History of Philosophy
49 Reactions to David Hume
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Abstract:

This text examines **David Hume's** influential 18th-century philosophy regarding **ethics and epistemology**, specifically focusing on his "is-ought" problem and the subsequent reactions from other thinkers. Hume argued that **moral obligation** stems from **human sentiment** and natural benevolence rather than pure reason, a view that challenged traditional religious and rationalist foundations. In response, **moral sense philosophers** like Joseph Butler and Adam Smith proposed that humans possess an inherent, possibly **God-given conscience** or cognitive faculty for making moral judgments. The lecture also addresses Hume's **skepticism** concerning human knowledge, noting that his reliance on the **theory of ideas** led to a perceived gap between mental perceptions and objective reality. To bridge this gap, later movements such as **Scottish Realism** rejected Hume's atomistic views in favor of **direct realism** and intuitive principles. Ultimately, the sources highlight a historical shift toward **moral psychology** and pragmatic belief systems to provide a universal basis for human conduct and certainty.

Briefing Document:

Philosophical Reactions to David Hume: Ethics and Epistemology

Executive Summary

The philosophical legacy of David Hume centers on two primary challenges: the "is-ought" problem in ethics and the skeptical conclusions of his empirical epistemology. In ethics, Hume argues that moral obligation cannot be derived from reason or empirical facts alone, as the world described by science is value-neutral. Instead, he roots morality in human sentiment, specifically the natural feeling of

benevolence. This perspective prompted the rise of the "Moral Sense" philosophers—including Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Smith, and Butler—who sought to establish a universal basis for morality within human psychology, often adding a theistic or cognitive dimension to Hume's subjectivism.

In epistemology, Hume's representational theory of ideas leads to a skepticism that questions the logical basis for believing in the external world or causal relations. In response, five distinct philosophical traditions emerged:

1. **Pragmatism:** Focusing on the psychological unavoidability of belief.

2. **Direct Realism:** Rejecting the "theory of ideas" to assert direct awareness of reality.

3. **Gestalt Approaches:** Rejecting the atomism of discrete ideas in favor of structured wholes.

4. **Conceptualism:** Reasserting the validity of abstract ideas.

5. **A Priori Categorization:** Introducing non-empirical structural principles (notably Immanuel Kant).

Hume's Ethical Framework: The Is-Ought Problem

Hume's ethics begins with the distinction between reason and sentiment. He maintains that while reason can define terms and predict consequences (utility), it is incapable of establishing moral obligation.

The Role of Reason

- **Relations of Ideas:** Reason can interrelate ethical concepts and define terms.

- **Matters of Fact:** Reason employs empirical science (Newtonian method) to predict the outcomes of actions.

- **Value Neutrality:** Science describes a "value-free world" of particles and forces. Because empirical facts only describe what *is*, they cannot logically dictate what *ought* to be.

The Role of Sentiment

Since reason is limited to facts and logic, Hume turns to human psychology to explain moral obligation:

- **Benevolence:** A universal, natural feeling of wanting good for others.

- **Sympathy:** A sentiment arising from the empirical similarity between oneself and others; it involves feeling pleasure or pain regarding another's situation.

- **Subjectivism vs. Relativism:** While Hume is a subjectivist (basing ethics on internal feelings), he is not a relativist. He argues that human psychology is universally consistent, providing a stable basis for moral rules.

The Moral Sense Philosophers

In the 18th century, a school of thought emerged to counter the egoism of Thomas Hobbes and the pessimistic "total depravity" view of human nature found in strong Calvinism. These "Moral Sense" philosophers argued that humans possess a distinct moral faculty.

Core Functions of the Moral Sense

The moral sense is viewed as a *sui generis* (unique) faculty with three distinct functions:

1. **Perception:** Identifying the moral quality of an action.

2. **Approbation:** Approving or disapproving of a situation.

3. **Motivation:** Driving the individual to perform the good.

Key Figures and Divisions

Philosopher	Primary Stance
Earl of Shaftesbury	Non-cognitive/Emotive; morality is a matter of "taste" or sentiment.
Francis Hutcheson	Non-cognitive; emphasized universal sentiments of benevolence.
Adam Smith	Theory of moral sentiments; aligned with the emotive view.

Joseph Butler   Cognitive; argued the moral sense (conscience) involves clear ideas and rational judgment.

Joseph Butler's Moral Psychology

Joseph Butler, an Anglican clergyman, provided a influential response to Hume by renaming the moral sense "conscience" and integrating it into a broader psychological framework.

The Four Propensities of Mind

Butler identified four God-given tendencies that govern human behavior:

1. **Particular Passions:** Basic desires for satisfaction (e.g., hunger, anger).

2. **Self-Love:** A rational propensity for self-interest.

3. **Benevolence:** A propensity for the well-being of others.

4. **Conscience:** The superior propensity that balances self-love and benevolence.

The Authority of Conscience

For Butler, conscience is both **cognitive** (it perceives the right balance) and **authoritative** (it provides the "conscience prick" or the "ought"). He argues that a virtuous person is a "properly functioning" human being, a concept reminiscent of Aristotelian ethics. He rejects the idea that benevolence is merely a form of self-interest, though he concedes that self-interest is often present.

Epistemological Responses to Humean Skepticism

Hume's "Theory of Ideas"—the belief that we only perceive mental representations rather than the world itself—leads to skepticism regarding substance, causality, and the external world. Subsequent philosophers developed five primary routes to circumvent this conclusion:

1. The Psychology of Belief (Pragmatism)

This approach argues that certain beliefs are psychologically unavoidable even if they cannot be logically proven.

- **William James:** Argued that in the absence of evidence, one may turn to "passionate grounds" or the "will to believe."

- **John Henry Newman:** Distinguished between "certainty" (logical demonstration) and "certitude" (psychological conviction).

2. Rejection of Representationalism (Direct Realism)

The Scottish Realist school (e.g., Thomas Reid) argued that the "Theory of Ideas" is a false premise. They advocated for **Direct Realism**, the view that we have immediate, direct awareness of external realities rather than mental intermediaries.

3. Rejection of Atomism

Hume and Locke viewed experience as a series of discrete "atoms" (individual sensations). Opponents argued that:

- Experience is a **Gestalt** (a structured whole).

- Humans have direct awareness of relations (like cause and effect) rather than just isolated stimuli.

4. Rejection of Nominalism (Conceptualism)

While Hume argued that we cannot have abstract ideas (nominalism), others returned to **Conceptualism**. This view maintains that we can entertain abstract concepts—such as space, time, or substance—which provide an empirical framework even if the ingredient concepts have no immediate sensory reference.

5. Rejection of Empiricism (A Priori Principles)

The final alternative is to introduce *a priori* principles—structural categories of the mind that exist prior to experience.

- **Immanuel Kant:** Attempted to bridge the gap by introducing *a priori* categories to organize empirical input. However, the effectiveness of this approach in providing knowledge of the "space-time world" remains a point of philosophical debate.

Study Guide:

Reactions to David Hume: A Comprehensive Study Guide

This study guide examines the philosophical responses to David Hume's 18th-century work, focusing on his ethical theories and the epistemological skepticism that followed his empiricist method. It explores the "Moral Sense" school of philosophy and the various pathways taken by later thinkers to address the challenges Hume posed to knowledge and morality.

Part 1: Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in 2–3 sentences based on the provided text.

1. **What is the "is-ought" problem as identified by David Hume?** Hume identifies a logical gap between descriptive statements (what "is") and normative statements (what "ought" to be). He argues that one cannot derive moral obligation or ethical duties solely from empirical facts or scientific observations of the natural world.

2. **How does Hume define the role of reason in ethics?** Reason is limited to defining ethical terms, interrelating concepts, and making empirical predictions about the consequences of actions (utility). However, reason itself cannot provide moral motivation; it can only identify the "matters of fact" in a given situation.

3. **According to Hume, what is the relationship between benevolence and self-interest?** Hume posits a natural sentiment of benevolence rooted in sympathy, which is triggered by our factual similarity to others. While benevolence is a genuine desire for the good of others, it contains a "significant dose of self-interest" because we feel pleasure or pain based on what happens to those like us.

4. **In what way does Hume's ethics avoid being classified as ethical relativism?** Hume is not a relativist because he believes human psychology is universally the same across all people. He seeks a basis for morality in a "universal sameness of psychology," meaning the same sentiments of benevolence exist in everyone to some degree.

5. **Who were the primary "Moral Sense" philosophers, and what was their shared objective?** Key figures included the Earl of Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson, Adam Smith, and Joseph Butler. Their objective was to root ethics in human psychology and defend the existence of a natural moral faculty against the egoism of Thomas Hobbes and the pessimism of certain Calvinist views.

6. **What are the three functions of the "moral faculty" according to the Moral Sense school?** The moral faculty allows an individual to perceive the moral quality of an action or situation (perception). It then enables the individual to approve or disapprove of that action (approbation) and provides the motivation to pursue the good (motivation).

7. **How did Joseph Butler's view of the moral sense differ from that of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson?** Butler argued that the moral sense is a cognitive faculty involving "knowing" and clear ideas, rather than a purely emotive faculty of "feeling" or taste. He referred to this cognitive, authoritative propensity as "conscience."

8. **What is the "representational theory of knowledge," and how does it lead to skepticism?** This theory suggests that the direct objects of thought are not external realities but "ideas" that represent those realities. This creates a gap between the mind and the world, leading to Hume's skepticism because there is no empirical way to prove that these internal ideas accurately represent external matters of fact.

9. **How does "Direct Realism" respond to Hume's epistemological challenges?** Direct Realism, championed by Scottish realists like Thomas Reid, rejects the representational theory of ideas entirely. It maintains that we have a direct awareness of the external world rather than being distanced from it by intermediary mental images.

10. **Explain the "Psychology of Belief" approach used by William James and John Henry Newman.** This approach suggests that when evidence is inconclusive, belief is driven by "passionate grounds" or psychological necessity. It distinguishes between logical certainty and "certitude" (psychological certainty), arguing that some beliefs are psychologically unavoidable even if they cannot be logically proven.

Part 2: Answer Key

1. **The "is-ought" problem:** Hume argues that you cannot derive moral obligation ("ought") from empirical descriptions ("is"). This challenged previous assumptions that objective moral truths were inherently accessible through reason or nature.

2. **The role of reason:** Reason helps define terms and calculate utility through the prediction of consequences. It cannot, however, provide the "ought" or the sentiment required for moral action.

3. **Benevolence and self-interest:** Benevolence is a natural feeling of wanting good for others, but it is psychologically linked to sympathy. This sympathy arises from observing similarities between ourselves and others, making it a blend of altruism and self-interest.

4. **Avoiding relativism:** Hume believes human nature is constant; therefore, the moral sentiments (like benevolence) are characteristic of all human beings. This universal psychology provides a stable, non-relative foundation for morality.

5. **Moral Sense philosophers:** This group includes Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Smith, and Butler. They aimed to show that humans have an inherent moral sensitivity that opposes the idea that humans are purely selfish (egoism).

6. **Functions of the moral faculty:** The functions are moral perception (recognizing the good), moral approbation (judging the action), and moral motivation (the drive to act).

7. **Butler vs. others:** Shaftesbury and Hutcheson viewed moral sense as a matter of sentiment or taste (non-cognitive). Butler and Reid viewed it as a cognitive faculty (conscience) that provides actual knowledge.

8. **Representational theory:** It posits that we only know our own ideas, not the "extra-mental" world. Because we cannot "get outside" our ideas to check them against reality, it results in skepticism regarding the existence of the material world and causality.

9. **Direct Realism:** It rejects the "atomism" of ideas and the representational gap. It argues for a direct, structured awareness of the world as it is, rather than a collection of discrete sensory stimuli that must be combined by the mind.

10. **Psychology of Belief:** Thinkers like James and Newman argue that belief is a function of our psychological makeup. Some affirmations are "unavoidable in practice," and we turn to these non-cognitive grounds when evidence is balanced.

Part 3: Essay Questions

1. **The Is-Ought Gap and Modern Science:** Analyze Hume's argument that the Newtonian "world of facts" is value-neutral. How does this perspective create the "is-ought" problem, and what are the implications for a purely empirical approach to ethics?

2. **Egoism vs. Altruism in the 18th Century:** Compare the "Moral Sense" school's view of human nature with the egoism of Thomas Hobbes and the pessimism of the "strong Calvinism" of the era. How did the concept of "natural benevolence" serve as a middle ground?

3. **The Anatomy of Conscience:** Detailed Joseph Butler's four "mental propensities" (passions, self-love, benevolence, and conscience). Discuss how conscience acts as the authoritative "rational check" and the source of the "ought" in his system.

4. **Overcoming Skepticism:** Evaluate the five alternative pathways to Hume's epistemology mentioned in the text (Pragmatism, Direct Realism, Gestalt

awareness, Conceptualism, and A Priori principles). Which approach offers the most robust defense against the "theory of ideas"?

5. **Cognitive vs. Emotive Ethics:** Debate the divide within the Moral Sense school regarding whether morality is a matter of "taste/feeling" (Shaftesbury/Hutcheson) or "reason/knowledge" (Butler/Reid). What are the consequences for the universality of ethics in each view?

Part 4: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
A Priori Principles	Structural or innate categories of the mind (suggested by Kant or Plato) that exist prior to empirical experience.
Approbation	The moral function of approving or disapproving of an action or situation; a judgment of moral quality.
Atomism (of Ideas)	The theory that experience consists of discrete, simple ideas (stimuli) that come to the mind one after another.
Benevolence	A natural, universal feeling of wanting what is good for others; a key sentiment in Humean and Moral Sense ethics.
Cambridge Platonists	17th-century thinkers who opposed mechanism and Hobbesian egoism, believing in innate knowledge and objective ethical ideals.
Conceptualism	The view that the mind can entertain abstract ideas (like space or substance) which may have empirical reference even if they aren't immediate sensory impressions.
Conscience	In Joseph Butler's philosophy, the authoritative, cognitive propensity that balances self-love and benevolence.
Direct Realism	The epistemological position that we have a direct awareness of external reality, rejecting the need for intermediary "ideas."

Ethical Intuitionism	A 20th-century descendant of Moral Sense philosophy; the view that moral principles or the concept of "good" are known intuitively.
Is-Ought Question	The philosophical problem of how to derive normative moral obligations ("ought") from empirical, factual descriptions of the world ("is").
Moral Sense	A proposed "sixth sense" or psychological faculty that allows humans to perceive moral qualities and feel moral obligations.
Nominalism	The rejection of abstract universals; Hume and Berkeley held this view, which the Scottish Realists eventually challenged.
Representational Theory	The view that the mind does not perceive the world directly, but only through "ideas" that represent external objects.
Scottish Realism	A philosophical movement (led by Thomas Reid) that reacted to Hume by defending common sense and direct realism.
Sentiment	A feeling or emotion; in Hume's system, sentiments (not reason) are the true foundation of moral judgment and obligation.
Utility	An ethical principle focusing on the usefulness or consequences of an action; a major component of Hume's "matters of fact" in ethics.