REASON, PASSION, AND SENTIMENT IN HUME'S MORAL THEORY

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In Hume's moral theory, there is so much emphasis on the impotence of reason that one might probably think that, for Hume, reason has nothing to do with action and morality. Moreover, it is easy to lead us to the conclusion that passion is the only element in determining action, and moral sense or sentiment is the only element in distinguishing virtue from vice. According to this understanding, Hume's dichotomy of reason and passion, or of reason and sentiment, is clear and distinct as well as his dichotomy of idea and impression. On the one side, reason is inert and impotent as well as idea; on the other side, passion and sentiment are full of activity and vivacity as well as impression.

However, with a little more careful reading, we find that Hume's dichotomy is not so clear, and the role which he assigns to each side is not so convincing. Therefore, in this paper, I will discuss the distinction of reason and passion involved in his doctrine of action, and the dichotomy of reason and sentiment involved in his doctrine of moral distinction. The close relation of these two doctrines is the reason why I pick them up together. The moral distinction is supposed by Hume to cause passion, and then action.

I introduce Hume's distinction of impression and idea first, because it is the basis of Hume's theory and is involved in most of his important arguments. I discuss the dotrine of action prior to the doctrine of moral distinction, since several arguments in the latter presuppose the conclusions of the former.

I. The Distinction of Ideas and Impressions

The dichotomy of ideas and impressions is the fundamental distinction involved and presupposed in most of Hume's philosophical arguments, particularly those in the *Treatise*. Perhaps this is the reason why Hume introduces this distinction as a basis in the very beginning of his first philosophical writing. For the same reason, it serves as the starting point of the present discussion on Hume's moral philosophy.

For Hume, all the operations or actions of the mind are under the denomination of "perception"; "nothing is ever present to the mind but its perceptions."[T, 456][1] Since Hume adopts "perceptions" as the broadest term to comprehend all the mental operations, any doubt raised on this point will be a verbal question, rather than a substantial one. Here we should pay our attention to Hume's classification of perceptions and his account of this classification. Hume usually divides perceptions into two kinds, namely, impressions and ideas. Although there are other ways of classification put by

Hume,[2] th present discussion will be limited to this well-known classification, particularly to those aspects pertinent to the issues of moral distinction and action. Therefore, I will not discuss whether or not impressions and ideas can completely comprehend all the mental operations, even this question is worth discussing.

Impressions are further divided by Hume into original impressions (impressions of sensation) and secondary impressions (impressions of reflection). Original impressions include impressions of sense, and pleasure and pain. Pleasure and pain are of intimate relationship to moral issues. Original impressions are without any antecedent, and secondary impressions are preceded by an original impression alone or by ideas derived from original impressions. Secondary impressions include calm impressions and violent impressions (passions). The moral sense is a kind of calm impressions.[T, 275-277] On the other side of Hume's basic distinction, ideas are the "faint images" of impressions, they are derived from impressions.[T, 1-3]

However, Hume's distinction is not so clear as to avoid any confusion. As a matter of fact, the question "what is the criterion by which Hume makes this distinction" has aroused some disputations. Generally speaking, there are three kinds of opinion expressed on this issue, represented by Stewart, Capaldi, and Tweyman respectively. Stewart insists that this distinction is not a substantial one, impression and idea only differ in degree. This kind of opinion can easily find a lot of evidences in Hume's writings, such as:

> The difference betwixt these consists in the degrees of force and liveliness with which they strike upon the mind, and make their way into our thought or consciousness. [T, 1]
>
> [impressions and ideas] differ only in degree, not in nature.[T, 3]
>
> impressions and ideas differ only in their strength and vivacity.[T, 19]
>
> the great resemblance betwixt our impressions and ideas in every particular, except their degree of force and vivacity.[T, 2]

Furthermore, Stewart points out, Hume's analysis of different ways of perceiving is not to destroy the unity of perceiving; as he says, at "the ultimate level the differences disappear."[3] The second kind of opinion on this issue can be represented by Capaldi. He maintains that, in addition to the relative criterion mentioned above, there is another criterion by which we can make the distinction of impressions and ideas; namely, the former is nonreferential, while the latter is referential, and of a representational character.[4] Along with his emphasis on this aspect of difference, Capaldi stresses that there is a distinction of moral feeling and moral judgment in Hume's moral doctrine.[5] However, this distinction is never made explicitly by Hume.[6] Finally, besides these two differences, Tweyman suggests the third difference; namely, the

impression is paradigmatic, and the idea is derivative.[7] Although, by means of this criterion, Tweyman's interpretation of the missing shade of blue[8] is convincing,[9] this criterion is not enough at all to clarify the distinction between impressions and ideas. Secondary impressions are derived from original impressions, in this sense, secondary impressions are derivative; certainly, Hume would not admit this conclusion.

Reviewing these different interpretations, I find that the most tenable one should be what is explicitly affirmed by Hume himself, i.e. "impressions and ideas *only* differ in degree, not in nature," even though other interpretations may be instructive in some respect. Thus, we conclude that Hume's distinction between impressions and ideas is a relative one. Here the question pertinent to this paper will be: Can such a relative distinction, as the presupposition of most of Hume's arguments, assure the distinction between reason and passion, and the distinction between reason and sentiment? This question is not easy to answer, but I hope the answer will be revealed in the following passages.

II. The Role of Reason and Passion in Action

The primary intention of Hume's philosophy is to reject the rationalist views of human nature. According to Hume, the rationalists put too much emphasis on "reason", but neglect other respects of human nature. He says: "In order to shew the fallacy of all this philosophy, I shall endeavour to prove *first*, that reason alone can never be a motive to any of the will; and *secondly*, that it can never oppose passion in the direction of the will."[T, 413] From his arguments on this issue, we can see Hume's view of the role of reason and passion in action.

Hume says: "All the objects of human reason or inquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit, 'Relations of Ideas', and 'Matters of Fact'." [EHU, 40] Consequently, there are only two kinds of reasoning, i.e. demonstrative reasoning and causal reasoning, the former does the comparing of ideas, and the latter does the inferring of matters of fact; reason has only these two kinds of operation, there is no third one.[T, 463] In order to assert that reason alone cannot be the motive of any action, Hume has to show that both of these kinds of reasoning cannot cause action by themselves. His argument against the influence of demonstrative reasoning upon action, especially when he specifically refers demonstrative reasoning to mathematics, is convincing. Obviously, no one would claim that mathematics can cause any action, whether directly or indirectly; at most, it might serve as an instrument for calculating whenever our action needs its service. Unfortunately, with regard to causal reasoning, it would not be so simple. Causal reasoning can provide us the knowledge of cause and effect, or of means and end. Obviously, this has something to do with action, since ordinary experience will tell us that our actions are often involved with this kind of conditional consideration. When I know that exercise will keep me healthy, exercise is the cause, and health is the effect; in this case, some one might assert that causal reasoning does have some kind of influence upon our action. Hume argues, however,

if I am not interested in the end, causal reasoning cannot have any influence on my action or cause me to exercise. Only when I already had the passion or desire for health, I will refer to the knowledge provided by causal reasoning, and exercise. In this sense, only the passion can be the direct cause of action. Causal reasoning might, at best, direct the action, it directs a passion to its proper object or directs a passion to choose the proper means for acquiring the already desired end. Consequently, Hume makes a very strong claim: "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them."[T, 415]

On this issue, the rationalist view seems to be more moderate than Hume's. According to Hume's description, the rationalist seems to take reason and passion as possessing the equal power or influence on human conduct, therefore, there will always be a combat between reason and passion in human mind. But, for Hume, there could not be this kind of combat, since passion is the only mental element which can directly influence action. Hume believes that the only possible combat should be between passion and passion, not between reason and passion. Reason cannot overcome passion, neither can passion overcome reason; they are not on the same level.

Granting that there is only the combat between passion and passion, we may still ask: What makes us to settle down the conflict of passions? In other words, what makes a passion overcome another passion? Hume did not ask this question, but, according to his theory, we can find a possible answer for him; i.e. a passion can be overcome by a contrary passion. Granting this to be true, what makes these two passions contrary? It cannot be the vivacity, otherwise, they will only differ in degree. Probably it is pleasure and pain that makes two passions contrary to each other; i.e. the passion connected with pleasure will overcome the passion connected with pain. But, how about the case when both of the passions in conflict are connected with pain? Should we say that the one with much vivacity will overcome the other with less vivacity? If someone makes me so angry that I want to kill him, but, afterall, I control myself and do nothing. What makes me control myself? The rationalist will anwer that your reason has controlled your passion, since you anticipate the punishment of murder. Nevertheless, Hume will answer that it is the impression of punishment which produces a passion to control the original passion. But, in this situation, when I reflect on my present experience, I do not find any impression of punishment, except an idea of punishment. If ideas are the proper objects of reason, then, in this case, why cannot I say that my reason controls my passion? Why the claim "reason cannot prevent my action" is more plausible than the claim "reason can prevent my action"? Even if I am convinced by Hume that my alleged idea of punishment is really an impression; why should I keep myself in the present impression of anger which is of so much vivacity, by yielding to the imagined impression of punishment which is of so little vivacity, and do nothing? In ordinary life, people do often feel a certain kind of conflict in making decisions to act. This conflict, for rationalists, is between reason and passion; but for Hume, it is between passions. No matter which theory is correct, it must be able to explain this kind of conflict familiar to ordinary people.

On this point, I do not think that Hume's theory is more plausible than the rationalist's. But this does not mean that Hume's theory is inconsistent, but only means that it is not satisfactory. When one objects to Hume by saying that ideas can cause action, Hume will answer that it is not the ideas that directly causes action, but that the ideas excite passions, and passions cause action; ideas only have indirect influence on action. When one objects to Hume by saying that reason can cause action, Hume will answer that your alleged reason is actually calm passions, which are often accompanied with reason, and calm passions arouse little emotion in our mind, therefore they are often neglected by us, and we misunderstand that reason alone can cause action; for the same reason, in certain situations, when we feel that reason can control passions, the truth is that calm passions which often accompanied with reason control violent passions which sledom accompanied with reason. In spite of the consistency of Hume's arguments, we can still blame him for confining reason into such a limited realm and at the same time leaving so much room for passions. No wonder that Thomas Reid had pointed out, Hume is changing the meaning of the term "reason" to suit his purpose.[10] Another point I would like to point out is that, even if passions are the proper and direct causes of actions, this does not follow that every passion is necessary to produce an action; one may have a lot of passions or desires, for example, those is the day-dream, but he may do nothing to perform them. We do not have to explain this case by saying that these actions are prevented by means of causal reasoning or contrary passions or calm passions; in certain situations, this kind of explanation is needless, since passions may be vanished by themselves or substituted by others.

With regard to the distinction of impressions and ideas, we have seen how much it is involved in Hume's theory of action, but, at the same time, we can find some of its weaknesses as it is applied in more detail. If we adopt the vivacity as the criterion to distinguish impressions from ideas, we will find it is hard to classify calm passions as impressions, since they are of little vivacity. In his theory of action, Hume uses the referential-nonreferential distinction to argue that reason has nothing to do with action, [T, 458] this argument seems very successful, since everything logically follows. But it is too successful to be true. If we follow this argument logically, reason will by no means have anything to do with actions, passions, and volitions; in the following page, however, Hume himself admits that reason can excite a passion; this fact will be sufficient to indicate that the preceding conclusion is wrong. A logically valid argument with a false conclusion, it means there must be something wrong with the premises. Dealing with moral issues of a practical character, we must appeal not only to logical validity, but also to actual experience and careful observation; this absolutely conforms to the essence of Hume's experimental method. Incidentally, Hume himself, according to this argument, infers that, we should not blame those actions accompanied or directed by false judgments, since they are innocent. If this were the case, most of the modern philosophies of law will have to be corrected; the fact is that we only forgive those who are incapable of making any judgment, we do not forgive those who are capable of making judgments, whether true or false.

III. The Role of Reason and Sentiment in Moral Distinction

The fundamental assertion of Hume's doctrine of moral distinction is: Moral distinctions are not derived from reason, but from sentiment. The distinction of impressions and ideas as well as his doctrine of action are also involved in this issue. To begin his arguments, he raises the question: "whether it is by means of our ideas or impressions we distinguish betwixt vice and virtue, and pronounce an action blameable or praise-worthy?"[T, 456] Those who maintain and emphasize Hume's implicit distinction between moral feeling and moral judgment take this question into two parts.[11] Consequently, the answer can also be divided into two parts: By means of impressions we do the distinction, and by means of ideas we do the pronouncement. The former is a matter of feeling, the latter is a matter of judgment or reason. This kind of interpretation will be very plausible, and it could be possibly developed from Hume's whole system. But, when Hume asked this question, I do not think he had that dichotomy in mind. If we take the word "pronounce" so seriously as to be equal to "judge" and as to be a work of reason, why shouldn't we consistently take "distinguish" in the same serious manner to be a work of reason? In asking this question, after all, Hume's chief intention, which is also revealed in his very following argument, is to show that morality is not based on reason but on feeling. He is not concerned with what reason can legitimately do in morality. Therefore, we do not have to divide this question into two parts.

According to Hume, all the mental operations are perceptions; without exception, as mental operations, moral distinctions are perceptions as well. Again, "as all perceptions are either impressions or ideas, the exclusion of the one is a convincing argument for the other."[T, 470] Here Hume's strategy is to confirm the role of sentiment by denying the role of reason in morality. Since morality "is supposed to influence our passions and actions,"[T, 457] and, according to Hume's doctrine of action, "reason alone can never have such influence." Therefore, morality cannot be basically derived from reason. As Hume says: "since vice and virtue are not discoverable merely by reason, or the comparison of ideas, it must be by means of some impression or sentiment."[T, 470] "The next question is, Of what nature are these impression, and after what manner do they operate upon us?"[T, 470] He points out, according to our experience, the impression arising from virtue is agreeable, the impression arising from vice is uneasy. Thus, it is by means of particular pains or pleasures (they are impressions) that we distinguish between vice and virtue.

In developing his doctrine of moral distinction, Hume has the rationalist in mind as his enemy. He is to reject the assertion that reason alone can distinguish between vice and virture, and to claim that it is moral sentiment or sense that distinguishes between vice and virtue. Up to now, his doctrine is not difficult to understand. And, it seems to me, if Hume were contented with this point, it would save him from lots of trouble, and his assertions would be more tenable. According to Hume, virtue or vice is something like secondary quality. He says,

> So that when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it. Vice and virtue, therefore, may be compar'd to sounds, heat and cold, which, according to modern philosophy, are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind.[T, 469]

In other words, moral sense is the natural organ which perceives virtue and vice, just like the eye is the organ by nature perceives colors. In ordinary experience, we find, most of human beings, except those who are blind, can tell black from white. Thus, we recognize, the eye is the very organ for color. Although the new-born infant cannot distinguish between colors, we would still admit that the ability of distinguishing between colors is a natural one, since this ability will be well developed if the infant has normal eyes. As a matter of fact, we do find that human beings can tell vice from virtue. But the sintuation of moral distinction is far more complicated than that of color distinction. In the first place, how do we prove that the ability of moral distinction is a natural one? Hume did not pay much attention on this question. Perhaps he just takes it for granted. In the second place, when we recognize that the eye is the organ of color distinction, we can use anatomy and optics to prove or confirm this assertion. How do we confirm or prove that the moral sense or sentiment is just the very "organ" which makes moral distinction? And how do we prove the existence of this invisible "organ"? However, this second question will not cause too much trouble for Hume. He believes that the faculty capable of moral distinction is a natural one; whatever it is, it cannot be reason, insofar as reason in the rationalistic sense. Since, in this sense, the only two legitimate operations of reason are the comparing of ideas and the inferring of matters of fact, and virtue or vice does not consist in any relation or matter of fact. You may call that natural faculty of moral distinction whatever you like, provided you do not identify it with reason in the rationalistic sense. This attitude has been explicitly expressed by Hume when he says:

> it is requiste that there should be some sentiment, which it touches; some internal taste or feeling, or whatever you please to call it, which distinguishes moral good and evil, and which embraces the one and rejects the other.[EPM, 88]

This is consistent with another claim: "virtue is an end, and is desirable on its own account, without fee or reward, merely, for the immediate satisfaction which it conveys."[EPM, 88] Virtue is what is desirable on its own account. Virtue itself is desirable, then, there is no further reason why it is desirable. If you want to explain this fact, the only thing you can say is that it is desirable because human nature feels it is desirable. As a natural faculty, reason, especially the causal reasoning, can only tell us the proper means to this desired end. It is only because of the ultimate end, i.e. virtue, that these means are desirable in a secondary and derived sense.

In the two paragraphs mentioned above (quoted from the second *Enquiry*),

Hume does not closely relate the doctrine of moral distinction to his impression-idea doctrine.[12] However, in the *Treatise*, we have seen the close relationship between these two doctrines. Although we might, according to the second *Enquiry*, explain his doctrine of moral distinction in a more plausible way, nevertheless, Hume himself, at least in the *Treatise*, will not be satisfied with that kind of interpretation. He develops it further, and relates the moral sense with the sensation of pleasure or pain. In this case, can he still claim that "virtue is an end, and is desirable on its own account"? Shouldn't it be more proper for us to say that pleasure is the ultimate end? To this Hume may reply: "We do not infer a character to be virtuous, because it pleases: But in feeling that it pleases after such a particular manner, we in effect feel that it is virtuous."[T, 471] The virtuous character is virtuous not because of pleasure. The truth is that moral pleasure usually accompanies virtue. And, for Hume, moral pleasure is different from other kinds of pleasure.[T, 472] But what makes moral pleasure to be a peculiar one? Is it because it is accompanied by virtuous character? And what makes a character virtuous? Is it because it is accompanied by moral pleasure? Obviously this is a circular argument.

Furthermore, even if we do not take this relation into consideration, there are still disputable issues in the *Treatise*. In order to explain the transfer of the vivacity of impression, and to make the morality not to be too subjective, Hume introduces the principle of sympathy, more accurately, disinterested sympathy. If we do not confine the operations of reason so limited, I do not see any reason why we cannot interpret the disinterested sympathy as a form of reason. And, on another point, he says:

> 'T is evident, that when we praise any actions, we regard only the motives that produced them, and consider the actions as signs or indications of certain principles in the mind and temper. The external performance has not merit. We must look within to find the moral quality. This we cannot do directly; and therefore fix our attention on actions. [T, 477]

Hume himself admits that we have no ability to know the motives directly. The motive is taken as a cause, then the action is the effect. It is by means of causal reasoning that we know the cause of the effect. Can the moral sense directly know, or immediately recognize, or simultaneously feel, the motive behind the perceived action? If it cannot, we have to admit that moral sense alone can never make a distinction between vice and virtue. Then, it will be meaningless to make such an effort arguing that reason alone cannot make a distinction between vice and virtue.

Before ending this paper, I would like to express another point. Although Hume emphasizes the role of passion in his doctrine of action, and emphasizes the role of sentiment in his doctrine of moral distinction, the more fundamental one is his emphasis on impressions, especially the orginal impressions – pleasure and pain. He says:

> The chief spring or actuating principle of the human mind is pleasure or pain; and when these sensations are remov'd, both from our thought and feeling, we are, in a great measure, incapable of passion or action, of desire or volition.[T, 574]

But it is not adequate for Hume to start his system from "the basis of all moral judgments and acts."[13] My concern here is not to show what kind of difficulties he would meet if he started from this basis. I only want to show that the ultimate foundations of the passion in the doctrine of action and of the moral sense in the doctrine of moral distinction are pleasure and pain. The moral sense as a calm impression is a kind of secondary impressions, the passion as a violent impression is also a kind of secondary impressions, both of them are derived from, or preceded by, an original impression, in which pleasure or pain is the only proper subject for moral theory, or derived from ideas which are derived from original impressions.

NOTES

1. All references to the *Treatise of Human Nature* are taken from the Selby-Bigge edition, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888), hereafter cited as T, followed by the page number. All references to an *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* are taken from Hendel edition, (New York; Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1955), cited as EHU. All references to an *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* are taken from the Schneewind edition, (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983).
2. See John B. Stewart, *The Moral and Political Philosophy of David Hume* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), p. 21, and pp. 347-48.
3. Ibid., p. 22.
4. Hume says: "A passion is an original existence, or of you will, modification of existence, and contains not any representative quality, which renders it a copy of any other existence or modification."[T, 415] See Nicholas Capaldi, *David Hume* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1975), p. 14 and p. 160. Also see Rachael M. Kydd, *Reason and Conduct in Hume's Treatise* (New York: Russell & Russell Inc., 1964), p. 175. Kydd inteprets them into proposition and non-proposition.
5. See Capaldi, *David Hume*, p. 154.
6. See Ronald J. Glossop, *The Nature of Hume's Ethics.*
7. See Stanley Tweyman, *Reason and Conduct in Hume and His Predecessors* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), p. 29.
8. See EHU, 29-30.
9. See Tweyman, pp. 37-39.
10. See J.L. Mackie, *Hume's Moral Theory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 47.
11. See Capaldi, p. 154.
12. According to Capaldi, Hume's argument for sentiment without being related to

the impression-idea doctrine was probably a response to Reid, Hume's contemporary and critic. See Capaldi, p. 179.

13. See Stewart, p. 58.