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On Virtues and Vices: Are moral values inevitably bound to our perception?

"When you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it. Vice and virtue, therefore, may be compared to sounds, colours, heat and cold, which, according to modern philosophy, are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind".

-David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*

This quote, written by David Hume in 1739, touches upon the dubiety of virtues and vices as objects with an inherent value in and of itself; they cannot be considered *ends* in and of themselves, rather they are *means* anchored in the boundaries of human perception and thus not universal qualities. When only reading this quote one would presume that David Hume is a value-relativist, but if one is familiar with his writing that is not necessarily the case; values are something Hume presents as inherent to the individual but also programmed, and thus the values precedes the individual (meaning that they do exist). However, what strikes the reader with this quote is the bold claim that moral values (virtues and vices) are bound to the "constitution of your nature". Although it suggests that Hume would reject universal values, does he do so? Or is this constitution something that can extend to others? Sequentially, plenty perspectives would disagree with this claim, either anchoring moral values in teleological or theological doctrines which the individual is obligated to respect. Are such philosophers correct in their claims and can they challenge Hume? From Hume's quote arise many questions, but they can be summarized in an encompassing thesis: Are moral values inevitably bound to our perception?

Henri Bergson, a French Catholic philosopher, argued in his "Creative Evolution" that society is not constituted by individuals alone, but by congregations of individuals (communities) whose moral foundation is grounded in a common doctrine. The French sociologist Durkheim takes this view further in his book "The elementary forms of religious life", by presenting the theory of *Functionalism*, where society and its institutions (mainly the Church) are bound to their function, but such functions arise not out of relative perception but by the *common need*. Although such institutions might arise from metaphysical arguments, or for existentialist

purposes their survival is ensured for their function; not their original purpose. The discussion of the functions of institutions is a different one than the one that is conducted in this essay, but an interesting concept arise from Bergson and Durkheim, namely the concept of the *common need*. The term almost speaks for itself: it is the common necessities of individuals, and the reason for why they group together, live together and create rules to which the inherent liberties of the human species must conform. As both Durkheim, Bergson and Freud (whose ideas on the nature of virtues and vices will be presented later) have demonstrated this common need, and the idea of the common need, must be encapsulated in some form of function and justify its existence as to ensure its survival; and thus, institutions like the Church has arisen they argue. Now, these necessities may vary from place to place, and thus it is no surprise to see that we have various religious congregations with different beliefs; bound to our environment.

Albeit many religions share common figures, doctrines and are largely focused on reproduction and societal rules, they have certain rules that are teleological in nature and bound to the environment from which the religion arose, but justified through theology. An interesting example is that of the rules regarding pork in the Abrahamic religions. Islam strictly prohibits it, Judaism are suspicious of it and it advised in the modern Rabbinic interpretation of the *Talmud* that pork be avoided. Christianity however, has not made any such rules. Why? Islam might give us a hint to this disparity between the three religions. Through using a constructivist perspective, it is clear to see why pork is avoided. As Biology has proven, Pork subjected to high temperatures is dangerous to the human body. Now, this suggests that Islam, who arose in a high-temperature area might have invented this rule not on the basis of Allah (but sequentially justified through him), but on the basis of *necessity;* to avoid spreading disease in the community that an individual might contract from pork. Christianity and Judaism, of whom one largely migrated from Canaan and settled in Europe, did not invent such rules because they did not need to; Christianity spread to a mild-hot temperature region, and the Jews were expelled from the South, and most of the Rabbinic elite settled in Eastern Europe. Thus, three religions whose doctrines are similar to the core differ on one rule based on the environment from which the religion operated in. Islam made not eating pork a virtue and the contrary a vice, religious rules justified through the transcendental and applied to our immanent existence. Now, how this does relate to Hume? Since Islam incorporated such a rule into their religion, the idea of necessity and a common need (to avoid spreading disease) might have played a bigger part in creating such a virtue than our own perception. However, one might make the case that the perception is still at play here, and is truly the justification for the invention of such a rule; and that eating pork is not any form of quality in an object, and if we make it such a quality it is inevitably going to be bound to our perception. Yet, one should not forget we are animals and necessity will dominate our philosophical ideas, especially in ancient rudimentary communities, with the goal of ensuring our survival (and the community's). It is true that philosophy is perhaps something bound to our nature, but to love thinking one must be alive; and to be alive is inherently a quality in an object, for it is that from which everything stems from.

Necessity has been explored as an alternative to the perception of the individual as the foundation for vices and virtues. However, there are other elements to Hume's quote worth investigating. One such argument is presented by Freud in his "The future of an Illusion"

regarding religion as an invention of our human perception, but as Kierkegaard' states "a crutch to face the absurd". In his book, Freud touches upon the existential need for a religion, to "humanize nature", and to understand our world and own emotions through the framework of a religious doctrine. Although the existential need for a religion is an interesting discussion, what is interesting for this essay is his idea on the virtues and vices. Virtues is something that has existed since forever; the first written record of certain values as higher than others can be found in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, where such values are discussed in relation to how to act or not. Now, Freud admits that the problem of interpreting ancient texts and trying to understand how certain values have impacted an ancient society is of an archaeological nature (and thus it will not be discussed in this essay, but further reading on that discussion can be found in Scruton's works, particularly in "The soul of the world"). Yet, in congregation with Hume, he finds that virtues and vices stem from our perceptions, but not as individuals, but as a community. Stories are invented, Freud argues, because they need to educate the individuals of a commune to strive for certain values. These values, sequentially, are considered (through our perception) to be good for such a community. Freud however, makes an interesting distinction between what perceptions are inherent to our nature, and when the perceptions transcends the constitution of our nature. For instance, certain virtues are bound to our perception and senses; as Hume diligently states in his treatise they are like "sounds, colours, heat, and cold". Thus, we cannot judge someone, a community or an action by a universal doctrine; because such doctrine, such a judgment will be inherently tied to our nature, and the perception that stems from it. However, Freud demonstrates that this is certainly not the case with all values and virtues. For instance, the invention of the hero or the heroine is not something that he believes is tied to our nature. It is a concept we make up for our own entertainment, and perhaps the entertainment of certain values as something to strive for; put on the pedestal for the sake of achieving and attaining them.

Is this tied to our perception? Yes, but in a different way from what Hume claims with perception as something tied to the constitution of nature. It is not in our nature, or at least not proven to be (might be argued for; but anyone can argue for anything as long as they are deluded enough), to perceive certain values as higher than others; except for those who are bound to our necessities, like murder is wrong etc. Yet, we invent such values. Why?

Freud, among others (Scruton also writes extensively on this in "Culture Counts") see this as the construction of something new. Although we cannot know for sure, the first stories of heroes can be found within agricultural communities i.e., communities who are no longer bound to the virtues of necessity, as survival is ensured through the constructed system. Instead, the idea of higher values, virtues and vices, arise from the need to understand, and perhaps advance. Why else would Odysseus have to fight the cyclops and the sirens? Why would David fight Goliath? Why would Jesus and his example be of such profound interest to Christians? The virtues of these heroes are not bound to the constitution of our nature, they are not bound to our perception (although they can be criticized and rejected through the individual's subjective realm of viewing the world), but they are bound to something else of a much more transcendental nature. Whether that is an abstract need for striving, or programmed into us like an advanced simulation, it still proves the point that certain virtues are not like "sounds" or "heat and cold". For sounds, although we might desire music and desire heat sometimes, are not subject to the same profound desire that virtues such as *temperance*, *humility*, *strength* and *beauty* are. They are of a different nature, the desire of the advanced mind that employs comparisons of values not based on instincts (such as, "Should I

eat this or not?") but on *what* and *who* we want to be. That is why we pursue them, and pursue them consistently. That is something that Aristotle also points out in the "Nichomachean Ethics": "One swallow does not make a summer". To be something, and to become who one wants to be, certain virtues are needed to encapsulate that abstract form of being that one seeks to attain. And such virtues, if only acted upon once, are not really virtues but rather virtuous actions. Consistency is thus a key to being virtuous. But why do we want to be virtuous, why do we want to seek out potential forms of ourselves?

If virtues were like sounds, we would just listen to them whenever they appeared and perceive them (like bad music, good music; of a subjective nature) in our own way. With virtues like *strength* and *diligence*, we seek something else: the unknown and the transcendental, what is not direct and immanent to us. We can consider a sound in whatever way we want to; and sounds are bound to the subjective realm as far as we know; like colors they are different to each individual (certain people are color-blind; does that mean that certain people are virtue-blind?). But can we consider someone as strong if he is weak? Can we consider someone as diligent if he is lazy and inactive? Sounds are not objective, if they were and bound to the constitution of our nature and senses, certain music would be objectively good. It is different with virtues. Can we consider someone who starves a vicious person through the lens of the vice of *gluttony* and ignore that very same vice with a person who eats in abundance? It is up for debate but an interesting thought to play with. Yet, this paragraph has proven that Hume simplifies the nature of virtues and vices through viewing them as that of colors and sounds. There is an abstract realm to moral values, which it is hard to argue is tied *only* to the constitution of our nature.

A constructivist perspective, with elements of a teleological approach, has been employed in the previous paragraph. It is high time to consider the theological aspects of this argument, with an anchoring entirely in the reason of an entity rather than that of dissecting the purpose of religious doctrines.

Kyrie Eleison. Christe Eleison. "Lord have mercy upon us, Christ have mercy upon us!" is perhaps the most common quote in liturgical and canonical settings. It is call, a cry, from the human soul to the abyss inhabited by what is believed to be God. This quote is interesting not only because of its aesthetic beauty (perpetuated in Frank Martin's "Mass for Double Choir" and Mozart' s "Requiem") but because of its consideration of the individual's fate as that of submission; unbound by our own actions, but bound by a helplessness that only God or Christ can answer. The same goes for the entire religion of Islam, which in Arabic translates to *submission*. The story of Abraham's moral dilemma of killing Isaac at the mountain, which God ordered him to do is yet another example of the influence God (whether he exists or not) has had on the human being. The influence, as argued in the first paragraph, might stem from necessity, but in this argument we shall explore that of the pure belief in an entity. What does such a belief say about Hume's quote? The first argument to consider regarding God's influence on our morals is that of *free will*. Free will has been incorporated into our souls, according to biblical doctrine, not because we shall be free from responsibility, burdens and suffering, but rather that we shall bow to such hinders and triumph spiritually through the framework of virtues and vices. If just briefly examining the framework in which this dichotomy operates, it is easy to dismiss it as rules to control. But through considering the existence of free will, virtues and vices appear more as a blueprint. Nothing is forcing the individual to act according to these rules, but the spiritual power of God is fear (like the

Prussian Protestant motto, *Ehret den Konig, Furchtet Gott).* Now, this in the setting of Hume's quote becomes inherently existential. Why do we fear something that, according to Hume's argument, would be *of* our own perception (and the boundaries of the human mind)?

Fear is something we cannot dismiss like sounds, heat and cold. We might fear the cold, like we fear *greed* or vices, but fearing the cold is biological; for why would you fear it if not for your survival (although, we might fear the cold because we associate it to something, and Hume is correct in defining such fear as completely bound to our perception)? Fearing God however, is existential and more common than one believes, for fearing "God" might not be fearing *Yahveh*, Allah or an entity somewhat similar to those of the Abrahamic religions. Carl Jung argues in his "The Modern Man in Search for a Soul" that God takes many shapes, and most specifically God takes the shapes of certain values. Atheists have their own God's: it is nothingness. Nihilists have their own God: it is basking in the nothingness. Christians, Muslims and Jews have their God, who is familiar to most. But how does the God of the Abrahamic religions differ from that of the non-"believers"? The question comes down to belief.

Belief precedes fear, and belief enables fear. People who claim that they do not believe in anything still possess fear. To them, although many would like to define it as such, nothingness is not like a glass of water: colorless and tasteless. Admitting that nothingness is the only thing and the only end is still admitting that there is an *end* and that there is a *thing*. Hume claims that virtues and vices are not objects with qualities in themselves, but in relation to that of fear, which is an object, the argument falls because fear drives all of us; it is like Freud' s *Libido:* constituted by the transcendental forces of our mind (not necessarily perception). Hume might fear a society in which virtues and vices decide how the individual should act and are taken for granted as something true and never questioned; and never admitted as bound to perceptions. But is not that fear that drives him, that wants him to write? Fear, which lays the foundation for most of our spiritual relationship to God (like how a son admires and fears his father) is thus an object that possess certain inherent qualities. But why then do we handle fear by following doctrines? Virtues and vices made up by others? In the theological sense the question is easy to answer: virtues and vices are the direct word of God, and the very thing we fear shall be unleashed will be if we deviate from that path: spiritual decay, sorrow etc.). It is harder to answer when following the constructivist belief but certain individuals such as Max Weber and Georg Simmel laid forth suggestions on why the necessity for God makes us follow others value systems. That line of argument, however, ties into that of functionalism (already presented in the first paragraph) and will thus be left to the reader's own imagination and capability to consider.

Another area of discussion is that on the essence of perception: what is perception and what is it formed by? Here, there are multiple scholars who can point us in the right direction and make for an interesting debate, but only one who operated in the field of psychology and philosophy will be considered. Michel Foucault, French post-modernist philosopher argues that whatever values and whatever authority is in power shapes our perception. It is a *tabula rasa* and whatever we are exposed to will be its main source of influence. For instance, the perception of a boy growing up in the Favelas of Rio de Janeiro and a Vietnamese fisherman might be identical as far as *aisthesis*[*] stretches, but will inherently differ on a lot of points; for the ones in power in Vietnam might be very different from the ones in Brazil and so forth. The

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[*] In this sense aisthesis aims to describe the senses in the Aristotelian sense: something which all individuals are born with and from which one can discern objective elements.

view on virtues, vices and other values will be shaped inherently and *only* by the societal norms in which that individual grows up in. But this idea poses an inherent problem to Hume. Something can be objectively cold and objectively warm. Although within the span of -10C to 30C people might have subjective views on what is warm and cold, there are agreements outside of such a span on the objective; anchored in *aisthesis,* most individuals, except for perhaps the braggart, would agree on that -50C is a freezing temperature. The same however, cannot be true for values. This is anchored in some basic logic and set theory that will be demonstrated below:

If a = individuals

If b = necessity of such individuals

If c = objective needs

If d = surviving

There are two considerations to be made:

 1. a will always = b, for if some individuals would not have necessities in relation to needs and surviving they would be immortal which is objectively impossible.

2. c will always = d, for if objective needs do not exist (eating, sleeping, staying warm\cold) would there really be something to signify that we are the same species at all?

Now these considerations are clear, and even Hume would agree with such claims. Yet, values are nothing like this and cannot be tied to our perception because of two reasons that combined, funnily enough are paradoxical, perception is subjective because it is formed by the society and environment we inhabit and thus values are subjective. There might be certain values that are objective and there is often a case that the world shares the idea that "murder is wrong", yet cultures in the Polynesian region suggest something else; like Girard proves with his theory of scapegoating, sacrifice (which is considered murder by most cultures) is still very present in these cultures, and a way to achieve some of their highest values like *mana*. Thus, Foucault proves a point in describing value-relativism as something present among all cultures and every human and thus it poses an obstacle to the ideas presented by Hume: values cannot be like hot and cold, for they inhabit spheres where the objective and subjective are bound to different measures (senses and environment).

Yet, there are many holes in all of the arguments presented above which will always be the case with questions dealing with the epistemological, metaphysical and ethical. But one inherent problem stands out. Viewing Hume's arguments as an attack on universal values when the quote does not specify what the constitution of nature is, neither what perception is (and what it is shaped by, and which this essay gave an alternative to). In connection to the theme of the 31st IPO, "Life in fair competition", is it really fair to judge another philosopher's quote without *truly* understanding the context in which it was used, how that philosopher defines concepts and terms. One can criticize how much as possible, but for the philosopher, discourse with the goal of discerning truth is more important than critique for the sake of critique; and does writing this essay, bring us any closer to the *truth*? These are questions

every aspiring philosopher should ask themselves now and then for, in the spirit of Hume himself, not contemplating your own philosophical arguments and their *true* nature is perhaps not philosophy at all; but rather some other area, largely based on dogmas (like politics etc.).

In conclusion, there are several points in which one could problematize Hume's arguments and answer the thesis of this essay. Through proving that although virtues and vices might at times be bound to perception, there are other things that affect our values such as necessity, consistency and objects with inherent qualities such as fear; that not only affects the values, but push us to them. So, are our moral values inevitably bound to our perception? Probably not. This essay found that the moral dichotomy as presented by Hume, is bound by other things than ourselves, perhaps even things which are not immanent? Perhaps, the moral values of all cultures, and their very essence, is bound by that which lies further beyond the very subject of this essay, our perception.