WHAT IS THE FOUNDATION OF MORALITY?

Passions, Emotions & Sentiment or Reason...
DAVID HUME & SKEPTICISM:

- Hume rejected any knowledge claims outside of clear experiential basis.
- Hume argued that the realm of human knowledge was limited to impressions and ideas - all other was in the realm of those things unknowable - and, for us, they simply don't exist.
Nothing is good or bad in itself...even murder:

...it impossible “from reason alone... to distinguish betwixt moral good and evil.”
“The hypothesis...maintains that morality is determined by sentiment. It defines virtue to be whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation; and vice the contrary.”

* Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals.
DAVID HUME:

“Reason is and ought to be the slave of the passions”
Hume’s Argument:

P1) Reason cannot tell us what we value
P2) Reason can help us pursue what we value
P3) What we value is based on our sentiments & passions
   SP1) We are naturally endowed with empathy – “fellow human feelings”
   Sp2) We find virtue beautiful and vice odious
P4) Morality is based on what we value

C) Morality must be based on our sentiments & passions
HUME’S ARGUMENT:

“It appears evident that the ultimate ends of human actions can never, in any case, be accounted for by reason, but recommend themselves entirely to the sentiments and affections of mankind without any dependence on the intellectual faculties.”
HUME’S ARGUMENT:

- Reason alone might override those “common fellow feelings” and permit inhuman acts.

- Role of compassion is directly linked to one’s conscience & to the ability to feel disgust at vice and approbation towards virtue; with reason alone, “men become totally indifferent toward these distinctions.”
Approval (approbation) is a pleasure, and disapproval (disapprobation) a pain or uneasiness.

“The moral sentiments are types of pleasure and uneasiness that are associated with the passions of pride and humility, love and hatred: when we feel moral approval for another we tend to love or esteem her, and when we approve a trait of our own we are proud of it.” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)
HUME ON SYMPATHY:

- Sympathy can be evoked by the outward expression of another which conveys their passions to us, through an association with our own passions, we come to identify their feelings with our own.
Sympathy can also be evoked through an observation of outward causes of our own passions and associating them with another via the inference that what causes us to suffer would also cause another to suffer: “...if we contemplate the instruments laid out for another's surgery, even someone unknown to us, they evoke ideas in us of fear and pain.” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)
SYMPATHY & MORAL JUDGMENTS:

- Three Players:
  - Moral agent: the person who performs an action
  - Receiver: the person affected by that action
  - Spectator: the person observing the action and its consequences and who approves or disapproves of the agent’s actions.
“...if you as the agent give food to a starving person, then the receiver will experience an immediately agreeable feeling from your act. Also, the receiver may see the usefulness of your food donation, insofar as eating food will improve his health. When considering the usefulness of your food donation, then, the receiver will receive another agreeable feeling from your act. Finally, I, as a spectator, observe these agreeable feelings that the receiver experiences. I, then, will sympathetically experience agreeable feelings along with the receiver. These sympathetic feelings of pleasure constitute my moral approval of the original act of charity that you, the agent, perform. By sympathetically experiencing this pleasure, I thereby pronounce your motivating character trait to be a virtue....”

(Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy)
The Trolley Problem: A Classic Philosophical Dilemma

Version 1:

Philippa Foot in 1967 at Oxford University first proposed the test scenario. ... “A runaway streetcar is hurtling towards five unsuspecting workers. Do you pull a switch to divert the trolley onto another track, where only one man works alone? Or do you do nothing?”

Version 2:

Judith Thomson, a philosopher at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, coined the term “trolley problem” and created what would become its second most famous variant, the “footbridge” .... “In the “footbridge” scenario (also known as “fat man”), the streetcar is heading towards five workers, but this time you’re on a footbridge over the track. Standing precariously close to the edge of the bridge next to you is a very large man, who, if he happened to topple onto the track below, could stop the trolley before it reaches the five. Do you push him?”

The Trolley Problem, cont.

“Joshua Greene, (then a graduate student at Princeton) decided to slide people into an fMRI machine to glimpse what happened in their brains when faced with different trolley-problem scenarios. He ultimately found that the answers people gave correlated with how emotionally engaged they felt with the dilemma. The decision to pull the switch was related to activity in the prefrontal cortex (associated with cool, conscious deliberation), while the decision not to push the fat man involved areas like the amygdala, associated with strong emotional reactivity.”


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“Morality may be innate to the human brain. This review examines the neurobiological evidence from research involving functional magnetic resonance imaging of normal subjects, developmental sociopathy, acquired sociopathy from brain lesions, and frontotemporal dementia. These studies indicate a “neuromoral” network for responding to moral dilemmas centered in the ventromedial prefrontal cortex and its connections, particularly on the right. The neurobiological evidence indicates the existence of automatic “prosocial” mechanisms for identification with others that are part of the moral brain. Patients with disorders involving this moral network have attenuated emotional reactions to the possibility of harming others and may perform sociopathic acts.”
**SOME PROBLEMS:**

- **Inequality of Sympathy**
  - Our capacity to associate with the suffering of others is governed and perhaps limited at least in part by our own experiences.
  - Just as different people feel different levels of suffering, so too would different people feel different levels of sympathy.
  - Some people seem to be easier to sympathize with than others – this is driven by how well we can associate ourselves with them.
  - If the circumstances are too alien or the people too different, we could be ignorant of their suffering entirely.
MORE PROBLEMS:

- Failure to account for unsympathetic behaviour:
  - What of people whose sentiments are not stirred by the suffering or joy of others?
  - What of those people whose feelings of pleasure are given rise by another’s suffering?

- Hume argued that “a false relish may be corrected by argument and reflection” i.e. “some education by way of instruction and/or experience must occur in order to develop the natural sympathies” (Enquiry, 178)
  - Can mean people be corrected by education?
  - How can Hume distinguish between proper and false relish without reference to some concept of objective truth?