

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Winter 1991-92 Volume 19 Number 2

- 117 Kenneth Dorter Freedom and Constraints in *Prometheus Bound*
- 137 Joseph Cropsey Virtue and Knowledge: On Plato's *Protagoras*
- 157 Michael Davis Politics and Poetry: Aristotle's *Politics*, Books VII
and VIII
- 169 Marie A. Martin Misunderstanding and Understanding Hume's
Moral Philosophy: An Essay on *Hume's Place
in Moral Philosophy*, by Nicholas Capaldi
- 185 Hugh Gillis Kojève-Fessard Documents
Translator
- 201 Glenn N. Schram The Place of Leo Strauss in a Liberal Education
- Book Review*
- 217 Will Morrisey *Questions Concerning the Law of Nature*, by John
Locke

Interpretation

- Editor-in-Chief Hilail Gildin, Dept. of Philosophy, Queens College
- General Editors Seth G. Benardete • Charles E. Butterworth • Hilail Gildin • Robert Horwitz (d. 1987) • Howard B. White (d. 1974)
- Consulting Editors Christopher Bruell • Joseph Cropsey • Ernest L. Fortin • John Hallowell • Harry V. Jaffa • David Lowenthal • Muhsin Mahdi • Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. • Arnaldo Momigliano (d. 1987) • Michael Oakeshott (d. 1990) • Ellis Sandoz • Leo Strauss (d. 1973) • Kenneth W. Thompson
- Editors Wayne Ambler • Maurice Auerbach • Fred Baumann • Michael Blaustein • Mark Blitz • Patrick Coby • Christopher A. Colmo • Edward J. Erler • Maureen Feder-Marcus • Joseph E. Goldberg • Pamela K. Jensen • Grant B. Mindle • James W. Morris • Will Morrissey • Aryeh L. Motzkin • Gerald Proietti • Charles T. Rubin • Leslie G. Rubin • Bradford P. Wilson • Hossein Ziai • Michael Zuckert • Catherine Zuckert
- Manuscript Editor Lucia B. Prochnow

Subscriptions Subscription rates per volume (3 issues):
individuals \$21
libraries and all other institutions \$34
students (five-year limit) \$12

Single copies available.

Postage outside U.S.: Canada \$4.50 extra;
elsewhere \$5.40 extra by surface mail (8 weeks
or longer) or \$11.00 by air.

Payments: in U.S. dollars AND payable by
a financial institution located within the U.S.A.
(or the U.S. Postal Service).

CONTRIBUTORS should follow *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 13th ed. or manuals based on it; double-space their manuscripts; place references in the text, in endnotes or follow current journal style in printing references. To ensure impartial judgment of their manuscripts, contributors should omit mention of their other work; put, on the title page only, their name, any affiliation desired, address with postal/zip code in full, and telephone. Please send THREE clear copies.

Composition by Eastern Graphics, Binghamton,
N.Y. 13901

Printed and bound by Wickersham Printing Co.,
Lancaster, PA 17603

Inquiries: Patricia D'Allura, Assistant to the Editor,
INTERPRETATION, Queens College, Flushing, N.Y.
11367-0904, U.S.A. (718)520-7099

Misunderstanding and Understanding Hume's Moral Philosophy:

An Essay on *Hume's Place in Moral Philosophy*,
by Nicholas Capaldi

MARIE A. MARTIN
Clemson University

As Socrates pointed out long ago, people do not seek the truth if they believe that they already possess it. This insight of Socrates provides an answer to an important question regarding the moral sentiment theory of the Scottish Moralists, for this theory seems to capture whatever insights are contained in Kantianism, Utilitarianism, Aristotelianism, or any of their various contemporary permutations, yet it avoids the sorts of problems commonly associated with all versions of these theories. Thus, the question is, why is it that moral sentiment theory is never considered a serious contender in the contemporary moral arena?

The answer has to do with what philosophers believe they know about moral sentiment theory, which, in most cases, amounts to what they believe they know about Hume's version of it. A good deal of what most philosophers believe they know—indeed, what they believe “everyone knows” about Hume's moral theory—is simply false. Thus, any attempts on the part of contemporary proponents of the moral sentiment theory to discuss or debate its merits become, instead, attempts to disabuse the audience of their various misconceptions about it. Nor are these misconceptions minor. For example, anyone who “knows” that Hume was some sort of emotivist, or that Hume thought that one cannot deduce an ‘ought’ from an ‘is,’ or that Hume believed that there is a ‘fact-value gap,’ is in the grip of misconceptions on the order of, say, “knowing” that Plato was a relativist or that Kant was a consequentialist.

It seems clear that, before contemporary philosophers can be persuaded to consider seriously whether or not moral sentiment theory might be true, they must first be convinced that they do not really know much of what they thought they knew about moral sentiment theory in general or Hume's theory in particular. It is, then, a delight to discover that someone has taken on this task. In his book, *Hume's Place in Moral Philosophy*,¹ Nicholas Capaldi takes on the received views, offering the most systematic and thorough critique of them to date.

Of course, Capaldi does much more than criticize the received views of Hume's moral philosophy. He also offers a historically and contextually sensi-

tive analysis of all the major aspects of Hume's moral theory. Capaldi begins by examining the views of Hume's predecessors, showing how they determined the central questions involved in the moral debate of Hume's time. He explains Hume's theory of moral judgment, emphasizing the importance of the distinction between moral sentiments and moral judgments. He offers a thoughtful account of Hume's much misunderstood theory of moral obligation and its relation to the moral debate of the time. Finally, he examines Hume's theory of the passions and explains its importance both for understanding Hume's conception of the self and for understanding the development of his theory of sympathy from the initial *Treatise* account to the final version found in the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*.

Yet, one thing that is evident throughout the discussion of each of these aspects of Hume's theory is that Capaldi is waging a constant battle against tenaciously persistent and pervasive misunderstandings of Hume. What this reveals is that the Socratic task of exposing ignorance, if not first in the order of importance, must be first in the order of dialectic. For this reason I shall concentrate primarily on this negative, Socratic aspect of Capaldi's book.

HUME'S PHILOSOPHICAL PROJECT

Capaldi makes clear that the most fundamental problem with standard interpretations of Hume's moral philosophy is their lack of attention to context, or, as he calls it, their "textual and historical myopia." Given the evidence of blindness at every conceivable level, this is an apt description. What makes Capaldi's critique so devastating is that it reveals just how profound the contextual myopia of Humean interpretation has been. It shows how a number of the most widely accepted interpretations of Hume's moral theory ignore the context of paragraphs in which passages occur, ignore the context of the sections in which passages occur, ignore the context of the historical debate to which Hume was contributing, ignore the context of Hume's overall moral theory, and, finally, ignore the context of Hume's general philosophical project. What makes Capaldi's own interpretation so powerful is his careful attention to all of these contexts in his delineation of Hume's moral theory.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the care he takes in providing an adequate philosophical framework for interpreting his moral views. This is crucial because the major and most fundamental source of misconceptions about Hume's views is a misunderstanding of Hume's overall philosophical project. Since its inception in the nineteenth century, the most general framework for interpreting Hume's thought has been the "rationalist-empiricist" distinction. This is not a helpful distinction for understanding Hume's philosophical project. First, it forces us to conceive of Hume's philosophical project as primarily epistemological, whereas Hume himself conceived of it as essentially moral.

And, second, it obscures the crucial fact that Hume's critique of philosophical thought was not directed merely against what has now come to be identified as rationalism, but against the traditional conception of the nature of philosophical thinking that motivated the 'empiricist' thought of Locke and Berkeley as well. Hume was not an empiricist, he was a skeptic; and his skepticism was not a result of 'following empiricist principles to their logical conclusions.' His skepticism was the result of his recognition of the incoherences inherent in the traditional perspective of *philosophical* thinking.

Capaldi provides a far superior framework for understanding Hume's philosophical project, viz., the framework of Hume's 'Copernican Revolution.' Hume's revolutionary move was to suggest a radical shift of perspective in philosophical thinking. Capaldi calls this a shift between the 'I Think' and the 'We Do' perspective. The traditional philosophical perspective, carried over into modern philosophy by Descartes, is, Capaldi points out, the 'I Think' perspective, or "the perspective of the egocentric, outside, disengaged observer" (p. 22). From this point of view, the task of philosophy is "to scrutinize our thought process in the hope of uncovering principles of rationality which could be applied to directing our actions" (p. 23). The task of philosophy so conceived is to test both thought and action, including all social practices and institutions, against the theoretical standards discovered by 'philosophical thought.' Hume's project was to show that this traditional perspective did not and could not produce any coherent standards, because reason, conceived in this way, was both self-destructive and inherently incoherent.

Hume, on the other hand, adopted the 'We Do' perspective, which, Capaldi says, "viewed human beings fundamentally as agents, as doers, immersed in both a physical world and a social world along with other agents" (p. 23). Rather than testing all thought and action according to theoretical standards, Hume reversed the procedure by testing all theoretical principles by the standards implicit in our actual thought and practice. Even some of the more thoughtful and context-sensitive of interpreters have missed Hume's essential move here. For instance, Norman Kemp Smith realized that Hume's project was not an irrationalist attack on reason per se, yet he mistakenly took Hume's fundamental criticism of the traditional conception of reason to be the psychological claim that we are constitutionally incapable of conforming to the theoretical standards of reason as traditionally conceived.

But while Hume certainly did believe this was true, it was not the basis of his criticism. What Hume attempted to illustrate was that if we thoroughly and consistently adhered to the standards produced by the 'I Think' perspective, "there would be an end at once of all action, as well as the chief part of speculation."² Any method that is supposed to produce standards of thought and action, which, when consistently applied, undermines all thought and action is radically misconceived. Hume's psychological point is not the criticism, but rather, the explanation of why proponents of the traditional perspective, in fact,

do not suffer from a complete paralysis of thought and action. The answer to this *is* psychological. ‘Nature,’ in the form of psychological mechanisms, prevents them from consistent adherence to their own theoretical principles. Hume’s suggestion that we be on guard whenever there is “any suspicion that a *philosophical* term is employed without meaning or idea” (*EHU*, p. 22, emphasis added), reflects his recognition that the “jargon, which has so long taken possession of metaphysical reasonings” (*EHU*, p. 21) is all too often merely a maneuver that allows philosophers to escape the consistent application and inevitable implications of their own theoretical principles.

Thus, Capaldi’s framework provides a more specific answer to what is wrong with attempts to understand Hume within the ‘rationalist-empiricist’ framework. To do so is to view Hume’s philosophical project as simply another move within the ‘I Think’ perspective rather than as an utter rejection of that perspective. An excellent illustration of just how thoroughly this sort of error distorts Hume’s thought can be found in Anglo-American Positivism. Despite its claim to Humean paternity, positivism was actually a perfect example of the sort of philosophical perspective that Hume rejected.

The essence of positivist theory was a theoretically derived theory of meaning, which was used as a standard for testing all thought and action. What was for Hume simply a practical method for clarifying suspicious philosophical terms became, for positivists, a standard for evaluating the meaning of all discourse. As critics were soon to point out, the positivist agenda, consistently applied, would not only relegate all moral, social, and political discourse to the noncognitive realm, but would totally undermine the very practice of science in whose name positivism was advanced.

But in addition to being an example of the sort of philosophical perspective Hume himself rejected, positivism is also an example of how the misunderstanding of Hume’s philosophical project can lead to an almost perversely distorted conception of his moral theory. Indeed, as Capaldi makes clear, the two major prevailing misconceptions of Hume’s moral thought are the legacy of positivist misinterpretation of Hume’s project. The misconceptions are (1) that Hume’s theory is a form of subjectivism, and (2) that Hume believed that there is a fact-value gap, as is evidenced by his claim that an ‘ought’ cannot be derived from an ‘is.’ I shall examine each of these in turn.

SUBJECTIVISM VS. INTERSUBJECTIVISM

The subjectivism attributed to Hume is generally believed to be one of two sorts. (It is even sometimes claimed that Hume, being either confused or inconsistent, held both.) The first sort is emotivism, the noncognitivist view that moral pronouncements simply express the evaluator’s feelings or sentiments. Such expressions are neither true nor false and, thus, there is really no such

thing as moral judgment at all. To say that something is virtuous is simply to express one's positive attitude or sentiments toward it.

The second sort of subjectivism is less extreme. It holds that moral pronouncements report the feelings or attitudes of the evaluator. Inasmuch as such reports are either true or false, it is not a form of noncognitivism, but it is still entirely subjectivist in the sense that all that is being reported is the feelings of the evaluator. On this view, to say that something is virtuous is to report one's positive feeling towards it. Capaldi traces the development of these readings of Hume in great detail and carefully examines the passages in Hume which are generally claimed to support such readings. What this reveals is that the smallest attention to context not only shows that these passages do not support the subjectivist reading, but also provides overwhelming evidence against such readings.

The early emotivists, Ayer and Stevenson, can at least be given this much credit: They never attributed emotivism to Hume. On the other hand, both claimed "inspiration" from Hume, and Capaldi points out that Stevenson even went so far as to claim that "Hume has most nearly asked the questions that here concern us, and has most nearly reached a conclusion that the present writer can accept."³ The implication is that Hume was groping around for the emotivist solution and that, if he had merely been a bit more consistent or less confused, he would have discovered it. But if one looks to the moral debate of Hume's time, a debate revolving around the moral egoism advanced by Hobbes and Mandeville, the moral rationalism of Clarke and Wollaston, and the moral sentiment theory first articulated by Shaftesbury and developed and elaborated by Hutcheson, it becomes clear that the questions that concerned Hume were, for the most part, not even remotely related to the questions that concerned Stevenson. Hume was interested in the nature of moral distinctions (what it is that makes something virtuous or vicious), in the nature of moral apprehension (how we come to know such moral distinctions), and in the nature of moral motivation (how we distinguish moral from nonmoral motivation). These were not the concerns of the emotivists. Furthermore, if one looks at Hume's actual text, it is clear that the answers he gives to his own questions are not at all close to Stevenson's answers to *his* questions. For Hume not only makes continual reference to moral judgments and clearly treats them as true or false, he also refers to specific moral qualities, and claims that the question of whether or not any given object has such qualities concerns a "plain matter of fact" (*EHU*, p. 289).

Although later emotivists and their critics did attribute emotivism to Hume, Stevenson attributed the second sort of subjectivism to Hume. On this interpretation, Hume is supposedly claiming that moral pronouncements report the sentiments of the evaluator. Although this interpretation at least acknowledges Hume's frequent reference to moral judgments and his claims that such judgments are true or false, it can be maintained only by a highly selective reading

of Hume's texts. It completely ignores the numerous passages where Hume explicitly denies that moral judgments refer to the personal sentiments of the evaluator. Likewise it ignores those passages where Hume claims that we can make correct moral judgments even when our personal sentiments are completely contrary to such judgments.

The only explanation of the degree of distortion evident in these subjectivist interpretations is that their advocates approached Hume with a set of preconceptions about what his moral views must (or at least should) have been. And the source of these preconceptions can be traced directly to the general misunderstanding of Hume's philosophical project.

What exactly was Hume's view? Capaldi suggests the term "intersubjectivist," and this is an appropriate description. The sense of "intersubjective" can be clarified by considering Hume's analogy to primary and secondary qualities (an analogy Hume adopts from Hutcheson). By Hutcheson's and Hume's time it had become common to interpret this distinction in a somewhat different manner than had Locke. Primary qualities were qualities of objects that existed "in the objects" and independently of human perception. Secondary qualities were "in the mind," and thus their existence was dependent on human perception. In Hume's language, secondary qualities were "impressions."

Consider our color perceptions and color judgments. Color distinctions are, in Hume's terminology, founded upon or determined by impressions. While impressions are obviously neither true nor false, it does not follow that our color judgments are neither true nor false. Nor does it follow that in judging that something is red, we are merely reporting our subjective impression. Instead we suppose that physical objects are so constituted that, viewed under certain standard conditions, they will produce the impression of red in normally sighted human beings. If I view an object under these standard conditions, I can use my impression as a basis for the judgment that the object is red. But, even in this case, I am not reporting my impression; I am using my impression as evidence for the judgment. My judgment is true when the object is, in fact, so constituted that it produces the impression of red in normally sighted human beings who view it under the appropriate conditions. It is false when the object is not so constituted. Our language reflects this distinction between reports of subjective experience and judgments of fact about the qualities of the object. When we wish to report our subjective experience we say that the object *looks* or *appears* red. When we wish to make a claim about the nature of the object, we say that it *is* red.

The same relationship holds between moral sentiments (impressions) and moral judgments. Certain objects such as actions or characters are so constituted that, under certain standard conditions, they produce certain sentiments (approbation or disapprobation) in normal human beings. If I view or consider, say, a person's character under these standard conditions, I can use my sentiment as a basis for the judgment that he is virtuous. But, as in the case of color

judgments, I am not reporting my own sentiment, but rather, using my sentiment as evidence for the judgment about the nature of the person's character. To say that someone is virtuous is to say that he has certain sorts of causal properties, that he has qualities that, under standard conditions, produce a sentiment of approbation in human beings. The question of whether or not someone possesses these qualities is, according to Hume, "a plain matter of fact."

The standard condition necessary for the production of the sentiments of moral approbation or disapprobation is an impartial point of view.

Besides, every particular man has a peculiar position with regard to others; and 'tis impossible we cou'd ever converse together on any reasonable terms, were each of us to consider characters and persons, only as they appear from his peculiar point of view. In order, therefore, to prevent those continual *contradictions*, and arrive at a more *stable* judgment of things, we fix on some *steady* and *general* points of view; and always, in our thoughts, place ourselves in them, whatever may be our present situation.⁴

Although this general point of view is impartial, it is not ideal in the sense of unrealizable. It is the view that all of us naturally have whenever we observe the actions or character of someone who has no particular relation to ourselves, for instance, when we observe a stranger engaged in some benevolent action towards another stranger or some cruelty inflicted on the people of a distant age or nation.

Hume not only considers the questions of which qualities produce moral sentiments and what objects have such qualities to be questions concerning plain matters of fact, he also considers the question of whether or not one has a moral obligation to be a plain matter of fact.

How can this be reconciled with what everyone 'knows' Hume said about the 'fact-value' gap and the impossibility of deducing an 'ought' statement from an 'is' statement? The answer reveals the second fundamental misconception at the heart of the received view of Hume's moral philosophy. It is to this misconception that I now turn.

OBLIGATION AND THE 'IS-UGHT' PASSAGE

Capaldi argues, quite correctly, that *Hume never raises any question whatsoever about the nature or status of the inference between factual or 'is' statements and moral or 'ought' statements*. The usual shock with which this claim is received is a good indication of how little regard has been paid to the line of argument Hume is pursuing in the section containing the so-called 'is-ought' passage. And this lack of attention to the context of the passage is a further

indication of how little regard has been paid to the nature of the moral debate that Hume was addressing in that section. Before the 'is-ought' passage can be understood, one must first understand its context.

As I mentioned earlier, the contending views in the debate of Hume's time were moral egoism, moral rationalism, and moral sentiment theory. Although Hutcheson must be credited with being the first to work out the moral sentiment theory in a systematic manner, he was at his best when criticizing rival theories. Hume's recognition of Hutcheson's genius in this regard is evidenced by his adopting all of Hutcheson's major criticisms of egoism and rationalism.

Hutcheson and Hume agreed that the moral egoists were correct in their recognition that both the nature of moral distinctions and the nature of moral motivation could only be explained by appeal to sentiments. The problem with egoism was not in its form of explanation, but in the content. It misidentified the sentiment. The "selfish system" founders on its radically misconceived notion of human nature. Hutcheson, Hume, and later Adam Smith all adamantly denied that human beings are motivated only, or even primarily, by self-interest. The selfish thesis is so contrary to the evidence of everyday experience that it can only be maintained by the most intricate, subtle and, ultimately, fallacious turns of argument, and by twisting the meaning of words beyond recognition. In addition, egoism renders all judgments regarding the actions and characters of historical agents and people in distant nations totally unintelligible. Finally, egoism reduces all morality to prudence and, in doing so, collapses the distinction between the moral and nonmoral realm. This, the moral sentiment theorists argue, eliminates morality altogether.

The second group of opponents in the debate of Hume's time were the moral rationalists. A number of somewhat different theories come under this heading, but what was common to them all was the view that moral distinctions consist in certain sorts of truths which are discoverable by reason alone. Hutcheson and Hume concentrated on two dominant versions. Both versions considered virtue to consist in conformity to truths, but they differed in their analyses of the nature of these truths. The first version held that the source of moral distinctions were demonstrable moral relations. Virtue consisted in conformity to these relations. This was the view of Samuel Clarke. The second version was Wollaston's view that virtue consisted in signification of truth in actions. Actions that signify things as they truly are, are virtuous; those that signify things as they are not, are vicious.

The section of the *Treatise* containing the 'is-ought' passage is devoted to the criticism of moral rationalism in general and Clarke's and Wollaston's versions in particular. Capaldi's treatment of this section contains many strengths, yet it does have a few shortcomings. Its strengths include his recognition that Hume, like Hutcheson before him, was rejecting a certain account of the nature of moral obligation and offering a different account in its stead; his analysis of the content and grammar of the 'is-ought' passage, showing how both are at

odds with the traditional interpretation of that passage; and his detailed examination of every major variation in the traditional interpretation, along with careful rebuttals of each. These aspects of Capaldi's account provide overwhelming evidence for his negative claim that Hume never raised the 'is-ought' question. From the perspective of the negative Socratic task, Capaldi's criticism of the received views on Hume's theory of obligation, particularly in relation to the 'is-ought' passage, is one of the major strengths of his book. His blow to the received view is simply devastating.

The shortcomings of his account, although they in no way detract either from the strength of his negative thesis or from his positive account of Hume's theory of obligation, do detract from his actual interpretation of the 'is-ought' passage. Even though Capaldi deserves much credit for examining the passage in a far broader context than any other commentator, his context is still not broad enough. While he recognizes that Hume and Hutcheson share the same concern, he does not examine enough of Hutcheson's work to reveal the fundamental nature of that concern. In fact, in the section containing the 'is-ought' passage, Hume repeats every one of Hutcheson's major arguments against moral rationalism, including Hutcheson's most fundamental criticism. As I will argue below, it is this fundamental criticism, first advanced by Hutcheson and repeated by Hume throughout the section, that Hume is addressing in his summary 'is-ought' paragraph. To show this will require a brief look at Hutcheson's criticisms of moral rationalism.⁵

First, Hutcheson argues that moral rationalism cannot account for moral motivation. The mere knowledge of any truth cannot motivate anyone to action; it is only when this knowledge is accompanied by some sentiment or desire that we are moved to act. But, quite apart from this consideration, the moral rationalists are completely incapable of giving any explanation of what makes something virtuous or vicious that does not either reduce to egoism, reduce to moral sentiment theory, or beg the question.

Hutcheson argues that, before one can appeal to the morality of an action as the motive to perform it, one must be able to give some independent account of what makes it morally good. What sort of accounts do the moral rationalists give? Some claim that it is an end proposed by the Deity. But why, Hutcheson asks, do we approve God's ends? Because, they say, God only wills what is best. But, Hutcheson points out, if one means naturally best, i.e., conducive to our own or others' interest, then the position either reduces to egoism or admits that it is a benevolent sentiment that makes something morally good and not conformity to truth. If, on the other hand, one means *morally* best, then the answer begs the question, saying no more than what makes it morally good is that it is morally good.

Another common way the rationalists answered the question of what makes something morally good was to appeal to duty or obligation. After describing Clarke's view that virtue consists in conformity to relations, Hutcheson notes:

'Tis asserted, that God who knows all these relations, &c. does guide his actions by them, since he has no wrong affection (the word 'wrong' should have been first explained); And that in like manner these relations &c. *ought* (another unlucky word in morals) to determine the choice of all rationals. (*I*, p. 246)

Hutcheson's point, both about the use of the term 'wrong' and of the term 'ought,' is that they beg the question. Clarke is supposed to be explaining what makes something morally good or evil, but to refer to it being wrong or obligatory in the explanation is to presuppose the very thing being explained.

Hutcheson attacks Wollaston's view that virtue consists in signification of truth on exactly the same grounds:

One of Mr. Woolaston's illustrations that significancy of falsehood is the idea of moral evil, ends in this, 'tis acting a lye. What then? Should he not first have shewn what was moral evil, and that every lye was such. (*I*, p. 271)

Nor does Hutcheson leave any doubt about the nature of his criticism.

One may see that he has some other idea of moral good, previously to this significancy of truth, by his introducing, in the very explication of it, words presupposing the ideas of morality previously known: such as 'right,' 'obligation,' 'lye'. . . . (*I*, p. 269)

Throughout his discussion of the moral rationalists Hutcheson continually points out that the question-begging character of their attempts to explain the nature of moral distinctions is particularly evident in their appeal to moral obligation or duty. To appeal to duty or obligation in explaining what makes something morally good is simply to say that what makes something morally good is its moral goodness. This is no explanation at all.

On the other hand, Hutcheson claimed that there was no problem of explaining moral distinctions and, thus, moral obligation, once one acknowledges the existence of moral sentiments. By 'obligation' one can mean that an action is necessary to obtain happiness to the agent; this is the prudential 'ought' and it "presupposes selfish affections, and the senses of private happiness." Or one can mean "that every spectator, or he himself upon reflection, must approve his action, and disapprove his omitting it" (*I*, p. 229). This is the moral 'ought,' and it presupposes moral sentiments.

Hume begins the section containing the 'is-ought' passage, which is titled "Moral Distinctions not deriv'd from Reason," by repeating the main argument of his Book II discussion of motivation. Like Hutcheson, Hume argues that reason discovers truth, but can never, in itself, motivate us to act. Only passions or sentiments can motivate actions. Thus, rationalism cannot account for moral motivation. Hume next examines the specific theories of Clarke and Wollaston, beginning with Wollaston. He first repeats a number of Hutcheson's

points about the absurd implications of Wollaston's views, e.g., that it makes the morality or immorality of an action depend on the sagacity of the observers instead of the intentions of the agent, and it implies that all virtues are equally virtuous and all vices equally vicious. Hume then turns to Hutcheson's most devastating criticism. After examining a number of attempts to escape the absurd implications of Wollaston's view, Hume points out that,

We may easily observe, that in all those arguments there is an evident reasoning in a circle. A person who takes possession of *another's* goods, and uses them as his *own*, in a manner declares them to be his own; and this falsehood is the source of the immorality. . . . But is property, or right, or obligation, intelligible without an antecedent morality? (*T*, p. 462n)

Like Hutcheson, Hume recognizes that Wollaston's attempts to explain what makes something virtuous or vicious inevitably beg the question. For, even supposing that immorality is derived from the 'falsehood' represented in action, Wollaston cannot give "any plausible reason, why such a falsehood is immoral" (*T*, p. 462n).

Hume next turns to Clarke's moral relations theory. Clarke had claimed that moral distinctions are based on demonstrable moral relations, what he called "eternal and immutable fitnesses and unfitnesses of things." In his criticism of Clarke, Hutcheson had pointed out that the supposed relations must be ones that hold only between rational agents, and that any of the usual senses of 'fitness' would seem to hold between things like numbers, sentences, inanimate objects, and so on. Hume adds his own twist to the argument by introducing his theory of relations. The only demonstrable relations, according to Hume, are resemblance, contrariety, degrees in quality, and proportion in quantity or number. But all these relations are applicable "not only to an irrational, but also to an inanimate object" (*T*, p. 464). Hume then challenges the moral relations theorist to specify a relation that applies only to rational agents and that is a demonstrable relation discoverable by reason alone. Capaldi offers an excellent, detailed analysis of this aspect of Hume's argument, showing both how it decisively proves there could be no such relations, and at the same time proves that even if such relations could be shown to exist, the rationalists could never demonstrate their effect on the will.

But it is important to note that Hume does not end his criticism of the moral relations view here. He pursues the matter a step further by indicating the sort of problems encountered when trying to explain what makes a given relation a *moral* relation. Why is it that the relation involved in incest is immoral in humans, but not in animals? If the answer is because animals do not have sufficient reason to discover its immorality, yet "man, being endow'd with that faculty, which *ought* to restrain him to his duty, the same action becomes criminal," then, Hume claims, "I would reply, that this is evidently arguing in a circle" (*T*, p. 467). Like Wollaston's, Clarke's attempt to *explain* the nature

of moral distinctions, what makes something moral or immoral, begs the question.

It is at this point that Hume concludes with the 'is-ought' passage. According to Capaldi, the passage is directed at the moral relations view and, more specifically, at Clarke. Capaldi takes Hume's main thrust against Clarke to be his inability to specify any demonstrable relation that holds only between rational agents. The point Hume is making in the 'is-ought' passage, according to Capaldi, is that neither can Clarke deduce the supposed moral relations represented by the moral 'ought' from the four demonstrable relations of science. The problem is not how or whether one can deduce the moral 'ought' from a factual 'is,' but how one can deduce the moral relation represented by 'ought' from these other relations which, Hume points out, "are entirely different from it" (*T*, p. 469).

This interpretation is certainly plausible. Not only would it make sense for Hume to be making this sort of point here, but, unlike the traditional interpretation, the claim Capaldi attributes to Hume is consistent with Hume's overall moral theory. And, as Capaldi points out, the actual grammar of the passage argues more favorably for his interpretation than for the received interpretation.

Yet I think there is an even more plausible interpretation. When Hume begins the passage with, "in every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked," I believe he really *is* referring to every system he has discussed so far and not merely to Clarke's moral relations view. Wollaston's version does not involve moral relations, and thus the criticism Capaldi supposes Hume to be making in the passage would not apply to every system Hume has "met with." As further evidence for his interpretation Capaldi points out that Clarke actually argues in the manner Hume describes in the passage, viz., establishing the being of God, referring to the affairs of men, and then turning to our obligations. But, in fact, both Clarke and Wollaston argue in this manner. I believe that Hume's point is that all the moral rationalists' attempts to explain the nature of moral distinctions beg the question because they employ terms that presuppose the very thing being explained.

When Clarke answers the questions of what makes these relations morally good by claiming that God, who has no *wrong* affection, guides His actions by them, and thus they *ought* to guide our actions, he has, in effect, merely said that what makes them morally good is that they are morally good. Likewise, when Wollaston attempts to explain what makes the signification of falsehood morally evil by claiming that God, our benefactor, has given us reason to know the truth and we are signifying the *lie* that we are *not obliged* to know the truth, he has merely said that what makes it morally wrong is that it is morally wrong.

Finally, while Capaldi correctly denies that Hume is discussing the nature or status of the inference from factual to moral statements, he does believe that Hume is concerned with an *inference*, viz., the inference from the four

demonstrable relations of science to a supposed moral relation represented by 'ought.' But Hume is not discussing any sort of inference whatsoever. He is using the term 'deduction' in a very common eighteenth-century sense that has nothing to do with inference. To deduce something in this sense is to explain it by reference to its source.⁶ It is a sense used by Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Adam Smith, as well as by Hume in a number of other places. All use 'deduce' in this sense when referring to the moral egoists' explanation of the source of moral distinctions. For instance, Hume refers to the egoists' "deduction of morals from self-love" (*EHU*, p. 215), and Smith describes the egoists as "those who are fond of deducing all our sentiments from certain refinements of self-love."⁷

Once it is recognized that Hume is criticizing the form of explanation employed by the moral rationalists, it becomes clear just how absurd it is to suppose that Hume is suggesting there is any 'fact-value' gap or that there is some problem with deducing moral statements from factual statements. For Hume is not complaining that the moral rationalists explain 'oughts' by using 'is's,' but exactly the opposite. His criticism is that they are attempting to explain 'oughts' or moral terms by using 'oughts' or other moral terms, and this begs the question.

CONCLUSION

I have already explained why I have concentrated on the negative aspect of Capaldi's task. But I would like to conclude by briefly relating this negative aspect to the positive aspects of his account. Capaldi's recognition of Hume's radical shift in philosophical perspective reveals a number of traditional blind spots imposed by a misunderstanding of Hume's philosophical project. I have discussed these in the specific area of Hume's moral theory. But there are other, more general, areas affected as well. For instance, the treatment of Hume's theory of meaning as a form of reductive empiricism (often referred to as Hume's following empiricism to its logical conclusion) is a natural result of the assumption that Hume is simply making a new move within the traditional philosophical framework. By rejecting this assumption, Capaldi is able to give a sensitive and accurate account of Hume's view on meaning.

The same is true of Hume's account of the self. The assumption that Hume is working within the 'I Think' perspective has led the vast majority of Hume commentators to take his *Treatise*, Book I, discussion of the self as his full account, in spite of Hume's explicit claim that this account is directed toward only *one aspect* of the self. In Book I Hume is rejecting the view of the self as a simple, atomistic Cartesian ego. The self is not essentially a "thinking thing." Capaldi shows that it is only in Book II, "Of the Passions," that Hume reveals

his full account of the self. The self is both thought and passion, mind and body. We come to have a concept of self, indeed, we come to *be* selves, only through social interaction. In treating man as a social being Hume is doing more than insisting that he always be considered in a social context. He is insisting that all selves are essentially and irreducibly social.

The implications of this view are momentous, both for moral philosophy and for social and political philosophy. In moral philosophy it quite obviously undermines the egoistic systems of Hobbes and his followers. But it likewise undermines the Kantian conception of a person. If moral agents are so solely in virtue of their rationality, i.e., if they are essentially thinking things, then no human being is a moral agent. Utilitarianism fares no better. The notion of society as comprised of distinct, individualistic entities performing a hedonic calculus involving the 'self-interest' of each discrete self is radically misconceived.

In social and political philosophy the Humean conception of self undermines the foundation of all social contract theory for the same reason that it undermines Utilitarianism. The view of society as composed of atomistic individuals contracting together to realize their "self-interests" is based on the same profoundly flawed conception of a self. Contemporary Rawlsian versions of contract theory are equally misguided. As Hume points out, "ourself, independent of the perception of every other object, is in reality nothing . . ." (*T*, p. 340). Take away our concrete relations to the world and others, and one takes away all selves. There could be nothing behind the 'veil of ignorance' except bundles of perceptions—very questionable arbitrators of social or political legitimacy!

Finally, Capaldi's recognition of Hume's shift in perspective gives him the basis for developing Hume's conception of how one can (and, just as important, how one cannot) achieve philosophical understanding of the social world. Capaldi argues that, on a Humean view, "social practice is an *intersubjectively* shared framework of norms within which we interpret what we are doing" (p. 284). The social world composed of these practices cannot be understood either by the sort of reductivism found in physical science or by the appeal to hidden, underlying structure that pervades much of social science. They cannot explain the social world because they either do not account for meaning or they arbitrarily *impose* some alien meaning on practice. For Hume the task of the social philosopher is "explication," which Capaldi describes as the attempt to clarify "our ordinary understanding of our practice in the hope of extracting . . . a set of norms which can be used to guide future practice" (p. 282). Social understanding and social criticism must take place within the intersubjectively shared framework of norms that determine the meaning of what we do. "Explication seeks to mediate practice from within practice itself" (p. 282). And, as Capaldi argues, this is ultimately the only conceptually coherent way to understand social and political reality.

NOTES

1. Nicholas Capaldi, *Hume's Place in Moral Philosophy* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989). The page numbers of all quotations from this book are placed in the text.

2. David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* in *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, with text revised and notes by P.H. Nidditch, 3d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), p. 45. Further references to the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* appear in parentheses in the text, abbreviated *EHU* and followed by the page number.

3. The quotation is from C.L. Stevenson's *Ethics and Language* (New Haven: Yale Press, 1944). It is cited by Capaldi on page 141.

4. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, with text revised and notes by P.H. Nidditch, 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), pp. 581–82. Further references to the *Treatise* appear in parentheses in the text, abbreviated *T* and followed by the page number.

5. The arguments discussed below are from Francis Hutcheson's *Illustrations on the Moral Sense*, in *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections with Illustrations on the Moral Sense* (New York: Garland, 1971). This is a facsimile of the 1728 edition. In all quotations from this work, I have eliminated antiquated capitalizations and italics and substituted the modern convention of using single quotes to indicate the use-mention distinction in place of the brackets used for that purpose in the original text. Further references to the *Illustrations* are made in the text, abbreviated *I* and followed by the page number.

6. This sense is described in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and in Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary*. It is worth noting that the full title of Johnson's *Dictionary* is *A Dictionary of the English Language in which the Words are Deduced from their Originals, Illustrated in their Different Significations by Examples from the Best Writers*. This is certainly a noninferential use of 'deduce.'

7. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1976), p. 54.