendency, behavioral habit, or temperament is not” – in either a “strong” or a “weak” sense (pp. 88-9). They are not, in the strong sense, in that a person with a bad memory or a disposition to be a kleptomaniac is not capable of responding to reasons to change – to reasons to cease to have the bad trait that she has. They are not, in the weak sense, insofar as they aren’t the product of reasons at all, good or bad.

²⁸ Goldie, pp. 91-2; see also R. Cohen, “On an Unorthodox Account of Hume’s Moral Psychology”, *Hume Studies*, Nov. 1994.

of the virtues threaten to render human life too comprehensively moral and human agents more morally liable than do our common moral convictions? In light of Hume's inclusive view of the virtues, there does appear to be some risk. I don't say that Hume cannot escape the difficulty; as noted, he may be able to do so, were he prepared to distinguish between reason-responsive traits and traits that aren't so. But Hume appears unable to take this route, insofar as he insists on holding so wide a view of the virtues, many of which are not, by his own lights, reason-responsive. And it's just this that may, to many, signal an underlying excessively comprehensive moral outlook on human life. The irony is that, in Hume's day, what critics objected to about his grouping together moral virtues and natural abilities or moral vices and personality traits was that doing so came off as an affront to morality.²⁹ To group the two together, it was said, is to dilute the purity and devalue the status of the true virtues. And perhaps they were right. In any event, in our era the worry goes the other way. No one today thinks that moral comprehensiveness constitutes an affront to morality. In our day, what critics worry about is that moral comprehensiveness constitutes an "affront" to *us*, to our humanity, insofar as arguably non-moral matters are increasingly recast as the objects of moral assessment and consideration – perhaps at the limit "crowding out" what would otherwise count as non-moral (including that which is less than fully reason-responsive) and enveloping us altogether.³⁰ Here then is one way in which the self in Hume might be thought overmoralized.

VI.

I turn now to a second way, and what we might call Hume's what we might call Hume's *broad view of moral obligation*.³¹ As Robert Shaver notes, Hume regards the "social" and "natural" virtues of, say, humanity (qua benevolence), generosity (EPM 9.19) and gratefulness (T 479) as duties we are obligated to fulfill, and not as optional extras above and beyond those of, say, justice.³² As Hume sees it, we not only have a duty to be just but a duty to be humane. For example, in our relations with unequals (such as that between parents and children), a parent's obligations are rooted in her being "bound by the laws of humanity" (T 478, 518). Moreover, these are no less binding than the "interested" virtues or requirements of promise-keeping and justice are (T 544-45). Not that the two types of obligation are identical; but they are relevantly similar. They both provide a "check" on what may or may not

²⁹ Fieser, p. 295.

³⁰ For example, Wolf in "Moral Saints".

³¹ The origin and nature of obligation, in Hume, is a complex topic. My concern here is limited to the pervasiveness of moral obligation, whatever its source.

³² Robert Shaver, "Hume and the Duties of Humanity", *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 1992, pp. 545-56.

be done, and they both restrain or permit only certain things. Furthermore, each is as equally exacting as the other: our duties of affection are no less strict than our duties to justice. And the reason why, Hume explains, is that strictness is a function of what is necessary for the subsistence of society, and humanity as much as justice is necessary to maintain the social confederacy (EPM 5.5). In short, on Hume's view, we have as rigorous an obligation to humanity as we do to justice.³³

Now, on a practical level, this sounds true to life. We do attach a high level of importance to our duties to humanity; and we believe we are right to do so. Nevertheless, at the level of theory, Hume's stipulation of an obligation to humanity gives rise to two potential problems,³⁴ and both, I suggest, point in the direction of overmoralization.

The first is a general problem. To what extent does Hume suppose the duties of humanity are to be enforced? Aren't such duties simply too imprecise to insist upon? And then, even if precise enough to enforce, wouldn't their enforcement undermine the agent from exercising the motive we often take to be most meritorious?

This, as I say, is a general problem, in that it applies to any account that wishes to make duties to humanity obligatory. But unlike others (e.g., Kant), Hume does not address the difficulty. Then again, why should he? Shaver thinks he needn't.³⁵ As he reads him, that Hume advances duties to humanity is one thing; that these obligations should, let alone can, be enforced is quite another. If they can be enforced, perhaps they should be. But nothing about enforcement as such follows from either Hume's broad view of obligation or his stance on strictness.

This is true enough, as far as it goes. But just how far does it go? *Pace* Shaver, if Hume wishes to base morality on human nature – if he wishes it to reflect human psychology – he needs to take care not to characterize morality such that its scope encompasses duties the fulfillment of which entail clamping down on the very motives from which spring many of our common life notions of merit. Yet just such clamping down would seem to follow, insofar as Hume renders the scope of our moral duties so broad that valuable motives and acts normally not thought obligatory are thought to be so.

To which it might be asked: should these moral duties *be* thought obligatory? Perhaps. Then again, doing so might make for a rather moral self. Would it make for an overmoralized one? Not necessarily, but it would raise the risk, in two ways.

³³ Indeed, some of Hume's remarks suggest that manners are also equally important, if not required. They not only have important moral *consequences* but an essentially moral *point*: they "enable people to acknowledge one another's special dignity". See Sarah Buss, "Appearing Respecting: the Moral Significance of Manners", *Ethics*, July 1999, pp. 795-826.

³⁴ Both touched on by Shaver.

³⁵ Shaver, p. 554.

It would, insofar as it leads Hume to create a morally (over?) loaded environment in which acts and motives traditionally thought not to be obligatory let alone enforceable would now be required and so call for closer review and perhaps even stricter enforcement. And it would, second, insofar as Hume's broad view of obligation has the related if unintended effect of relieving the self of some of its nobler motives, ironically deflating it by morally overloading it.

This last worry comes to a head upon turning to the second, related problem stemming from Hume's obligation to humanity: that of supererogation. If moral agents are as strictly obligated to fulfill their duties to humanity as to justice, the question emerges: what room does Hume reserve for supererogation?³⁶

As commonly understood, the supererogatory is a class whose actions resist being accounted for in terms of the traditional division of obligatory, forbidden and permissible. In this, they are actions that go beyond the bounds of duty; they do not seem to be obligatory. On the other hand, they are not merely permissible, either, insofar as they are morally praiseworthy and worthy of emulation.³⁷ This creates a tension, and the question is how to resolve it.

The natural lawyers before Hume tried to deal with the strain and account for the supererogatory by distinguishing between *perfect* and *imperfect* duties. Omit doing the latter, they held, and you may be blamed – your character may be chided; but since the omitted duty is not perfect but imperfect, no *deontic* judgment follows. The basis for the difference, they held, is that perfect duties are more important and so stricter than imperfect ones. So, for example, duties of justice were thought necessary to the maintenance of the social order, whereas duties of affection or humanity were not. The lawyers' alternative, however, is not available to Hume. As we've seen, and as Shaver notes, Hume rejects their distinction and the corollary it supports. In all its many incarnations, humanity, for Hume, is a full-on duty: it is not always naturally forthcoming, and just as a check must sometimes be placed on what happens naturally, so a spur must sometimes be placed on what doesn't. It follows that, on Hume's scheme, many (too many?) acts of virtue seem to be not just permissible or even recommended but required, and their omission seems to be not just discouraged but forbidden.

And in this there is something more – or rather less – to Hume's account. We touched on it before. It's that on Hume's scheme, while the scope of obligation has gotten quite broad – while the number of moral duties and burdens (as well as potential failings) has increased – the very possibility of supererogation itself has

³⁶ Supererogation is a complex topic. My aim here is only to call attention to a difficulty Hume may face with respect to it: namely, whether his wide view of obligation can make satisfactory room for the phenomenon, and if not, how this bears on the issue of overmoralization.

³⁷ J. O. Urmson, "Saints and Heroes", in A. I. Melden (ed) *Essays in Moral Philosophy*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1958, pp. 198-216.

decreased, insofar as Hume leaves little or no room (i.e., opportunity) for an agent to be motivated to go or actually to go beyond the call of duty. To be sure, Hume does assume such room throughout his writings. He takes both saints and heroes, with their *uber-moral* acts and motives, to be on moral territory, albeit on the far side of morality, often framing the former as “extravagant” moral extremists while praising the latter as transcendent bearers of “the most sublime kind of merit” (T 600). But beyond the rhetoric, Hume at the level of theory never explains (is unable to explain?) in what way these agents are supererogators, or for that matter, what place supererogation has within his broad view of moral obligation. Again, that he speaks of “extravagant” or “sublime” acts does suggest that he thinks doing these is doing something morally extra-ordinary, perhaps something beyond what is normally required or expected. But alone such talk is insufficient to account for supererogation. Nor is it sufficient to address the underlying source of the deficiency, which Shaver himself notes: namely, that within Hume’s broad view of obligation, the meritorious is inadequately distinguished from the necessary, the approved unsatisfactorily opposed to the required.³⁸ Instead, Hume replaces these distinctions “with a distinction within obligations, between the useful and the immediately agreeable”, and this leads him to slide too easily “between a vocabulary of duties and a vocabulary of virtues”.³⁹ As a result, it is not only the case that what might otherwise be distinguished is not, in Hume. There is something more as well: what might otherwise be beyond obligation is apparently and effectively obligatory.⁴⁰

But then what place *do* supererogators have within Hume’s broad view of moral obligation? Might what distinguishes them be only a matter of degree? How so? If the obligations to which Hume’s saints and heroes are beholden are different from our basic duties only in degree and not in kind – i.e., if what distinguishes his saint and hero is at root their respective ability to do what is extraordinary with comparatively little or no effort, or to do what is exceptional by exercising abnormal self-control in the face of fear or seductive inclination, or alternatively, to fulfill commands the merit of which is only comparatively more sublime than run-of-the-mill merit – why should this warrant postulating a unique class of action and a unique

³⁸ E.g., “All morality depends upon the sentiments; and when any action, or quality of the mind, pleases us *after a certain manner*, we say it is virtuous; and when the neglect, or non-performance of it, displeases us *after a like manner*, we say that we lie under an obligation to perform it.” (T 517)

³⁹ Shaver, p. 555.

⁴⁰ Worried that Hume is being “returned to the deontologists with a vengeance” Shaver interprets the collapse as merely nominal (p. 555). But this is no help. Hume would be nominally recognizing an agent’s act as one that falls outside the realm of duty while simultaneously requiring her (to go beyond the call of duty in order) to fulfill it. This would effectively undo the notion of supererogation by making it a duty to go beyond the call of duty – a requirement that defies its own definition and violates our common life moral intuitions by diminishing the number of moral dimensions we commonly take there to be.

kind of agent? Doesn't supererogation require more? Doesn't it require going *beyond* one's duty?⁴¹ Yet on Hume's broad view of obligation, the resources for making that distinction appear to be absent.

Then again, there may still be one resource left. It might be possible to argue that for Hume, qua virtue ethicist, supererogation is best understood as being a matter of degree, in the sense that, (a) given certain moral ideals, supererogatory acts can go either a little or a lot beyond a given standard of virtue or duty, and (b) to the extent that all virtuous observers, given full information, may variously deem an action to be either obligatory or supererogatory, more or less. But a case would first have to be made for this interpretation.⁴² Then a further case would have to be made for interpreting Hume accordingly. And while there are places where Hume does seem to allow that the *strength* and *force* of a moral obligation may vary (T 568-9) or where the extent and inflexible nature of the obligation itself may admit of "*degrees*" (T 530-33), it is far from clear just how much can be made from so little. Nor is it clear how talk of duty by "*degrees*" (T 569) might sit with respect to Hume's concern to overcome the variability of sympathy when it comes to making moral judgments and fulfilling moral duties (T 580). In any event, a proper address of these topics is beyond the scope of this paper, which in this section has aimed solely to sketch a problem to be overcome with respect to Hume's broad view of moral obligation. And for now, that problem stands.

As does the parent issue of overmoralization, brought on by his broad view. For it remains an open question: to what extent does Hume render human life too morally comprehensive, insofar as his account loads it up with requirements and prohibitions commonly thought only to be advisory while engendering it with a duty-oriented breadth contrary both to our understanding (and his?) about the proper place of morality in our lives? Here it might be thought unfair require Hume to first find a satisfactory place for supererogation, on pain of possibly overmoralizing the self. Other moral theorists don't have to do so; why should Hume? But in Hume's case the problem is different. It is not just that he doesn't account for the phenomenon, or even that he can't account for it, in light of his very extensive view of moral obligation. The problem is that at the level of theory he effectively discounts it insofar as he excludes it, and he excludes it insofar as the infrastructure he sets up conflates the necessary and the meritorious, the required and the approved. This, recall, is what Shaver acknowledges but tries to downplay. Yet Shaver only identifies the problem; as I've shown, he does nothing to undo it. In Hume, the problem stands.

VII.

What then shall we conclude, in light of these two cases of potential overmor-

⁴¹ David Heyd, *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, Cambridge, 1982.

⁴² See Jason Kawall, <http://people.colgate.edu/jkawall/VirtueTheoryandtheSupererogatory.pdf>

alization? Is the self in Hume overmoralized? I've suggested that, with respect to the matter of scope, there may be reason to think so. For, according to Hume, the gamut of human life would appear to be exhaustively divisible into that which is moral and immoral, virtuous and vicious; and our actions and reactions would appear to be wide open to moral judgment and evaluation, while our moral duties and obligations would appear to be remarkably extensive. Moreover, to some, a moral exposure of this magnitude risks putting too much moral pressure on individual agents, insofar as there is almost nowhere morality isn't: nowhere an agent can be morally indifferent, in light of the net cast by Hume's wide view of the virtues, and nowhere she can be motivated by morally supererogatory considerations, in light of his broad view of moral obligation. This leaves little to no room for her to entertain either non-moral or *uber*-moral cares and concerns. And so it might be thought that, in light of its scope, Hume's conception of morality constitutes an excessively moralistic view of human life: that it makes our lives more comprehensively moral than they should be.

That said, my argument is far from conclusive. Whether Hume's conception of morality is in fact excessively moralistic or burdensome depends on a number of further factors, beside its scope. These include the substantive content, the level of stringency, the susceptibility to maximization, and the overriding motivational authority of its demands, none of which I've focused on, except in passing. Not that the mere existence of these additional dimensions forecloses on the threat. If anything, their existence opens up for investigation the issue of overmoralization in Hume still further. So while the argument of this essay is necessarily inconclusive, the question it asks stands: Is the self in Hume overmoralized?

If the answer leans toward yes, the irony is large. For as we saw at the start, not only is Hume concerned to contain, if not root-out, the ill effects of disfigured moral psychologies and "extravagant" forms of conduct and character; between his day and ours, he has earned renown for being a moral moderate. Neither extremist nor perfectionist, his vision of morality manifests neither the harshness of the deontologist nor the remoteness of a utilitarian. Instead, Hume presents an ostensibly livable morality, a *human* morality by which human beings can flourish, a morality predicated on human nature that is neither alien nor invasive nor oppressive.

And yet, as I've suggested, there are ways in which the scope of his account may threaten to render morality too demanding insofar as it renders human life too morally comprehensive. So perhaps we do best to end this way. Is the self in Hume overmoralized? Maybe: maybe not. There is still work to be done. Is there an issue in need of address regarding the overmoralization of the self in Hume? So I've argued.

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