Hume's best Book: Why Hume called his *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* 'incomparably the best' of everything he wrote

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I explore why Hume regarded his *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* "incomparably the best" of everything he wrote, while this judgement of his is not confirmed at all by the rankings in popularity of his works. Hume's main reason for this judgment was the conviction that regarding the principles of morals he had reached the most satisfying, systematical and evidently true results of all his work. I argue that the general rejection of Hume's own judgement is based on prejudices that fail to take into account the way Hume himself thought that his works should be read. Hume's wish to explain his "new and distinct notion of moral philosophy" led him to introduce many changes to this Enquiry even until few days before his death. Hume's intention were to guide the reader thus to an understanding of his system of ethic, for he had become aware that, instead of using exact definitions, he should rely on natural descriptions and good examples to make his main point come out more clearly. Hume's appeal to the obvious as a key to understanding seems to suggest that the Scottish philosopher was indeed "very far away from most of contemporary analytic philosophy."

WORK TYPE
Article

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received:
22–April–2018
Accepted:
21–November–2018

ARTICLE LANGUAGE
English

KEYWORDS
Morals
Scepticism
Systematicity
Description
Obviousness

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Kienzler, Wolfgang (2018). «Hume's best Book: Why Hume called his *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* 'incomparably the best' of everything he wrote». *Disputatio. Philosophical Research Bulletin* 7, no. 8: a007.

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Hume's best Book: Why Hume called his *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* 'incomparably the best' of everything he wrote*

Wolfgang Kienzler

Addo dum minuo
Hume to Gilbert Elliot, in 1751

§1. A puzzle about Hume

IN HIS *AUTOBIOGRAPHY* OF APRIL 1776, David Hume relates some remarks about his *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* '... which in my own opinion (who ought not to judge on that subject) is of all my writings, historical, philosophical or literary, incomparably the best'. Hume states this as a simple fact, just like something that really should be obvious to everybody, and he gives no reason or argument for his statement. He does, however, remark that he, being the author, really ought not to judge on this subject. As he disregards this caveat, he suggests that he has particular reason to do so. One obvious reason for this would be that this opinion is not generally held, or more precisely that it is generally not held, since otherwise it would be unnecessary and moreover simply vain to repeat it. Another, complementary reason would be that Hume thought it to be of some importance that this should be expressed and known.

We also know that Hume held his high opinion already in 1753: 'I must confess, that I have a partiality for that work and esteem it the most tolerable of anything I have composed'. He confirmed this opinion in 1755, calling the book his 'favourite performance, though the other [this most probably refers to the EHU, although that work was not officially called 'Enquiry' until the edition of 1758; W.K.] has made more noise'. These repeated remarks deserve our attention. Even if we should come to disagree with Hume on this point we should first of all *understand his reasons for making it.*

* NOTE TO THE READER: Wouldn't it be nice to understand why exactly Hume was convinced that of all his writings, his Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals was 'incomparably the best'? What standard of comparison did he use? And wouldn't it even be nicer if we found out that to have this particular opinion was completely consistent with and that it actually followed naturally from Hume's most basic views on philosophy? And would it finally not be very nice if a better understanding of Hume's outlook could help us appreciate some features of his works in a new and more consistent way?

If some remarks and observations in this presentation may seem a bit outlandish at first, it may be useful to keep the first one of these questions in mind

Disputatio. Philosophical Research Bulletin Vol. 7 | No. 8 | Dec. 2018 | a007 | ISSN: 2254-0601 | www.disputatio.eu

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We also know that Hume revised the structure of the *Enquiry*, even after he wrote his *Autobiography*, in July 1776, changing one part of a section into an appendix,[1] and that he made one last change only thirteen days before his death.

In general, the *Enquiry* has been regarded as a reworking of Book 3 of the *Treatise*, with much difference in literary style and some difference in emphasis, and it has received comparatively little attention.[2] Thus, Hume's own judgement has plainly *not* been accepted. This rejection, however, has not been based on any sufficient appreciation or discussion of Hume's motives or reasons. It is the first task of this article to clarify this issue.

The answer why Hume regarded his *Enquiry* to be the best of his works, stated dogmatically, goes like this: Of all his philosophical works, and arguably of all his writings, the *Enquiry* shows the greatest degree of systematic coherence, thus it is the work approaching most closely Hume's philosophical as well as literary *ideal of one systematically integrated whole*.[3] And furthermore, Hume found that what he had written in the *Enquiry* was also quite obviously and definitely *true and correct*.

The main purpose of this article will be to explain Hume's opinion in some detail. In order to make it intelligible at all it will be necessary, however, to develop some new perspectives about how to read Hume according to his own suggestions. There *are* very good reasons for Hume to think of the *Enquiry* as his best book. Another question that will have to be answered is: Why has it been so difficult to perceive these reasons?

I will therefore try to show how the usual angle Hume's writings are approached from does much to obscure these reasons. The more general perspective will be that we discover how Hume developed a new and distinct notion of doing moral philosophy in his later work —and one which he himself did little, and at least not quite enough, to thoroughly explain.[4]

1 Letter to Strahan of July 30, 1776 and of August 12, 1776, both quoted in CE, p. xxxiv.

2 To give just one prominent example: John Mackie discusses *Hume's Ethical Theory* (1980) exclusively from the *Treatise* —and justly so, because the *Enquiry* does not intend to offer any 'theory' in the strict sense of the term.

3 If this can be shown we would have reason to believe that Hume did *not* regard scepticism as the primary aim of his philosophy, and that he did not wish to extend scepticism as far as possible, — but that he really aimed at more positive results in his philosophical writings. The real problem was that in most areas (such as theoretical philosophy and philosophy of religion) he was unable to find any such positive results (see section III).

4 The motto that 'By shortening and simplifying the questions, I really render them much more complete. *Addo dum minuo*.' (GL, 1, p. 158) is taken from a letter where Hume comments on work on *Human Understanding*. Yet there is reason to suppose that he would have applied it to his *Enquiry* also. Actually the motto applies to the *Enquiry* in a much higher degree because in theoretical philosophy Hume cannot actually claim completeness for his results (although he does in some respects).

§2. 'It must be the style': traditional reactions to the puzzle

Hume gives us no explicit clue as to the exact nature of his opinion. One possible answer can be ruled out fairly easily, however. For one, the book does not cover any particularly *new terrain* but offers, as Hume himself states, a reworking of part of his *Treatise*.

He does not confine his judgement to his philosophical writings, but to his writing in general, thus giving the statement more importance, but also making the kind of praise he has in mind still more vague —it could be a matter of style or content, or, as we may presume, of both aspects, as he calls 'love of literary fame' his ruling passion. Most Hume scholars have held this opinion.

Selby–Bigge repeats the statement twice in the *Introduction* to his edition (SB, pp. ix and xxii), and he states that 'in one sense the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* is the best thing Hume ever wrote' (p. ix). This sense he confines to the fact that Hume had 'given greatest attention to the style', making him 'the one master of philosophic English' (xxii, quoting GG), yet in the end he merely concludes: 'It is better to read Hume in the *Enquiries* than not to read him at all' (p. xxxi). Grose had claimed earlier that Hume had apparently given up deep thinking for pleasant and successful writing, remarking that 'few men of letters have been at heart so vain and greedy of fame as was Hume.' (GG, vol. 3, *History of the Editions*, p. 36)

Turning to contemporary Hume scholarship, Beauchamp begins his editorial *Preface* to the *Critical Edition* by quoting the notorious remark, commenting justly that it 'has mystified many scholars of his philosophy'. He then goes on: 'Yet the originality, depth of insight, and stylistic precision of this small treatise make it a legitimate candidate for the status Hume bestowed upon it.' (CE, p. v) This kind of praise would fit just about everything Hume wrote, and thus remains very general. It is, therefore, not very surprising that the nature of the statement is no further inquired into, but rather the mere fact of it is taken as an argument: 'Hume's enthusiasm may render it appropriate that the present volume is the first in a new critical edition of his works, the *Clarendon Hume*.' (ibid.)

This line of approach towards the book very much resembles the model inaugurated by Grose/Green and Selby–Bigge: The *Treatise* is taken to be Hume's main philosophical work, and the *Enquiries* are then basically regarded as more popular versions of their respective parts of the *Treatise*. Their merit is taken to be mainly stylistic, while in matters of doctrine the general opinion has it that the *Enquiries* contain *less* philosophical content than their earlier versions —the most that is admitted is something of a shift in emphasis.[5] This attitude is clearly visible in Selby–Bigge's *Comparative Table of Contents* and by Beauchamp's section

[5] The emphasis on 'doctrine' shared by these approaches obscures the main features of Hume's attention to *method*, as will be explained below. Not just stylistically but also philosophically *the way* Hume states and describes matters is often more important than *what he writes*. The whole point of the *Enquiry* is to describe morality in the right way, and morality is something we all are quite familiar with —but our picture is usually distorted by misdescription, caused very often by philosophical prejudice.

A Sentence–by–Sentence Comparison of EPM and the Treatise, followed by a list of *Substantive Changes in the Treatise's Doctrines* (CE, pp. lvi–lxiii). This perspective, for all its merits, quite simply *presupposes* that the value of the *Enquiry* is entirely dependent upon that of the *Treatise* —and therefore this very perspective makes it (one would like to say *a priori*) impossible that the *Enquiry* could possibly turn out to be Hume's best book. This approach also flatly overrules Hume's notorious 1777 *Advertisement* about his work.[6]

We might state the case briefly thus: Along the received line of approach no convincing appreciation of Hume's dictum can or will be found.[7] It is therefore unsurprising that nowhere in the editorial material of the *Clarendon Hume* this question is discussed.[8]

Another consequence of the preoccupation with the relation of the *Enquiry* to the *Treatise* is that we do not get a concise exposition of Hume's strategy in his *Enquiry*.[9] The book is basically seen as a series of more or less connected essays addressing various aspects of moral theory. This, however, is decidedly *not* Hume's own opinion.

§3. Interlude: Hume on the difference between theoretical and practical philosophy

Although he was publishing all of his work, apart from the *Treatise*, under one title (*Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*), thus suggesting a certain sense of unity among his non–historical work, Hume came to see that theoretical and practical philosophy were of a widely diverging nature. This can be seen from his 1751 exchanges with Gilbert Elliot. In his first reaction to the *Dialogue* which Hume later appended to the EPM, when still in manuscript, Elliot clearly appreciates the particular structure and strategy of the piece. He writes in his remarkable letter (which is worth to be quoted in its entirety):

6 Hume there explains that 'some negligencies in his former reasoning and more in the expression, are, as he hopes, corrected' (SB, p. 2). This understatement makes the difference appear slighter than it really is. However, it should be noted that Hume claims his later writings to be superior to his earlier work. It may be worthwhile to take him at his word on this point.

7 In a certain sense, the Green/Grose edition, notwithstanding all its imperfections, is the only one inviting the reader to develop considerations about the *development* of Hume's basic approach — simply by printing the variants and changes on the same page as the main text (and indicating the time of change). The SE gives no variants whatsoever and thus cuts today's students completely off from this kind of inquiry. The CE gives admirably full information but it does not make it very easy to use it.

8 To be sure, this is not to blame the editor for any fault —these facts only express the main line of Hume scholarship during the last hundred or so years.

9 The *Student's Edition* gives a very brief overview of *The Structure of the Text* —showing much hesitation: 'One could group Hume's concerns in different ways, and thoughtful readers will wish to do so. The outline in this section should be interpreted as an aid to orient the reader to Hume's structure, not as his recommended conception or as the only defensible conception.' (SE, p. 51)

> I must freely own to you, that I have received from this last piece an additional satisfaction, and what indeed I have a thousand times wished for in some of your other performances. [...] But how agreeable was my surprise, when I found you had let me into this maze, with no other view, than to point to me more clearly the direct road. Why can't you always write in this manner? Indulge yourself as much as you will in startling difficulties, and perplexing received opinions: but let us be convinced at length, that you have not less ability to establish true principles, than subtlety to detect false ones. (quoted in GG, 3, *History*, p. 52)

Hume responded to this invitation that he should always resolve his sceptical doubts in such a clear and unambiguous manner, that, unfortunately, the cases cannot be treated alike:

> Your notion of correcting subtlety of sentiment, is certainly very just with regard to morals, which depend upon sentiment; and in politics and natural philosophy, whatever conclusion is contrary to certain matters of fact, must certainly be wrong, and there must some error lie somewhere in the argument, whether we be able to show it or not. But in metaphysics or theology, I cannot see how either of these plain and obvious standards of truth can have place. Nothing there can correct bad reasoning but good reasoning, and sophistry must be opposed by syllogisms. (GL, 1, p. 150; GG, 3, p. 54)[10]

Hume thus expresses the basic idea that in morals we do have a plain standard of truth, and it is our job in philosophy to explain it and to describe how it is being applied.[11] In 'metaphysics', however, no such standard is to be had and all we can do is to show that standards introduced by others will not stand up to the test. Therefore Hume can write an *Enquiry* concerning the principles of morals, but only loose and diverging *Essays* concerning human understanding.[12] In theoretical matters, we can answer our opponent 'not by solving his difficulties (which seems impossible), but by retorting them (which is very easy)' —as he explains later in the same letter.

This touches the main issue of Kant's objections against Hume. Notoriously, Kant claims that he can treat an important part of theoretical philosophy in just the same systematic way as moral philosophy.[13] In the *Introduction* to his *Prolegomena* Kant acknowledges his great debt to Hume (and to Hume only) and confesses that it was Hume who 'woke me from my dogmatic slumber'. Then, however, he immediately goes on to remark that he would not follow Hume's *conclusions*, for the plain reason that Hume had regarded 'not the whole of his

[10] In Part I of the *Dialogues on Natural Religion*, Philo emphasizes this point, similarly contrasting 'trade, morals, politics, or criticism' with 'theological reasonings'.

[11] Hume does not state his case altogether clearly in every respect —remember that he found reason to restate his basic attitude later. It is not really 'syllogisms' he offers to fight bad reasoning.

[12] See the next section for more on this point.

[13] Actually Kant claimed that he could treat *all* of philosophy in this systematical way. Even in the field of traditional metaphysics, which he showed to be fundamentally ungrounded, Kant presented a systematical analysis (again using his Table of Judgements) of all possible errors and delusions reason can get itself entangled in.

problem, but only a part of it, which, by itself, and without taking the entire sphere into account, cannot afford a sufficient answer'.[14] In the theoretical part of his investigation, Hume had been unable to proceed systematically and he thus was prone to fall into scepticism following his acute analysis mainly of the notion of cause and effect. According to Kant, however, Hume simply had not found the key towards a *systematic* analysis of human understanding and reason. Kant himself claims that his Table of Judgements, together with his distinction between things–as–appearance and things–in–themselves, offer such a key.[15]

In the field of practical or moral philosophy, however, Hume *did* arrive at such a systematic answer. In the field of theoretical philosophy the controversy between Hume and Kant turns on Kant's claim that he has found something that Hume believed could not exist. Kant believed he had shown the overarching *unity* of reason while Hume divided the domain of philosophy into one 'sceptical' theoretical or metaphysical, and one 'positive' moral part.[16]

In the field of practical philosophy, however, both philosophers claim to have found the one true and obvious system of moral principles, and the one implicitly held by everybody anyway already. Therefore the real clash between the two conceptions would have to take place here —unless it could be shown that they are substantially equivalent.[17]

For present purposes, however, it is enough to keep in mind that after 1751 Hume strongly believed that the cases of moral and theoretical philosophy are quite incompatible. It is therefore important not to be misled by the surface analogy of his 'First' and 'Second' *Enquiry*.

§4. A fresh start: The unity, structure and point of the *Enquiry*

How did Hume view his '*Second Enquiry*'? First of all, this book was really not the second but the *first* Enquiry he wrote. In 1748 he had published his *Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding*, and even in the third edition of 1756 he retained this title. Only in 1758, the first edition to print both works in the same volume, did Hume change the title to *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*,[18] making it thus conform to the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*. At that time this *Enquiry* had already gone through two editions. This fact strongly suggests that Hume regarded his EPM to be much more of a

14 Kant, *Prolegomena*, Akademieausgabe p. 260, tr. P. Carus, emended.

15 This controversy cannot be discussed here in any more detail.

16 If this division itself is regarded as expressing scepticism as to the possibility of a *unified conception* of reason —then Hume's later conception of philosophy is even *more sceptical* than his earlier view which had at least claimed to apply one and the same method in all of philosophy (see the title of his *Treatise*, Book Three).

17 A more thorough discussion of this question will have to wait for another occasion. The core idea of such a comparison would have to be that the basic *description* of morality is surprisingly similar in Hume and Kant, while their respective philosophical, or metaphysical, *interpretations* make them disagree.

18 For details about subsequent editions see CE, p. xxvii.

unified treatise than his PEHU, leaving it a somewhat open question whether this latter book was to be a series of essays (note the plural!), or an enquiry (EHU) after all.[19] This way to proceed also indicated that in Hume's opinion it was more important that EPM remained an *Enquiry* than that PEHU remained a collection, or rather a series, of *Essays*. For Hume, EPM was the more important book.

Well, if the *Enquiry* is to be regarded as a unified book —what is its structure and purpose? The book's quite complex structure has baffled many readers. The 1751 version consists of nine sections, four of them divided into two parts each, and two more made up of three parts, and furthermore two appendices and a dialogue.[20] This structure underlines first of all the fact that the book does *not* consist of essays, quite simply because essays cannot have an appendix.[21]

There is nothing called 'Preface' but the first section does serve this purpose —and we find a 'Conclusion' in section 9 (the first part of it, to be more exact).

Still, the overall structure seems a bit puzzling, with no less than three, and in the final edition five sections *following* the *Conclusion*,[22] and at first blush this seems to speak against the idea of a strongly unified treatise.

§5. The structure of the book

Most generally, Book 3 of the *Treatise* as well as the *Enquiry* are believed to offer an *argument* about the origin of morality, namely that moral distinctions and principles are not derived from reason but from sentiment. A closer look at the beginning of the *Enquiry* shows this to be wrong. Hume explains that there have been endless arguments about the origin of moral distinctions, but then he goes on and leaves all this argument aside and he addresses quite *another question* and he also uses *another method*. He steps out of the sphere of argument and

19 Beauchamp notes that in the first edition Hume refers to the book "as containing 'Essays' rather than 'Sections'" —and he goes on to claim that 'EPM was written under the same model as EHU' (CE, p. xvii [the reference in line 8 of this page ought to read 'p. 15n.', not 'p. 110n.']). Hume, however, *corrects* this self–description in his list of errata contained in the 1751 edition. Thus he makes it plain that he has written an 'Enquiry' consisting of 'Sections' —and except for two places, corrected immediately, these are the terms he uses throughout the book. Therefore, Hume's slips and the way he corrects them point out that he regarded his *Enquiry* to be of a quite *different* genre (so to speak) than the reworking of the first book of the *Treatise*. (In this spirit, the 1751 edition of the *Enquiry* contains in the back an advertisement of Hume's 'Essays, Moral and Political', and of his 'Philosophical Essays' (p. 254).)

20 In the final 1777 version two parts of sections have been transformed into appendices. In total the book is made up of nineteen smaller parts, none of them substantially changed between 1751 and 1777.

21 Otherwise, the appendices would themselves have to be called 'essays'.

22 There is a small hint: In the 1767 edition, after the addition of a third appendix in 1764, Hume shortened the title of this section from *Conclusion of the Whole* to *Conclusion*. This may indicate that there is a conclusion of the main part in section 9, but that this is *not* the conclusion of the entire work.

into *description*. He explains that he has found 'a very simple method' which he will now use to proceed. It is the method of inquiring into the nature of 'personal merit' —more specifically the new method he will use is to be guided by 'the nature of language' (sec. I, § 10). This pronouncement has not been much noticed.[23] The consequences, however, are far–reaching. For one, this method, based on a simple observation of language, is completely independent of any impressions or ideas, and therefore quite independent of the basic tenets of Hume's empiricism.[24] This means that the *Enquiry* can stand completely on its own feet —and we thus find no references to the EHU in the work. According to Hume, the book can and should be read and judged completely on its own —and also without reference to the *Treatise*.[25]

Hume thus claims that the book offers a complete, self–sustained enquiry, not just into the origins but into the nature of morality —and he claims to give a complete, satisfying and obviously correct answer. This is the task of the nine main sections of the book. Hume's answer is summarized in his *Conclusion*: 'Personal merit consists altogether in the possession of mental qualities, useful or agreeable to the person himself or to others.' (s. 9, §1) Hume calls this theory 'simple and obvious', and he declares that there cannot be any doubt that it is correct, so that there will not be any need for further research.[26] We could thus state that Hume is positively convinced that he *has found the truth*. At the end of Part I of the *Conclusion* Hume admits that in this particular case, very much in contrast to his usual attitude in philosophy, he is strongly tempted to proclaim what he has found as a dogmatic truth. He declares: 'I am sensible, that nothing can be more unphilosophical than to be positive or dogmatical on any subject.' This is something he really does not want to be. In the present case, however, he feels quite unable to find anything to be sceptical about:

> Yet, I must confess, that this enumeration puts the matter in so strong a light, that I cannot, at present, be more assured of any truth, which I learn from reasoning and argument, than that personal merit consists entirely in the usefulness or agreeableness of qualities to the person himself possessed of them, or to others, who have any intercourse with him. (s. 9 § 13)

Hume is completely convinced of the truth of his 'system', which really amounts to a brief statement resting on a collection of some simple observations based on the description of

[23] In fact, there is no editorial comment either in CE or in SE about this method; neither index even has a lemma 'method' and only SE has a lemma 'language', with a sub–lemma 'language/as moral guide'.

[24] Already the *Advertisement* to Book 3 of the *Treatise* had declared that the connection to the first part was rather slight. Now the connection is completely severed.

[25] Of course, Hume judges his 'simple method' to be empirical, and it *is* empirical —if this term is taken in a very wide sense— and in a sense dependent on our observation of *linguistic practice*, but not on *impressions* of any kind. Note that the term 'impression' occurs only once in the preliminary *Section* I (§2), and twice more in *Appendix I* (§ 11) and I (§ 7). Nothing depends on these occurrences.

[26] This attitude is somewhat similar to the method of geometry where a fairly small number of examples is used to confirm very general conclusions, with no further research required.

language and some examples from common life and from history. The only thing that still worries him is the fact that this simple truth has not been known and accepted all along. This is the only (faintly) possible source for any kind of scepticism, 'that an hypothesis so obvious, had it been a true one, would, long ere now, have been received by the unanimous suffrage and consent of mankind' (ibid.) This objection, however, seems more of a rhetorical nature: Hume is and stays convinced of his results.

He is, however, not simply satisfied and does not rest dogmatically content with this conclusion, but in addition to the smooth and easy train of thought through the seven sections 2–8 he offers two more confirmations of his results. The first touching stone is the fact, adduced by Hume, that 'in common life, these principles are still implicitly maintained' (s. 9 § 2). To further illustrate this he offers a short dialogue about the virtuous character of 'Cleanthes'; and Hume's 'argument' that his little dialogue captures the true nature of morals resides in the fact that this dialogue is 'so natural' that it could have been taken from real life.[27]

This phrasing gives another important clue to 'Hume's method': The *Enquiry* is not offered as an *argument* designed to convince us —Hume does not want to force any argument on us and he does not want to *reason* in favour of his hypothesis. Rather, he wants to collect some *reminders*, reminding us of the way we talk about personal merit and thus about morality.[28] He is not doing any research but rather he steps back and tries to describe without prejudice the way we talk about morality, or rather the way we *conduct* our moral discourses.[29] The obstacles we have to overcome are our theoretical prejudices, not the difficulty or obscurity of the matter. Hume remarks: 'And it seems a reasonable presumption, that systems and hypotheses have perverted our natural understanding; when a theory, so simple and obvious, could so long have escaped the most elaborate examination.' (s. 9 § 1)[30] The real task of philosophical enquiry is not to devise elaborate theories, but rather to give an account of the matter that is *as natural as possible*. This could be dubbed *Hume's Naturalism* —if that title were not already in use for quite different conceptions.

27 Most scholars would take Hume's little dialogue to be a 'mere illustration' of no systematic value. Hume himself, however, seems to be convinced that his natural dialogue is much *more* convincing than any amount of argument: Argument would always provoke counter–argument —Hume wants to decide the matter for good— as good as the fact that 2+2=4 (even if this is not his example). Therefore, the way he sees it, his dialogue is *stronger* than any argument could be.

28 While Hume calls his method 'empirical' it is quite obvious that the experience he appeals to is not *new experience* but the one we *already have*: Any educated person would know the examples Hume offers in favour of his view.

29 This seems to be the most vital distinction: Hume claims that we all agree in the way we conduct moral discussions we are practically involved in (according to our 'natural understanding'), it is only when we *talk about* morality, on a theoretical level, that we start to disagree.

30 These remarks are similar to some methodological remarks in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. Even the switch from a *Treatise*, or *Tractatus*, to an *Enquiry*, or *Investigation*, thus from a (seemingly) more to a (seemingly) less exact way of conducting philosophy, makes for a curious parallel —and finally we find April 26 to be a date important to both thinkers— even if according to different calendars.

The second touchstone for Hume's conception of morality is his concluding *Dialogue*. The relation of this piece to the rest of the book has often been found obscure —and some editions have even omitted it.[31] The *Student's Edition* states: 'Finally, the short essay entitled ‚A Dialogue' is appended at the end more or less as a fifth appendix to EPM.' (SE, p. 50) This rather vague comment is quite mistaken: The point of the appendices is quite different from that of the *Dialogue*. They discuss some questions not necessary for the main train of thought of the *Enquiry*. They function very much like long foot —or rather endnotes to the book. The *Dialogue*, however, is no footnote but works on the same level as the main parts of the *Enquiry*. It is designed to *confirm the main result* of the *Enquiry* by resolving the single most important objection to the surprisingly simple system of morals Hume has come up with. This is the objection, natural to every empiricist (at least since the writing of John Locke), that moral convictions diverge so widely across the ages and nations that any attempt to reduce them to a common principle would appear hopeless. Beginning with a thinly disguised tale of customs of Ancient Greece, emphasizing how some customs simply seem to contradict our feelings of right and wrong, being repellent to the modern reader, the *Dialogue,* after some extended discussion, leads to the conclusion 'that different customs and situations vary not the original ideas of merit (however, they may, some consequences) in any very essential point' (*Dialogue* § 51).[32] In this way, the *Dialogue* is not part of the main line of thought of the book and not necessary to arrive at its aim, but it is important, not because it gives any theoretical justification, but because it arrives at the same result by first going in the opposite direction.

The appendices, in contrast, respond to questions that *seem* essential to the main train of thought, but which really are not —simply because they are too theoretical, or one might say 'metaphysical'. *Appendix I* discusses the question which at first seemed to be the main topic of the *Enquiry*, namely to decide whether the origin of morality lies in reason or in sentiment. As it turned out, it was quite unnecessary for Hume to even address this question in order to arrive at his system of morals —thus the very position in the book shows that for Hume this is

[31] The *Dialogue* was not included in the first edition of SB; GG print it like a piece independent from the *Enquiry*, even inserting a blank page so that it can begin on a right–hand page (GG vol. 4, p. 289), and it carries its own running titles (while the appendices have running–titles indicating that they are part of the *Enquiry*). The first of the four appendices starts, by contrast, without any break, on a left–hand page (GG vol. 4, p. 258). The original editions, however, treat the *Dialogue* in the same way they treat the appendices: In the edition of 1768 both the series of appendices and the *Dialogue* start on a right–hand page, following an empty left–hand page. Both have their own left and right running titles (as have all the sections of the *Enquiry*). In this way the original printing history supports the notion that the *Dialogue* belongs with and actually is part of the *Enquiry* just like the appendices. The edition of Green and Grose seems to follow the use of the one–volume 1758 edition where sections may begin in the middle of any page.

[32] The only departure from his system of morality that Hume admits is the case of 'artificial lives', living 'in a different element from the rest of mankind' (D § 57), leading to 'monkish virtues' —but for Hume this is not a different form of morality but rather its perversion. His task is only to describe 'natural morality'.

a very 'theoretical' question the importance of which is much overestimated. [33] His enquiry into the 'principles of morals' does *not* require that this theoretical question be answered first.[34]

In a similar vein, *Appendix II* rejects the hypothesis that *all* human action may be driven by self–love, not by giving an elaborate argument, but simply by stating that it is patently unnatural and silly: 'Such a philosophy is more like a satire than a true delineation or description of human nature.' (App. II, § 13) Thus Hume reminds us again of his view that the task of moral philosophy consists not in giving any argument but entirely in 'the description of human nature'.[35]

The overall structure of the book can accordingly be summarized thus: Section 1 introduces the question and method of the *Enquiry*. Sections 2–4 explain that utility is always applauded. Section 5 explains that utility cannot be the whole answer because utility is always directed towards an aim, something is useful for something else. It also introduces the notion of humanity: being human we have some natural sympathy for some actions, and we judge them to be moral by the feeling they induct in us. Thus the notion of something's being agreeable, which seemed much less important at first, turns out to be more basic, from a moral point of view —simply because something agreeable does not need an aim or end to earn sympathy. Sections 6–8 then explain how qualities useful to ourselves and agreeable to ourselves but also to others are applauded by the natural feeling of humanity. Section 9 summarizes the results in one or two sentences,[36] as quoted above; and it explains that this system of morality also gives us the best chances to lead a happy life.[37] The appendices then discuss some points too theoretical to be included in the main line of the *Enquiry*, and the Dialogue shows in conclusion how the apparent diversity of moral ideal reduces to Hume's simple system if we look a bit deeper into the matter.

[33] Hume remarks that 'all this is metaphysics' and the very subtlety of such an approach shows it to be wrong in the field of morals, where the truth will always be simple: 'The hypothesis which we embrace is plain' (App. I § 10)

[34] Hume states that 'it is needless for us, at present, to employ farther care in our researches concerning it' (s. 1, § 10). In his *Appendix I* he then goes on to explain that the results of his main *Enquiry* have also given him a most natural and easy answer to the question regarding reason and sentiment. This will make 'the arguments on each side' (s. 1, § 9), he had referred to at the beginning, quite superfluous. His system of morals, derived from mere description, solves the old question, putting the need for argument to an end.

[35] Appendix III and IV also discuss some more detailed points.

[36] Here the motto of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* comes to mind: 'Everything a man knows … can be said in three words'.

[37] This prospect might serve as a third argument in favour of the correctness of Hume's answer. Systematically, he sets it apart from the rest of the *Enquiry* and nothing depends on these more practical considerations.

§6. A look at some late changes

The appendix on self–love originally made up Part I of Section 2 of the *Enquiry*, thus opening the main part of the book after the introductory first section. Hume's late change makes the main structure of the *Enquiry* much more natural: The question whether all of human action can be reduced to self–love is quite central to many philosophical debates about the nature of morality —but Hume intended the *Enquiry* not to *enter into philosophical debate* but rather to calmly *describe* the most basic features of the true nature of moral acting and judging— or, in other words, to plainly state the 'principles of morals'. This could be done once and for all and then the question was, in Hume's opinion, no longer in any need of debate. The transposition to a less conspicuous position in the book was, therefore, part of Hume's strategy to highlight the non–argumentative nature of his *Enquiry* —with little success, as this 'true nature of the *Enquiry*' continued to be much misunderstood.

It is striking and quite fitting that Hume made this particular change only *after* he had written his *Autobiography* with the pronouncement about the *Enquiry*. As explained above, that statement had expressed the opinion that *something should be done* in order to bring out the excellence of this work even more clearly.

Thus, originally, a section giving an *argument* had opened the main part of the *Enquiry*, and only very late did Hume change this —putting the material in an appendix right next to the section explaining the respective roles of reason and sentiment in arriving at moral judgements and decisions.[38] This late change makes the book display its *purely descriptive* spirit more clearly.

The very last change Hume made, only thirteen days before his death, concerns the same topic. He asked to take out part (here put in italics) of this sentence: '... it seems undeniable *that there is such a sentiment in human nature as benevolence;* that nothing can bestow more merit on any human creature than the sentiment of benevolence in an eminent degree ...' (see CE, p. xxxiv) This change deletes a reference to the material that had made up the first part of Section 2, now removed to Appendix II, and thus it further smoothes the line of thought. It furthermore underlines that the fact Hume feels that he really has nothing to *prove*, least of all the existence of such a sentiment of benevolence.

In another important modification made quite late, in the 1764 edition Hume changed the statement of his simple method in Section 1.[39] He mainly cancelled the earlier claim that his *Enquiry* ought to begin 'with exact definitions of *virtue* and *vice*' and he now pointed out that "the very nature of language guides us almost infallibly in forming a judgment of this nature". Thus there is a sense in which Hume made his *Enquiry* less and less 'exact' —but not in order to render his book more popular but rather to bring out his main point more clearly.[40] He seems to have realized only gradually that he did not need any exact definitions

[38] It is also striking that Hume's argument against self–love was longer than his calm and plain explanation of benevolence —whose merit it seems 'superfluous to prove' (s. 2, § 1).

[39] See the variant listing in CE, pp. 215–6.

[40] Note that Hume introduced all these changes silently. He did not inform his readers about them.

but only 'natural descriptions' and good examples. In the end one good example did more to bring out Hume's main idea than any intricate argument or any exact definition. This tendency has been much misunderstood and it has contributed to the comparatively low regard his *Enquiry* has been held in. It is about time to develop a new sensibility in appreciating his later way of thinking.[41]

§7. Chronological Summary and Outlook[42]

7.1. The 1750s

In reworking parts of the *Treatise* Hume found that he could collect his basically sceptical and non–systematic theoretical philosophy in *essays* only, but he also found that his considerations in practical philosophy could be presented as a sustained, systematic *enquiry*. Mainly for reasons of symmetry he decided to change the title of his theoretical essays to *Enquiry* in 1758.

Hume came to strongly believe that his reworking did not simply express his old findings and doctrine in a more accessible manner, but he was convinced that everything became clearer and philosophically more convincing as he developed his ideas in a calmer way without much argument. The growth of this conviction coincides with his declaration in 1753 and 1755 that his *Enquiry* was his 'favourite performance'. The book has a simple basic structure arriving at a simple 'moral theory' in the end; and it puts what had seemed to be the main question, about whether morality has its origin in reason or in sentiment in an appendix —indicating that this was *not* the main question Hume is interested in. He also added a *Dialogue* to show how the apparent diversity of moral convictions could best be understood according to his simple scheme. Hume also added an Index to highlight some of the features of the *Enquiry*.

7.2. The 1760s

During the preparation for the 1764 edition Hume introduced two more changes to highlight the non–exact and non–theoretical character of the *Enquiry*. He removed the first part of Section 6 to an appendix "About some verbal questions" —thus indicating that these matters, too, were not really necessary for the main line of the book. Hume also refashioned his

[41] This may also give occasion to reconsider the common notion that Hume did no serious thinking after 1757.

A note on Hume's Index: The *Index*, prepared by Hume (and reproduced in CE, p. 288–292) mainly lists various moral attributes and usually adds 'its merit whence' —thus suggesting the simple investigation of personal merit to be the main topic of the *Enquiry*. We also find a brief summary of the *Dialogue*, consisting of the three lemmas 'Athenian man of merit', 'French man of merit', and finally 'Morals, not fluctuating'.

[42] An account of 'developments in Hume's thinking from 1751 to 1776' has yet to be written. There seems to be little awareness that anything of value is to be found here.

remarks about the method he is following in the *Enquiry*, indicating that exact definitions were not the tool needed for doing his work.[43] This puts the nature of the entire work into a new light: Philosophy (in the domain of morality) does not consist in giving exact definitions and cogent argument but proceeds from unbiased descriptions of everyday moral practices — and these we do not have to collect from many examples, but we can enter into our "own breast" and follow the leads language gives us about these distinctions.[44]

7.3. The 1770s

Looking back over his life and work Hume, as his life was coming to an end, found himself most satisfied with the *Enquiry*. However, he found that this impression was not shared by others. Therefore he effected some last changes to further simplify the structure of the main part of the *Enquiry* and to make the train of thought more straightforward and positive. He moved the first part of *Section 2,* in which he had explained how he would *not* proceed, so that it became *Appendix 2*.

§8. Appendix: Sections 1 to 9 summarized[45]

Section 1. Yes, it is obvious that 'moral distinctions' are real, i. e. anybody denying them is plainly insincere.[46] To make it clear what they are and how they work we can follow a simple method: we just investigate the way personal merit is expressed in everyday language.

2.0. (= Appendix 2: The theory that all moral judgement reduces to self–love is plainly ridiculous.)

2.1. Everybody would agree that 'benevolence' is universally praised.

2.2. Utility is one main reason why benevolence is praised.

43 This change does not introduce a new method into the book —this would have to result in altogether changing the way the investigation proceeds. Rather the change shows *a new level of reflection* on the nature of his enquiry on Hume's part. (It might be compared to the very last remarks in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus.*)

44 There are more significant changes introduced in the 1764 edition, one of them amounting to little less than a summary of Hume's entire approach. This is the long Latin quotation from Cicero in App. 4, note to § 11, concluding that, were he alive today, Cicero would not have his 'moral sentiments' fettered by 'narrow systems'.

45 To give a satisfying account a summary of the respective *contents* would have to be combined with an explanation of Hume's *strategy* why he chose just this arrangement of examples and composition.

46 This talk of 'reality of moral distinction' has nothing to do with the metaphysical question of whether moral values 'exist'. The question is not solved by any argument or deduction, but simply by reminding ourselves of the fact how *ridiculous* it would be to deny this reality in practice. This reminds of Shaftesbury's 'test of ridicule'.

3.1. A sense of justice, being mainly a sense for property and respecting existing laws and regulations, is useful. Justice resides in usefulness. [As we will see, it is thus laudable, if not intrinsically so, but only respective to an aim or end.]

3.2. Also more particular laws about property are intended to be useful.

[Appendix 3 gives still more examples.]

4. Any more developed society needs laws and regulations to be organized.

5.1. A sense of morality does not arise from education alone. Neither is it grounded entirely in self–love. There exists a natural sentiment of sympathy in all human beings (unless artificially suppressed). It is plainly true that this feeling of sympathy leads us to a natural interest in the good of humanity.

5.2. The natural sentiment of benevolence leads to a natural interest in the welfare of humanity. It is absolutely clear, and this could be stated *a priori*, that no man is *completely* uninterested in the welfare of humanity. It is furthermore evident that utility (in moral judgements) does not become effective through self–interest only, but also through principles of humanity.

6.0. (= Appendix 4: To give an exact definition of the difference between talents and virtues is less important than one would think, because it is the utility to which each will lead which counts.)

6.1. It is naturally human to esteem the bearer of useful qualities. It is absurd even to consider the possibility that all sentiment toward the general good is just pretence.

6.2. Bodily talents strengthen positive reactions. So does wealth, yet wealth is only a means towards some end, not an end in itself.

7. Some qualities, e.g. some special virtues of character are agreeable to us, independent of any utility.

8. It is obvious that qualities agreeable to others, such as politeness, are esteemed, even without any personal motive.

9.1. Conclusion: The truth that all personal merit concerns something agreeable or useful, either to ourselves or to others, is so simple and natural that it leaves no room for any doubt.

9.2. Furthermore it is plain that this attitude gives us the greatest chance to live happy and content, because the ways of conduct in question will be successful in the long run and because they are accompanied by a positive sentiment towards ourselves.

App. 1. All of the above makes clear: All attempts to base morals on reason only must fail, because they will never be able to explain the phenomenon of spontaneous sympathy.

App. 2. The theory that all moral judgement reduces to self–love is plainly ridiculous. [And thus not to be discussed seriously.]

App. 3. Unlike benevolence, justice leads to something useful not in isolation but only as part of a larger system —it is more like the 'final stone in an arch' than a 'brick in a wall'. In many cases justice consists in arriving at a decision, even where it is relatively unimportant how the decision comes out. The point is that things must be settled in some way.

App. 4. To give an exact definition of the difference between talents and virtues is less important than one would think, because it is the utility to which each will lead which counts.

Dialogue: There exist widely diverging moral systems (in Antiquity and in Modernity, as well as in different countries), but these differences have their origin in the variation of natural and cultural conditions; the principles of morals, utility and being agreeable, are always and everywhere the same.

Note:

To the question: Why should we believe that everything in all these sections is true? Hume would answer: because it is *obviously so*, in a way that does not need any argument. He would claim this for every individual issue. To the next question: But do all these cases and examples Hume collects and assembles really lead to Hume's conclusion? Hume would answer that Gilbert Elliot had understood the point in 1751, and that therefore others should also be able to appreciate it, too. And if somebody still remains unconvinced, Hume would possibly answer that she please try once again to follow him along the path of his way in his *Enquiry*. In the end the reader would have to take it or leave it. If the picture offered by the *Enquiry* is *not* obvious it is nothing —but if it *is obvious*, then it will settle the matter.[47]

Concluding Note:

Of course, there are also other excellent reasons to have a special esteem for particular other writings of Hume's, like e.g. the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*[48] —not to mention the *Treatise*.

[47] One conclusion of these considerations may well be that we realize more acutely that Hume was *very* far away from most of contemporary analytic philosophy.

[48] In a letter to his publisher, Hume said of the DNR: 'Some of my friends flatter me, that it is the best thing I ever wrote.' (Letter to Strahan, June 8, 1776 [GL ii, p. 323]) Hume thus emphasizes that he considers the *Dialogues* as a major work, worthy of publication. This does, however, not imply that he thought them superior to the *Enquiry*. As the same letter mentions *My Own Life*, written shortly before the letter, this would have amounted to an open self–contradiction. Taken together, the two passages express Hume's conviction that the *Dialogues* were an important work, even if it did not, contrary to the opinion of some of his friends, equal the *Enquiry*.

Note on a recent Paper

Recently, Annette C. Baier has discussed Hume's claim. Her contribution "Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals: Incomparably the Best?" (Baier 2008) points out the 'intellectual acuteness', 'its clear–eyed working out of the implications of determinism', its 'humane and beneficient version of a gentle morality, and its refusal to look for any secular substitutes for hellfire as moral inducement', and furthermore its 'literary craft, its demonstration of some of the virtues it discusses, its Shaftesburian and Theophrastian resonances, its lightness of touch, playful wit and teasing doubleness of message'. In the end, however, Baier asks: 'But are these what its author hoped we would admire?' Her answer is: 'Who is to know?' —and she ends her paper with a quotation from Hume: 'I fall back into diffidence and skepticism.'

More specifically Baier describes the book's overall structure as quite complex, comparing it to a villa with some lesser adjacent buildings (293), calling the *Dialogue* 'possibly an afterthought' (293). She finds the numerous quotations an 'impressive display of learning' (294)[49] and the ending 'fairly open–ended and inconclusive' (294) —quite contrary to the reading suggested above. She does comment briefly on Hume's index (294). She also quotes from a 1751 letter calling the *Enquiry* 'mighty fine polished, beautiful and entertaining, and which is odd, nothing at all skeptical' (315). She calls the author of this letter 'not a very perceptive, nor even a very careful reader' (315). In the light of the reading developed above, however, this statement could be called quite ingenious, if not very original.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank Hanno Birken–Bertsch for some valuable suggestions regarding the preparation of this article

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[49] Hume's examples may seem quite learned to a modern reader, yet from his point of view they are intended to be merely quite common examples and illustrations leading the way through his train of thoughts.

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The *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* is quoted by section, appendix, dialogue, also the paragraph numbering introduced in CE is used.