



ESSAY

SECRET NUMBER **3168**

LANGUAGE **ENGLISH**

TOPIC **II**

Don't write your name, country, or any other form of identification!
N'écrivez pas votre nom, votre pays ou toute autre forme d'identification!

Schreiben Sie nicht Ihren Namen, Ihr Land oder andere Formen der Identifikation!
¡No escriba su nombre, país o cualquier otra forma de identificación!

DO NOT CHANGE THE TEXT FORMATTING. NE MODIFIEZ PAS LA MISE EN FORME DU TEXTE. ÄNDERN SIE NICHT DIE TEXTFORMATIERUNG. NO CAMBIE EL FORMATO DEL TEXTO.

<TITLE / TITRE / TITEL / TÍTULO>

1. Introduction

Moral intuition, a human tendency to judge actions and characters either good or evil, virtuous or vicious is one of the most defining characteristics of human beings. That being said, the very nature of morality and our ability to conceive of it has been one of the crucial questions in philosophy ever since the Ancient Greece times. One of the fundamental questions which we encounter when pondering the nature of morality is the question of whether being virtuous or vicious is an attribute of a character or an action per se or not. Especially the Ancient philosophers were often quite tempted to answer “yes”, but in more recent meta-ethics and epistemology, many have opted for a dissenting view, one of them being the famous British empiricist David Hume, whose citation on the topic will be analyzed and discussed.

In this essay, I will pursue to partly defend David Hume’s statement but also present critique of some of its implications. First, I will clarify the contents of the quote and consider the viewpoints that can be implied from it. Second, I will consider other meta-ethical stances that are also relevant to take into account. Then, I will proceed by pursuing to provide arguments to refute meta-ethical naturalism and show why I think it is justified to agree with Hume in terms of meta-ethics. Furthermore, after having defended a part of Hume’s statement, I will go on by criticizing the notion of vice and virtue as comparable to secondary qualities. Finally, I will conclude by presenting my viewpoint on the very nature of moral intuition and its aspects.

2. Analyzing the quote and its implications

In the quote, David Hume states that when you judge something to be good or evil, your perception of the matter is not an attribute of an action or the character you are judging, but rather, the attributes of vice and virtue exist solely in the mind. It can therefore be implied that there is no morality beyond human thought: morality does not have an objective, people-independent existence. Thus, it seems to me that Hume takes a position against a meta-ethical stance known as naturalism. Moreover, Hume says that vice and virtue “may be compared sounds, colors, heat and cold” and that “from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it”. Hence, it can be interpreted that according



to Hume, we make sensory perceptions and moral judgments based on intuition, and that the two aforementioned capabilities are comparable. However, this is not to say that the judgments are objectively correct: in fact, as I will discuss in the next section, it may be implied that the likewise our senses, our perception of moral is not an objective, universally shared conception.

3. The philosophical disputes as the backgrounds of the quote

In his quote, David Hume takes part on a central dispute within the branch of metaphysics: the question of whether morality of a conduct or a character is existent beyond human thought. Hume compares the attribute of morality to qualities such as heat, sounds and colors, the qualities that are “secondary qualities” of objects in the Lockean sense. Hume and Locke were both famous representatives of the school of British empiricism, according to which our knowledge of the world is primarily derived from our perception, rather than from reason or any innate ideas. Locke famously made the distinction between primary and secondary qualities of objects and his idea was to point out which attributes of objects may be known objectively and which ones may not. The so-called “primary qualities” of things that exist independently of human mind and perception: qualities such as shape and size are primary qualities because they do not need a perceiver in order to be the way they are. Respectively, secondary qualities are qualities that are dependent of the perceiving subject, such as color, taste and odor. As we can imply from the quote, Hume considers morality to be a secondary quality comparable to the previously mentioned ones, therefore rejecting the possibility of conceiving of moral based on their objective, primary qualities. Considering vice and virtue secondary qualities entails that objective viewpoint on moral questions is impossible, since everyone necessarily has a subjective viewpoint on such matters: just like colors or odors aren’t experienced in a similar way by different people, likewise our perceptions of vice and virtue are not completely objective.

Such a stance eventually seems to oppose the meta-ethical viewpoint called naturalism which I think would be relevant to discuss as a possible objection to Hume’s proclaim. Meta-ethical naturalism is a stance according to which moral can be conceived by examining the perceivable qualities of a character/action. Naturalism states that morality is an objective quality, completely comparable to all the other defining attributes of a thing. One of the first ones to hold such a view was Aristotle, who thought that human beings have the ability to perceive the virtuousness or viciousness of a conduct. According to him, our sense of morality is derived from our perceptions, as opposed to Plato, who emphasized the significance of reason instead. Nevertheless, Aristotle’s central idea was that just like shape, size or mass, morality can be perceived and is therefore reducible to natural, perceivable qualities.

In later philosophy, however, Aristotle’s viewpoint has been questioned and criticized on multiple grounds, one of the most famous counter-argument being the so called “open question argument”. Open question argument aims to illustrate how the morality of a conduct or a character cannot be reduced to any natural qualities, and therefore, in accordance with Hume, cannot be a quality independent of the mind. The open



question argument goes as the following: Let's presuppose that moral good is that which causes pleasure. Therefore, the morality of a conduct could be completely reduced to its capability to cause pleasure. Then let's call a character or action "x". Now let's present the "open question": Is it good that x causes pleasure? Though we defined the good as synonymous to pleasure, intuitively, however, the question seems completely sensible and relevant. That being said, it appears that we cannot reduce good to pleasure, but there is always a possibility that a certain natural, objectively perceivable/measurable quality does not meet with morality. Here I want to clarify that the quality of pleasure was just an example: the open question argument can be applied to all the other natural qualities as well. The main point is that morality is not a quality that could be perceived, and every attempt to reduce the morality to some perceivable quality will ultimately fail.

4. The basis of our morality

Next I would like to examine more detailed aspects of Hume's statement and consider some of the problems that come with his viewpoint. Though non-naturalism bears many significant advantages compared to naturalism, there is one challenging question that Hume's viewpoint inevitably encounters: what is the basis for our morality and is it sufficient? If meta-ethical naturalism was, in fact, true, it would be easy to form a sufficient basis for our morality, and therefore, we would not have any problems in terms of the sufficiency and validity of our moral judgement. Non-naturalism, however, provides no such an explanation. As Hume states in the quote, vice and virtue are "perceptions in the mind" and if we consider them comparable to Locke's secondary qualities, they are always somewhat subjective, just like smell or color. In order to consider Hume's viewpoint plausible, we need to be able to explain the basis of our moral intuition. In this section, I will present a critique on a viewpoint which can be implied from Hume's utterance, and pursue to offer an explanation that is in my opinion, more plausible.

If we take an explicit look at what Hume is proposing, he claims that when you affirm something as good or evil, it is the case that "from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it". Though Hume does not explicitly state it here, it can be sensibly interpreted that the aforementioned description refers to empathy. The utterance implies that empathy, the human ability to put yourself in the position of others, is the natural basis for our moral intuition. This would mean that even though the characters or actions do not bear the attribute of vice or virtue, there is still somewhat an objective, natural basis for our sense of morality. Though this seems like a pretty great way of avoiding the problems of non-naturalism, I want to point out some of the crucial problems that such a stance encounters, and respectively, criticize Hume's way of comparing vice and virtue to Lockean secondary qualities.

Though we have previously in this essay concluded that morality is not a natural quality of things, it does not exclude the possibility that our moral intuition might be just a



natural, intrinsic human quality, that is, empathy. According to Hume, our ability to make moral judgments about conducts is comparable to our ability to hear, see and feel objects. However, though moral intuition indeed bears some resemblance to Lockean secondary qualities, I still think that this comparison is not completely non-problematic. If we think about our ability to hear, smell and see objects, we eventually notice that they are essentially natural capabilities. Every human without significant disabilities possesses these capabilities from birth, and the way in which they develop is not dependent of culture. In other words, even though our viewpoint from which we use our senses is subjective, the way we use the senses is natural and universally shared.

In my opinion, however, same thing cannot be said about moral intuition. I do not want to disregard the significance of empathy in terms of our moral intuition, but I do think that unlike our senses, our moral intuition cannot be reduced to our natural capability to feel empathy. The question of the development of our moral is part of the huge “nature versus culture” debate. Though people may have dissenting opinions on whether which one is more crucial in terms of morality, I think it is obvious that the significance of culture cannot be disregarded. The influence of culture can easily be noticed by examining how people from different cultures or surroundings have very dissenting conceptions of vice and virtue. The psychological explanation behind the phenomena is that as we grow up, we form schemas based on which we categorize things. For example, our minds form notions of the simple concepts such as “dog” or “school” but also of the more abstract concepts, for example the schemas of good and evil. The schemas which we formulate by learning from our surroundings explains why we might have different views on moral questions, but also, why the conception of moral is usually shared by a society or other community. All in all, though I agree with Hume in a sense that vice and virtue are perceptions in the mind, I do not think that they are comparable to Lockean secondary qualities in a sense that vice and virtue are not completely natural due to their cultural aspects. Empathy may be an intrinsic capability, but the way it manifests itself in people is certainly not. In conclusion: both secondary qualities and moral judgments are perceptions in the mind, but they are not perceptions of an utterly similar nature.

5. Summary

In this essay, I hope to have analyzed the contents and implications of David Hume’s citation and justified why I partly agree with him. First, I have presented the Lockean distinction between primary and secondary qualities and illustrated how this type of thought is apparent in Hume’s words as well. Secondly I have compared meta-ethical naturalism and non-naturalism and pursued to justify why I think non-naturalism is a more plausible stance, with the help of the famous open question argument. Furthermore, I have analyzed the more detailed aspects of Hume’s citation and discussed its implication of moral intuition as an intrinsic, natural quality. Finally, I have provided critique of the idea of comparability of secondary qualities of objects by pleading the role of culture in terms of moral intuition.