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**Commercial Individualism and the Polite Academy:  
James Balfour's Encounter with the Moral Philosophy of David Hume in *A Delineation  
of the Nature and Obligation of Morality*.**

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**Introduction:**

In 1753, James Balfour of Pilrig had a treatise published in Edinburgh under the title 'A Delineation of the Nature and Obligation of Morality, with Reflexions upon Mr. Hume's Book, intituled, *An Inquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*.' In the summer of the following year, William Cleghorn, the professor moral philosophy at Edinburgh since 1745, died shortly after (allegedly) recommending Adam Ferguson as the man most suitable to replace him at the university. Instead, the position was given to James Balfour whose unstartling treatise on the principles of morals was then followed by ten years of even less impressive teaching at the university. He was eventually persuaded to leave the chair whose reputation had, in his hands, fallen behind that of the university as a whole by 1764. It was then given to Ferguson, who had become the champion of, amongst others, David Hume and Principal Robertson.

Richard B. Sher emphasised the failure of the chair of moral philosophy, created in 1708, to attract impressive occupants, or at least to sustain impressive performances, right up until its golden period began when Adam Ferguson took it in 1764.<sup>1</sup> Or, it would be more accurate to say, it failed to attract impressive moral philosophers who were at the same time acceptable as candidates to the university authorities. David Hume was famously turned down in favour of Cleghorn in 1745 after Hume's philosophy was subjected to a campaign of slander – being branded as dangerously sceptical, atheistic, and amoral – and so it could hardly be said that impressive individuals willing to undertake the teaching of moral philosophy at Edinburgh were not to be found. Thus, what may be seen in the history of moral philosophical instruction at the university from the mid-1740s until the mid-1760s, is an anomalous situation in which a superior figure like Hume could be rejected out of hand, while a much less significant individual – and one who would prove very difficult to get rid of – like Balfour, could be given the chair over such another capable figure as Ferguson. Hume's 'Affair at Edinburgh' has been explained as being partly due to parochial politics, but some have also argued that these

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<sup>1</sup> Richard B. Sher, 'Professors of Virtue', in M. A. Stewart (ed.), *Studies in the History of the Scottish Enlightenment*, Oxford, 1990.

factors were not sufficient on their own, to produce the outcome that occurred.<sup>2</sup> In addition, there was a problem with Hume's philosophical ideas that prevented him from being a welcome addition to the university in certain quarters.

In this paper, Balfour's response to Hume's moral philosophy is examined in order to find out what exactly was so objectionable about it from the point of view of the university. As Richard Sher has suggested, the fact that Balfour published an attempt at a refutation of Hume during the year previous to Cleghorn's death, would have done him no harm in his application for the position. Considered as an historical document, therefore, Balfour's treatise may tell us something about why the university authorities at Edinburgh were so averse to Hume's moral philosophy as well as about the kind of philosophical position that could be taken against it. In particular, attention is paid to the chapter in which Balfour explicitly takes on Hume's theory, his *Reflexions on Mr. Home's Scheme in General*.

### **Balfour's major problems with Hume:**

Balfour introduces his response to Hume's moral philosophy by observing that such is the complexity of the relations between passions, virtues, ourselves and other beings, and their constant flux, "'tis no wonder if we are often at a loss to know our proper duty, and if, in many cases, the distinctions betwixt right and wrong appear very imperceptible."<sup>3</sup> However, he chooses not to adopt the position which he attributes to Plato (in his 2<sup>nd</sup> Alcibiades) where he, "affirms, that we stand in need of the assistance of some superior being, to remove the mist that obscures our mind, and to furnish us with the proper means to distinguish between good and evil, and teach us how to act in a right manner, both with regard to God and man."<sup>4</sup> Although he acknowledges the difficulties, he insists that "the great lines of duty are, for the most part, clearly discoverable, if we will be at any reasonable pains to investigate them."<sup>5</sup> Where particular cases prove more difficult to disentangle than the general parameters of morality, "an honest intention" will "excuse a mistake in judgement, and, for the most part, prevent any palpable bad consequences of such mistake."<sup>6</sup> This, we may take to summarise the scope of moral philosophy for Mr. Balfour - the moral philosopher is cast in the role of guide for the perplexed through the complexities of moral decisions.

However, as regards the philosopher whose book Balfour set out to "subvert", he finds good basic intentions, but also a complete and dangerous failure. He writes that, "[o]ur author's professed design appears to be, to clear up the principles of morals, and place them in such a new an strong

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Roger L. Emerson, 'The Affair at Edinburgh and the Project at Glasgow', in *Hume and Hume's Connexions*, ed. M. A. Stewart and John P. Wright, Edinburgh, 1994 and Sher, op.cit..

<sup>3</sup> James Balfour, *A Delineation of the Nature and Obligation of Morality*, [Edinburgh, 1753] reprinted, Bristol, 1989, p. 102. (Referred to as *Delineation* below).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

point of light, as to render it more easy in particular cases, to discover the real difference betwixt right and wrong, and thereby to promote, and facilitate, the universal practice of virtue.” However, Hume’s excessive subtlety has led him astray in such a manner as to subvert the whole basis for moral judgements. Balfour writes that he, and his readers, “must be under a strong temptation to think, that [Hume] has on the contrary exerted all the force of his genius, applied the whole edge of that subtilty and acuteness, in which he excells, to extenuate, and render as imperceptible as possible, the difference betwixt virtue and vice, nay, to confound both in one undistinguishable chaos.”<sup>7</sup>

Balfour’s most vehement and fundamental objection to Hume’s moral philosophy centres on the collapsing of any real distinction between *moral virtues*, and *talents*, and other such personal attributes. This was an element in Hume’s moral philosophy that dated back to the third book of the *Treatise of Human Nature* published in 1740. In that work, Hume had grouped a wide range of personal attributes together under the heading of *natural virtues*. His analysis was divided into categories of *greatness of mind*, *goodness and benevolence*, and *natural abilities*. Hume argued at that point, as he had argued in correspondence with Francis Hutcheson,<sup>8</sup> that while *natural abilities* and *moral virtues* are distinguished in “all systems of ethics”, with the former having no moral worth attributed to them, “[w]hoever considers the matter accurately, will find, that a dispute upon this head wou’d be merely a dispute of words, and that tho’ these qualities are not altogether of the same kind, yet they agree in the most material circumstances.”<sup>9</sup> Hume writes in the first appendix to the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (entitled disparagingly, *Of Some Verbal Disputes*), “[o]n all occasions, where there might arise the least hesitation, I avoided the terms *virtue* and *vice*; because some of those qualities, which I classed among the objects of praise, receive, in the English language, the appellation of *talents*, rather than of virtues; as some of the blameable or censurable qualities are often called *defects*, rather than vices.”<sup>10</sup>

Against Hume, Balfour argues that many of the things that are called virtues in Hume’s work are really to be regarded as the means available to virtuous, but equally available to vicious, motives and purposes. According to his metaphor, a ship may be well built, i.e. possess the virtues of a good ship, but requires a good captain in order to sail well. He proceeds to attack Hume’s collapsing of the distinction between moral virtues and other abilities at some length. Balfour writes that Hume, “misunderstood the proper nature of virtue, and, proceeding upon a fundamental mistake, has been led into a thousand absurdities.” He presents a summary of Hume’s conception of virtue saying that, “it is the possession of such qualities as are useful or agreeable to ourselves or others.” As Balfour narrates Hume’s theory, the nature or “merit” of virtue is found to reside in “its utility” and it is found that

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>8</sup> J. Y. T. Greig, *Letters of David Hume*, Oxford, 1932, letter of Sept. 17<sup>th</sup>, 1739, vol. 1, 33-34. (Referred to as *LDH* below).

<sup>9</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton, Oxford, 2000, p. 387. In the references below, this title is abbreviated to *Treatise*.

Hume, “resolves that into a common sentiment of humanity...” This “sentiment of humanity” is, as Balfour observes, located only in the observer of moral characteristics. Balfour remarks in relation to this, that “most of those qualities placed by [Hume] among the virtues, are very different from humanity, and even many of them, as will by and by appear, do not so much as belong to the soul.”<sup>11</sup>

Balfour agrees with the basic principle that, “virtue is recommended chiefly by its utility,” but disagrees that the distinction between moral virtues and personal abilities and attributes should be collapsed entirely into a concept of utility. He therefore adds to the principle of utility that, “the utility of virtue is of a peculiar kind, it has something in its nature that gives it a superior excellence, and essentially distinguishes it from the common idea of utility.”<sup>12</sup> For Hume the differences were merely differences in degree and in the choice of words. Although, as he says, he has not been able to point out what the “quality of virtue” is that gives it its excellence, he says that it is sufficiently proved by the “general consent of mankind.”<sup>13</sup>

However, Balfour proceeds to characterise what he takes to be the man of true virtue according to his own philosophy, and in so doing appears to contradict himself. He writes,

“But there appears no difficulty to point out this property of virtue, which is the source of its peculiar beauty and excellence. We have already shown, that an intention to do good, is essentially included in the notion of virtue. This intention is founded in original sentiment and affection, and capable of the greatest improvement by means of proper reasoning and reflexion, and of being thereby rendered a strong and habitual principle of action. Let us then suppose a man of this character, one who has an habitual inclination and intention to do good, and even to subject his own private gratifications to the more general good of others, who has been at pains to render this disposition a firm and uniform principle of conduct. How lovely is such a character, what a benign aspect does it bear to society. It is an original, active and natural source of blessings, which are thence derived to mankind in bounteous and delightful streams.”<sup>14</sup>

Against this image, Balfour contrasts the kind of individual implied in David Hume’s notion of moral virtue. Hume’s man of virtue, “may be wise, learned, brave, witty, chearful [*sic*], handsome, cleanly, rich, and great.” For Balfour, however, Hume’s individual, “may possess all these qualities, and a thousand more of the same kind, and yet be without virtue.” If this individual, Balfour argues, “has no habitual purpose or intention to do good to others,” and at the same time, “his own sensual and selfish gratification is the sole study and care of his life”, then he can at best be considered, “an useless and unworthy member of society”.<sup>15</sup>

Balfour’s key argument against Hume’s notion of moral virtue is that many of the characteristics which Hume placed under the heading of *natural virtues* could as easily lend themselves to evil as to good purposes. He writes, “[a]ll those qualities, accounted virtuous by our

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<sup>10</sup> David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch, Oxford, 1975, p. 312. (Referred to as *Enquiries* below).

<sup>11</sup> *Delineation*, pp. 105-6.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105-6.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

author in respect of their utility, are indeed useful: but in what sense? in this only, that they are capable of being put to a good use; but they may be also put to a bad one.” The difference between the different effects that can arise from these, as he would see it, so-called *virtues*, lies in the “virtuous disposition” of the person deploying them. Thus, for Balfour, *moral virtues*, properly so-called, are distinguished from the powers, i.e. the personal abilities, that may be employed to implement them.<sup>16</sup> He therefore declares that, “virtue is no other than the right application of such qualities, and exerting them in such a manner as to attain the good end proposed.”<sup>17</sup>

Thus, in Balfour’s view, the existence of personal abilities in a person is not sufficient for that person to deserve the denomination of *virtuous*: “A wicked and malicious man may be supposed possessed of them all.”<sup>18</sup> Hume’s mistake, he argues, has been to confound the qualities themselves with the use that is made of them.<sup>19</sup> By reintroducing the distinction between personal powers, and moral virtues, Balfour is able to insist that the former can be used to vicious as well as virtuous ends. He writes that, “[a] person of small endowment is not capable of any great degree either of virtue or of vice. But one possessed of great abilities, is capable of a high degree of either, according as he uses them.”<sup>20</sup> For Balfour, the moral excellence of certain kinds of personal qualities and actions remained something that could not be deduced logically, but which he thought could be declared self-evident primarily on the basis that some phenomena were aesthetically pleasing to the observer in a different way to others. He writes, “[t]is goodness, ‘tis right intention alone, that infuses that charm which so much captivates and delights. This entirely coincides with the scheme we have laid down; but is totally subversive of that of our author.”<sup>21</sup>

In support of his argument about the distinction between moral virtues and those personal qualities which may be used to attain either virtuous or vicious ends, Balfour calls upon the “antients”. Against Hume’s collapsing of this distinction he marshals Cicero and Juvenal, and through the former, Panetius the Stoic. In Juvenal’s case, he says, “[i]n his tenth satire, [...], he exposes, with great spirit and justness of thought, the vanity of power, eloquence and ambition, fortitude and military glory, and other things which men are apt to set a high value upon, when he considers them as not under the influence of virtue. The ancients, to be sure, can not be of any avail to our author, as their notions of virtue were diametrically opposite to his.”<sup>22</sup> In fact, Hume was sufficiently confident

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.107-8.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.109.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.109.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.111.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.112.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.114.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.113.

as a modern not to feel it necessary to have the support of the ancients in such matters, remarking at significant moments on the confusions that permeated their writings on morality.<sup>23</sup>

### *The Peculiarities of Hume's Characterisation of Virtue*

In Balfour's reading of Hume, his objections do not stop at the latter philosopher's collapsing of the distinction between moral virtues and natural abilities. He is particularly affronted by the range of attributes that Hume's use of the term *virtue*, and his explanation of the kinds of judgement associated with the term, covers, and the particular things that Hume names as being commonly judged to be virtuous in his sense. Balfour remarks that Hume, "indeed crowds into his assemblage of virtues, every endowment of the mind, every quality of the body, and every external ornament, and advantage of fortune."<sup>24</sup> In fact, Hume's characterisation of the kinds of things typically regarded as virtuous includes, "not only the agreeable qualities of the mind, but the properties of the body, beauty, strength, and just proportion: nay, even external things, dress, riches, and indeed by a necessary consequence, pleasures of very kind."<sup>25</sup> This is consistent with the statement that Balfour quotes from Hume: "VIRTUE, says he [...] consists in the possession of qualities useful or agreeable to the person himself, or to others."<sup>26</sup>

The conclusion that Balfour draws in response to Hume's theory at this point is significant. He makes the following summary statement about the consequences of Hume's argument:

"...this is certain, that he has paved the way to enrich mankind with the possession of a thousand virtues that were never once dreamt of before. For every minister of pleasure, even of the lowest kind, may put in his claim for virtue, and rise in his demands in proportion as he can increase our sensual gratifications. Strange morality indeed!"<sup>27</sup>

From Balfour's perspective, this representation of Hume's moral theory is evidently understood to undermine its validity. However, when one examines the roots of Hume's philosophy, it becomes clear that not only is there some truth in what Balfour says, but also that the concern with pleasure, and the provision of sensual gratifications was not far from Hume's actual intentions. There are a number of aspects of Hume's philosophy which must be considered in order to clarify this.

Hume's moral philosophy was designed to overcome the problems that he perceived in both ancient and modern thought by introducing "the experimental method of reasoning".<sup>28</sup> According to the introduction to the *Treatise* this entailed basing all conclusions concerning human nature on prior observations, and Hume emphasised that such observations could best be made by examining the

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<sup>23</sup> See *Enquiries*, p.170; *LDH*, March or April 1734, vol.1, p. 16: "I found that the moral Philosophy transmitted to us by Antiquity labor'd under the same Inconvenience that has been found in their natural Philosophy, of being entirely Hypothetical, and depending more upon Invention than Experience. Every one consulted his Fancy in erecting Schemes of Virtue & of Happiness, without regarding human Nature, upon which every moral Conclusion must depend."

<sup>24</sup> *Delineation*, p.109.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.116-7.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.120.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118-9.

<sup>28</sup> The subtitle to the *Treatise* reads, "Being an attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects."

practices of men, “in company, in affairs, and in their pleasures.”<sup>29</sup> Book II of the *Treatise* contributed to Hume’s investigation by laying out the principles of human psychology. The first two of the three parts of this book concentrate on the manner in which individuals establish an awareness of their own social status and that of those who surround them. The first part concentrates on self-awareness in the form of *pride* (and *humility* its opposite), and the second on *love* or *esteem* (and their opposites in *hatred* and *contempt*).

In the theory that Hume develops in Book II of the *Treatise*, the individual is presented as continually and fundamentally concerned with social status. At the centre of his self-awareness stands the feeling of pride, or in adversity, the feeling of humility. The regard, or in Hume’s terminology, the love or hatred, esteem or contempt, in which his individual is held by others, depends on the extent to which he can display ownership of certain kinds of objects. The objects which cause both pride in one’s self, and esteem in those whom we encounter, are typified by property and riches,<sup>30</sup> but also extend through a wide range of personal attributes, and social and familial connections, associated with the possessor in an analogous way to the relation of property. The key feature of objects which cause pride and esteem – in short, the sense of social status – is that they possess the power to cause pleasure.

Hume’s first presentation of the *natural virtues*, being those which cause such problems for Balfour, appears in part 3 of Book III of the *Treatise*. At this point, Hume explains that his understanding of these is derived from the psychological theory presented in Book II, and in particular, the kinds of moral judgements covered by Book III part 3 are the same, he says, as the kind of social judgements made in Book II part 2 (on *love and hatred*). Thus, Hume’s theory of natural virtues does originate in a concern with the distribution of pleasures, and the objects which cause pleasure, in society. So Balfour’s characterisation of his moral philosophy does not in fact stray too far from the truth.

There are two other objections that Balfour raises about Hume’s philosophy in this text which need to be examined at this point. First of all, he finds that in Hume’s theory of morality, there is no satisfactory theory of selfless motivation, sufficient to overcome selfish, individualistic motives; secondly, he finds that Hume outlines a theory of cultural-moral relativism in the *Dialogue* that accompanies his *Enquiry*. By examining the first case, a fundamental difference emerges between the two philosophers over the role that their respective contributions to moral philosophy is supposed to fill.

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<sup>29</sup> *Treatise*, p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> Hume writes at the beginning of section II.1.x (*Of property and riches*), “[b]ut the relation, which is esteem’d the closest, and which of all others produces most commonly the passion of pride, is that of *property*.” *Treatise*, p. 309.

***Private Versus Public Interests***

Balfour finds that Hume provides no means by which the selfish motives of mankind may be countermanded by some other set of motives – either selflessness or public spiritedness. In particular, there is no room in Hume’s scheme, he believes, for either “self-denial” or “humility”, virtues for which Hume appears to have particular contempt. This part indicates a fundamental difference in the function of moral philosophical investigation and teaching between the two philosophers. Hume’s nominalism arises from his desire to know how it is that virtues are commonly understood; Balfour’s preaching arises from his belief in the tenets of a philosophy that may be characterised as a fusion between Christian Stoicism and civic humanism (it emphasises both self-denial and humility, and public spirited service).

Balfour indicates the kind of human passions that do not naturally arise but which would, in his view, be most beneficial to humanity if they did. He writes,

“if we were so constituted, as that the principle of humanity was the source of our highest satisfaction, such constitution, as we are social creatures, would undoubtedly contribute to the greatest perfection of our happiness; and therefore, in our calm reflexions, this is what we must naturally wish and desire.”<sup>31</sup>

This “principle of humanity” combines benevolence and self-denial in such a way as to motivate individuals to regard the good of society as more important than their own interests. However, he finds that human nature is such that these motives do not arise without the input of the moral philosopher. He observes that, “such constitution is far from agreeing to the prevailing character of mankind.” The question for the moral philosopher to answer is, “[w]here, then, shall we find proper countermotives to subdue the force of the selfish passions, and give an habitual ascendant to the social ones.” Balfour judges that Hume’s “scheme” provides no such answer:

“it points out no general sentiment arising from the beauty and order of the constitution, or from the happy effect resulting to virtue in the final issue of things, which might be of force sufficient to accomplish this great object of morality, *viz.* to subject the selfish passions to the general good: on the contrary, he talks of the moral differences as taking but a slender hold of the heart.”<sup>32</sup>

Such teleological thinking as would posit a “final issue” to things was indeed far from Hume’s mind. As regards the general good, Hume’s concern was with the manner in which consensual legal conventions – the *artificial virtues* of justice – became established. Such conventions did not promote shared, positive ends, but served the negative purpose of setting limits to the destructive potential of unrestrained self-interest.

Hume’s concern with the description, through “experimental” investigation, of how humans actually make judgements and establish shared “general rules”, marked a fundamental difference in his approach to moral philosophy from that of Balfour. Balfour appears to have recognised some truth in Hume’s argument that selfless moral motives were not naturally strong in individuals, but saw the

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<sup>31</sup> *Delineation*, pp. 122-3.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 122-3.

philosopher's role as one of struggling against this fact. For Balfour, the moral philosopher was duty-bound to encourage motives directed towards the "general good", i.e. towards shared ends, by preaching the evils of self-interested and proud behaviour.

Balfour attempts to rehabilitate the need to encourage two elements in moral psychology which Hume had rejected. Self-denial and humility which Hume had, "banished to the monasteries with abundance of scorn and sever invective", are called upon as the "largest sources of virtue, and the most shining ornaments of the men of the world." The purpose of self-denial, according to Balfour, is, "to subdue the private affections; it is a noble virtue that stands opposite to all the selfish passions at once." Self-denial is supposed to, "moderate their violence, to check their indulgence, and, by a steady discipline, to reduce them to a proper subjection: and this it does, not from humour or caprice, but in order to attain the noblest of all purposes, that is, to secure to the social virtues the empire over the mind."<sup>33</sup> Humility is found to be, "a species of self denial," which, "stands opposed to all the passions in general...". For Balfour, pride is "certainly" a vice, and, "[t]here is perhaps no vice in great life more hurtful to society than pride." The examples he presents, designed to illustrate the social benefits of actions motivated by humility rather than pride, are primarily military or political and derived from classical sources. He declares, "no virtue sets a great character in such a beautiful point of light, as does humility."<sup>34</sup>

Hume, however, refuses to accept the moral condemnation of pride and the self-directed motives to which it gives rise. For Hume, the concern with social status was an evident, empirical fact that had to be understood and accommodated in moral philosophy rather than frowned upon and dismissed as unacceptable. His theory of justice, law and artificial virtue, first expounded in the *Treatise*, Book III, part 2, explains how such motives are kept within reasonable boundaries, i.e. how they are prevented from damaging the interests of other members of society, or indeed a society as a whole.

On the basis of these various criticisms of Hume's moral "scheme", Balfour ultimately finds that his philosophy contains, "repugnant principles", in which the predominant principle is "immediate self-love". He accuses Hume of reinstating Epicureanism, "the antient scheme which excluded religion...". Both Hume and the Epicureans are supposed to have "referred all to self-love and immediate enjoyment," but Balfour implies that Hume is the worse influence since Epicurus, "excluded the grosser pleasures of sense, and introduced the virtues as subordinate ministers to the happiness he proposed."<sup>35</sup>

To crown it all, for Balfour, Hume is found to have asserted that moral codes are culturally specific, varying from context to context. The *Dialogue* attached to the *Enquiry*, suggests that

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p.125.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p.123.

different things will be called virtuous and vicious in different cultural and historical contexts. Balfour writes that Hume, “observes that, in some countries, certain actions have been deemed virtuous, or vicious, which, in other countries, have passed under the contrary denominations.... [and] would seem to deduce the following conclusion [...] that fashion, vogue, custom, and law were the chief foundation of all moral determinations.” Balfour disagrees, allowing only that the means to protect or attain to moral virtues may vary from case to case.<sup>36</sup>

### **Contexts and Conclusions:**

So why did this conflict in moral positions arise? Contextualisation provides part of the answer. Both Balfour and Hume derive insight from Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, in particular on the aesthetics of morality. For both, a moral sense of sorts is called into play, although Balfour reads like he is closer to Shaftesbury in his emphasis on the beauty of the morally virtuous character. However, the two philosophers take this insight in different directions. Balfour appeals to the civic humanist ethos found in “the polite academy”,<sup>37</sup> and which informed the writings of Shaftesbury; he seeks a foundation for a peaceful and sociable civic-Christian morality which may be preached by the moral philosopher. Hume, however, endeavours to describe the use of moral concepts and language as they are found in his experience.

Balfour had a particular problem with the nominalism of Hume’s moral philosophy. For Hume, because his exploration of morality was descriptive rather than prescriptive, moral attributes, or *virtues*, were taken to be those things which are referred to as such. They are not intrinsic qualities: Hume’s argument in *Treatise*, Book III, part 1, shows how any realist conception of moral qualities is untenable, and he replaces such theories with a moral sense theory derived from Hutcheson and Shaftesbury. Balfour appears to be trying to take a Shaftesburian notion of the aesthetic perception of moral goodness in a different direction from that of Hume. For Balfour, the moral righteousness of a benevolent character is self-evident; Hume does not disagree with this directly (although for him the righteousness is not so much discovered through perception as established) but collapses the distinction between those characteristics of behaviour called virtuous in Christian and civic humanist morality and those which may be called virtues in other utilitarian terms.

Hume’s “experimental” human psychology strongly reflects the experience of an advanced commercial society, one in which consumption had become strongly implicated in the visible management of social status. This may reflect his experience of English society rather than Scotland

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>37</sup> On the importance of civic humanist ideas in the Scottish universities at this time see Peter Jones, ‘The Scottish Professoriate and the Polite Academy, 1720-46’, in *Wealth and Virtue: the Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff, Cambridge, 1983.

which would not have manifested such features nearly as strongly as England at the time.<sup>38</sup> Hume's theory of morality, and in particular his conception of natural virtues, is derived from his psychology (published as Book II of the *Treatise*) which stresses the manner in which individuals become aware of, and are motivated by, social status. At its centre stands the passions of pride (and humility), love or esteem (and hatred or contempt). Hume's enumeration of the natural virtues in III.3 is, as he points out, merely a repetition in less detail of II.2, and the objects which typically stimulate such passions span a wide range of categories, a philosophical claim to which Balfour strongly objects. Within Hume's theory of psychology, as in his derivation of natural virtues, possession, the power to acquire possessions (i.e. *riches and power*), and the conspicuous consumption of objects that give pleasure, are accepted as important elements in the motives of individuals.

Balfour was particularly hostile to the complacent attitude of Hume towards self-interested individualism, and the motive of pride. He regarded the kind of individualism anatomised by Hume in his early philosophical works as a particularly pernicious threat to society. In Balfour's response to Hume, it appears that notions of the "general good" and "social virtues", presented as ends in themselves, are to be preached by moral philosophers ostensibly for their self-evident worth. At times, however, it seems that these must be preached primarily in order to avert the supposedly self-evident evil of the kind of individualist mentality described by Hume.

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<sup>38</sup> Hume spent time working with a firm of merchants in Bristol during 1734 before moving to France where he wrote the *Treatise*. It was at this time that he researched those philosophical ideas that were later rewritten and published as the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* in 1751.