Morality and Feeling in the Scottish Enlightenment

GORDON GRAHAM

There are several commonplaces about Scottish philosophy in the eighteenth century that may be said to have taken on the status of truisms. The first is that the birth and establishment of a distinctive Scottish school of Common Sense is to be found in this period; the second is that an important element of this school lay in its applying to the moral sciences the methods that had proved so successful in the natural; the third holds that the work of David Hume is the most prominent and influential of the period, his *Treatise of Human Nature*, as its title suggests, being the most ambitious and significant attempt 'to put the science of man on a new footing'[1].

As befits truisms these propositions are indeed true—broadly. There is, however, reason to question an implication commonly drawn from them. It seems to follow from the fact that Scottish philosophy at this period was marked by a 'natural' approach to the questions of morality, and that Hume's *Treatise* is the most famous attempt to apply this approach, that Hume thus speaks for eighteenth century Scottish philosophy as a whole when he concludes that 'morality is more properly felt than judged of'[2]. Such an inference, however, conflicts with another striking historical fact. While it is true that the philosophical school of Common Sense emerged in the eighteenth century, and that Hume is the best known Scottish philosopher of the period, it is *not* true that his philosophy can unqualifiedly be said to belong to that School. On the contrary, the two principal figures in the establishment of Common Sense as a distinctive philosophy—Francis Hutcheson and Thomas Reid—were intellectual *opponents* of Hume. In fact, Reid's philosophical work in particular, can accurately be described as dominated by the desire to *refute* Hume.

Thus, while it is true that (almost) all the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment, Reid no less than Hume, understood themselves to be engaged in the new 'science of mind', and were convinced of its applicability to the traditional topics of moral

[1] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, L. A. Selby-Bigge (ed.), (Oxford: Clarendon Press), Introduction, p. xxi.

[2] *Treatise*, Bk III, Part 1, Section ii, p. 470.

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philosophy, this common conception of their enterprise still gave rise to deep philosophical differences. Indeed, in the case of moral philosophy, it led to positions diametrically opposed. For while it is accurate to say that Hume believed morality more properly felt than judged of, Reid expressly held morality to be more properly judged of than felt. 'In the approbation of a good action … there is feeling indeed, but there is also esteem of the agent; and both the feeling and the esteem depend upon the judgment we form of his conduct'[3]

My aim in this paper is to explain how these contradictory accounts of the place of feeling in morality can arise from what appears to be the same method, the same 'science of mind'.

I

Hume's largest and most important work is not entitled *A Treatise of Human Nature* by accident. The use of the term 'nature' here is significant, because the model of inquiry he has in mind is that of Bacon and Newton. In a sense the *Treatise* is not really a work of philosophy as traditionally conceived at all. It is rather, an exploration in what Hume (along with many others of his time) calls 'the science of man'. The distinction between natural science and philosophy is more marked now than in Hume's day, and his using the terms almost interchangeably may disguise what is in reality a important shift. In the modern sense Hume's investigation is scientific rather than philosophical, and his intention is to solve long-standing metaphysical problems by using the observational methods of Bacon and the mechanical conceptions of Newton. In his view these had proved so productive in natural science that there was every reason to think they would prove profitable in the mental and moral sciences also. He makes this very plain in the Introduction to the *Treatise*, but it is made plainer still in its 'revised' version, namely the *Enquiries*. In the Section 'Of Miracles' in the first *Enquiry* he expressly seeks additional authority for his argument by asserting that 'Lord Bacon seems to have embraced the same principles of reasoning'[4], and in the Section on Justice in the second *Enquiry* he claims that his argument is an application of 'Newton's chief rule of philosophizing'[5]. Like several other major philosophers (Wittgenstein and Nietzsche are specially striking examples) Hume believed that the significance of his work and its

[3] Thomas Reid, 'Essay on the Active Powers', *Collected Works*, p. 673.
[4] *Hume's Enquiries,* p. 129.
[5] *Hume's Enquiries*, p. 204.

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claim to originality lay in the adoption of a method wholly new to philosophy, and that (in his case) this new method was the method employed by the natural scientists.

In his adoption of the 'scientific' method, however, Hume was not as novel as he supposed. In fact, the move to a 'science of mind' as the basis of moral philosophy is now recognized to be a distinguishing feature of the period quite generally, and of writers belonging to the Scottish Enlightenment especially. Indeed the movement was so widespread that Pope could include the dictum 'account for the moral, as for natr'l things' in his *Essay on Man*. But the difference between Hume and many of his contemporaries is that, while *they* saw in the science of mind a new basis for moral philosophy, *he* develops it in a way that essentially divorces the two. Whereas Alexander Gerard, for instance, thought that 'we must inquire what is the constitution & structure of human Nature' in order 'to discover whether Virtue has any foundation in the nature of man'[6], it is well known that on the basis of an empirical account of human nature Hume uncovers a logical gap between is (nature) and ought (virtue). Indeed, this is just one of several traditional philosophical positions that he undermines. Notably, he finds no logically conclusive basis for inductive reasoning, cannot find any ground for attributing necessity to causal relations, and argues that reason is necessarily inert with respect to action, which is always determined by desire or 'the passions'. The gaps that these conclusions seem to present to our customary ways of thinking are, in the end, to be bridged by recording that this is just how the human mind typically works. It is our brute nature, not logical intelligibility, that underlies the simple passage from one thought or belief to another. So, since we cannot prove that the future will be like the past, or that a cause must give rise to its effect, we must rest content with the observation that 'reason is nothing but a wonderful and *unintelligible* instinct in our souls which carries us along a certain train of ideas… [This] habit is nothing but one of the principles of nature, and derives all its force from that origin' (my emphasis)[7].

Whether Hume is right about this is obviously of crucial importance to his enterprise, but it is not the topic of this essay. Here it is sufficient to note that these sceptical conclusions prompted many philosophers to mount a counter attack. Famously, Kant was roused

[6] Quoted in P. B. Wood, 'Science and Virtue in Aberdeen', *Studies in the Philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment*, M. A. Stewart (ed.), (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 141.

[7] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, L. A. Selby-Bigge (ed.), (Oxford: Clarendon Press), Bk I III:XVI, p. 179.

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from his 'dogmatic slumbers' by the implications of Hume's contentions[8]. But more importantly for present purposes, so too were many of the Scottish philosophers who shared Hume's ambitions in the science of mind, among them, and especially, Thomas Reid[9].

Reid's counter-strategy may fairly be summarized as this: Hume, in company with several other philosophers (Berkeley is a prime example) deploys what Reid calls 'the theory of ideas', which he summarizes as follows.

> Modern philosophers as well as the Peripatetics and Epicureans of old, have conceived that external objects cannot be the immediate objects of our thought; that there must be some image of them in the mind itself, in which, as in a mirror, they are seen. And the same idea, in the philosophical sense of it, is given to those internal and immediate objects of our thoughts. The external thing is the remote or mediate object; but the idea, or image of that object in the mind, is the immediate object, without which we could have no perception, no remembrance, no conception of the mediate object.[10]

It follows from this 'theory of ideas' that if we are to move from the interior contents of the mind to the exterior world of present and past, and thus suppose that the mind accurately captures or reflects reality, we require some sort of reasoning or inference. Reid contends that the theory of ideas, being a philosophical theory, if it is seriously to call into question the beliefs of common sense, requires a better ground upon which to base itself than the common sense which it displaces. This is (he thinks) what it cannot have. There *is* no better ground than common sense. That is to say, at the root of our everyday beliefs are certain principles of judgment and inference which we naturally (in the sense of unreflectively) employ, and which, importantly, we cannot fail to employ without falling into confusion and sceptical error. And in *Essay Six* 'Of Judgement' he gives several examples of these.

[8] *Prolegomena* (Prussian Academy edition Vol. 4), p. 260.

[9] Reid might thus be thought to be a natural ally of Kant, but in fact, on the basis of what he knew about Common Sense philosophy, Kant took a very dim view of it. 'When insight and science are on the decline, then and no sooner to appeal to common sense is one of the subtle inventions of recent times, by which the stalest windbag can confidently take up with the soundest thinker and hold his own with him. As long as the least remnant of insight remains, we shall do well to take no recourse to this desperate aid' (*Prolegomena*, p. 259).

[10] Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, I, Ch. 1 (Beanblossom and Lehrer, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1983), pp. 142–3.

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Reid thinks, like Hume, that there are important differences between the apprehension of factual truth and the making of moral assessment, and he further agrees that an important part of this difference lies in the special role of feeling: 'Our moral judgments are not like those we form in speculative matters, dry and unaffecting, but, from their nature, are necessarily accompanied with affections and feelings'[11]. But he still regards them as judgments. In fact, as Alexander Broadie has shown convincingly, there is a close similarity of structure in the accounts Reid gives of sense perception on the one hand and moral sense on the other.[12]

But there is a puzzle here. Hume, as we noted, claims to found his account of morality on a simple observation of how, as a matter of fact, the human mind works. Among many of his contemporaries one of Reid's greatest achievements is also his championship of the science of mind. Paul Wood quotes Robert Eden Scott as saying 'it is to a name of so recent date as our countryman Reid that we are to consider [the science of mind] as indebted to so firm a foundation'[13]. But the passage from Reid quoted above raises this question. Is Reid's account of these 'first' principles of the mind any more than a matter of saying: these are the ways in which, as a matter of fact, the human mind typically works? If so, this, it seems, is just what Hume also says. Where, then, is the difference? Hume sets out to describe human nature because, he believes, this is the best foundation for natural philosophy and thus for the moral sciences. If he is right, we must rest content with how human beings do think as a matter of fact. We must resist any impulse to search out a deeper level of intelligibility. In response, and in opposition apparently, Reid argues that Hume's conclusions are unconvincing because they run contrary to the principles of how human beings think, and because there is no better ground upon which to base any reasoning. By routes that are different, no doubt, Hume the sceptical subverter of ordinary opinion, and Reid the rational defender of it, appear to have arrived at the same conclusion. But in this case, despite appearances and Reid's own understanding of the matter, there seems to be little to choose between philosophical scepticism and common sense.

Alexander Broadie has noted this same difficulty.

> That Reid thought there was indeed an opposition between himself and Hume … is not in doubt, but I wish to raise here a

[11] 'Essay on the Active Powers', *Collected Works,* p. 592.

[12] Alexander Broadie, 'Reid making sense of Moral Sense', *Reid Studies*, 1 (1998), pp. 5–16.

[13] Wood op. cit., p. 145.

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> question concerning precisely what the dispute was between the two men. We shall find it surprisingly difficult to answer that question.[14]

Of course it does not follow from this that there are no points of difference whatever. There may well be. But what does seem to follow is that the scope of these differences must be highly restricted and hence of very limited philosophical interest. Perhaps Hume has inadequately captured some of the basic features of the human mind or draws unwarranted inferences here and there. If so, on these points Reid (or anyone else) might set him right. Reid does indeed have interesting and important points to make about some of the details of Hume's argument. But such detailed investigation or even refutation is very far from the tone and purpose of Reid's attack. He clearly believes that Hume's error is in the foundation not the detail of his thought, that his starting point is wrong, and that this is why he makes the mistakes he does. If, as we seem to have found, Reid shares that very foundation and takes the very same tack—that is to say, Reid no less than Hume appeals to a science of human nature and denies the possibility of any further or better appeal—the dispute is without real philosophical substance and the greatest philosophical controversy of the Scottish Enlightenment, arguably of eighteenth century philosophy comes, in the end, to nothing.

III

Striking though this conclusion may be, I think further reflection shows it to be incorrect. Despite the care and clarity with which Reid writes and argues, there is not, as it seems to me, a definitive interpretation of all that he says, and accordingly it is possible that unwittingly he does indeed end up pretty close to Hume. If this is an accurate reading of the situation however, it is so only in so far as we rest content with the true observation that both Hume and Reid base their arguments on an appeal to human nature and both suppose that there is a clear sense in which no further rational basis is either possible or required. It follows from this that there is no fundamental difference between them only if we suppose that they are operating with the same conception of human nature. This, I think, is what is contestable.

[14] Alexander Broadie, *The Tradition of Scottish Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990), p. 115.

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We can find our starting point in the concept of judgment, which, as we have seen is the point at which Hume and Reid's account of morality seems to differ, because something of Reid's idea of human nature is revealed by the examples he gives of principles of judgment, the fundamental principles which control the operations of the human mind. Here is the first of them, together with his amplification and defence.

> I hold as a first principle, the existence of everything of which I am conscious…
>
> When a man is conscious of pain, he is certain of its existence, when he is conscious that he doubts or believes, he is certain of the existence of those operations …
>
> If any man could be found so frantic as to deny that he thinks, while he is conscious of it, I may wonder, I may laugh or I may pity him, but I cannot reason the matter with him. We have no common principles from which we may reason, and therefore can never join issue in an argument.[15]

This sort of argument is now quite familiar. It is not dissimilar to G. E. Moore's appeal to common sense, and it is still regularly reformulated as a way of refuting the sceptic. It can be given a more high flying transcendental, Kantian interpretation than Reid gives it[16], but its adequacy against the sceptic is not my principal concern here. I want rather to point out that the derangement of the man Reid imagines—what is lacking in him—is not an operation of the mind, *empirically* conceived, but a failure to adhere to a normative principle of reason. He still speaks, thinks, puts sentences together, makes claims, certainly, and if such cases were at all common, their examination would have its place in a scientific study of mental processes. However, the point is that if, like Hume, we confined ourselves to experience and observation, we should *have* to record them as phenomena to be included, and eventually incorporated, in a psychological, perhaps in the end a neurophysiological, theory of the working of the human mind. If *this* is what we mean by human nature, then such strange and unusual phenomena would be part of it. Within this perspective, Hume is entirely consistent. From the point of view of the empirically observable, these or any other abnormal operations are no more and no less, workings of the human mind. So too with strange or unusual desires. However statistically abnormal, they are no less desires, and so no less entitled

[15] Reid, op. cit., pp. 266–7.

[16] An illuminating comparison of Reid and Kant in this regard is to be found in Andrew Seth, *On the Scottish Philosophy* (Blackwood, 1885).

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to be listed as amongst the observed phenomena of human nature. Hume is willing to describe them as unreasonable, though not irrational; in a famous example he asserts, ''tis not contary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger'[17]. But the important point is that he cannot lend any *normative* interpretation to the term 'unreasonable'. It means no more than unusual.

By contrast, on at least one interpretation, Reid describes the principles of the mind in normative terms. So, for instance, his seventh principle reads 'that the natural faculties, by which we distinguish truth from error, are not fallacious'. Notice that 'the natural faculties' referred to are faculties of distinguishing truth from error. They are not simply causal powers of belief formation, which might or might not reflect truth. The ideas of truth and error figure in the delineation of the faculties themselves. Whether it is right or not to call the enumeration of such faculties an exercise in the 'science of mind' does not matter much. If it is, this is clearly a science of a different order than the Newtonian mechanics on which Hume models his inquiry. The difference is confirmed by further consonant remarks of Reid's. At another place in the same essay he says that the first principles he enumerates are 'all fitted by Nature to produce belief in the human mind'. 'Fitted by' is a most un-Humean expression in this context, and this is because it is normative.

To appreciate the contrast I am trying to make explicit compare a different case. Suppose we are explaining the workings of the internal combustion engine. In saying that this part does this and that, that, we are not engaged in generalizing inductively from the operations of a finite set of actual car engines. If we were, then our claims might be refuted by facts about the behaviour of some of them. However, as far as the facts of experience go, some engines work well and others work badly. To make this sort of functional differentiation, we need to understand how an internal combustion engine works, and this means understanding its general design, not recording the actual operations of particular engines. The 'evidence' of an engine that works differently from the standard, is not evidence contrary to claims about its function because it may be malfunctioning. If it is, the facts of its operation can be discounted. Or rather, it is precisely in so far as we have grasped the nature of a properly working engine—the norm—that we are in a position to understand an aberrant one as defective. Understanding the formative principles of design is a precondition of understanding and

[17] *Treatise,* Bk II, Pt 3, Sect iii, p. 416.

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explaining what is happening in the particular case. The facts of the particular case do not establish, or undermine, the adequacy of those principles. Where standards of manufacture are low, it may be that most actual engines fail to realize their principles of design.

To understand an engine is to think in terms of function, purpose and design relationships. An engine fails when it does not do what it is supposed to. Its nature, properly speaking, lies in its intended operation, not its actual operation. Hume's error from Reid's point of view (if this is a correct interpretation of Reid) is, ironically, that he tries to derive an 'ought' from an 'is'—and fails of course. Reasoning employs normative conceptions at its heart, and the most we can do, at some point or other, is recount these conceptions. Any attempt to provide an account of rational structures in terms of observable events must be inadequate.

Consider, in the light of these remarks, something Reid says about the principle 'those things really did happen which I distinctly remember'.

> Suppose that a learned counsel, in defence of a client against the concurring testimony of witnesses of credit, should insist upon a new topic to invalidate the testimony. 'Admitting' says he 'the integrity of the witnesses, and that they distinctly remember what they have given in evidence—it does not follow that the prisoner is guilty. It has never been proved that the most distinct memory may not be fallacious. Show me any necessary connection between the act of mind which we call memory, and the past existence of the event remembered. No man has ever offered a shadow of an argument to prove such a connection; yet this is one link of the chain of proof against the prisoner and if it have no strength the whole proof falls to the ground…'
>
> I believe we may take it for granted, that this argument from a learned counsel would have no other effect upon the judge and jury, than to convince them that he was disordered in his judgment.[18]

This could be interpreted as a relatively straightforward appeal to common sense, the sense of the ordinary man, against the idle abstractions of the philosophers, something similar to Dr Johnson's famous 'refutation' of Berkeleyan idealism[19]. What Reid goes on to

[18] Ibid., p. 270.

[19] Kant's strictures on common sense fit Johnson much better than they do Reid. They were in fact prompted by Beattie. Whether or not Beattie (described by Hume as 'silly and bigoted') deserves the same opprobrium is a more difficult question.

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say lends some support to this interpretation. Nevertheless, an important point to note is that what common sense is persuaded of here is not that the counsel's claim is false, but that he is disordered in his judgment—he is not reasoning *well*. Reid has further things to say about the precise analysis of this disorder. However, these further remarks only underline, by explicating, the idea that the conflict with common sense is not first and foremost a conflict with propositions to which most people unreflectively assent, but a conflict with forms of reasoning that are taken as basic. In other words, it is the reasoning that is absurd, not the propositions it gives rise to. This is a crucial difference in the use that is made of the appeal to common sense. As Reid puts it, with respect to the legal example he gives 'Counsel is allowed to plead every thing for a client that is *fit* to persuade' (my italics). In short, Hume's reasoning, and in general the reasoning which supports the theory of ideas, is not being conducted as it *ought*.

If this is correct, a proper account of human nature cannot be arrived at by experience and observation, at least not as Hume means this. Any record of how human minds work as a matter of observable fact will include the defective as well as the properly functioning. To treat the defective on a par with the properly functioning for the purposes of rational assessment is absurd. It has error built into it. But this is just what Hume does. Since from the point of view of the empiricist method, everything that can be observed is of equal scientific standing, it is inevitable that Hume should fail to uncover rational procedures and be led to fall back on generalized custom or habit.

But if Hume's empiricist method necessarily cannot give an account of human nature of the sort Reid invokes, what can? In the case of the engine it was said: An engine fails when it does not do what it is supposed to. Its nature, properly speaking, lies in its intended operation, not its actual operation. By parity of reasoning, human nature, on this alternative interpretation, lies in its intended operation, not its actual operation.

This interpretation of Reid is given considerable support by a remark of one of Reid's contemporaries, Thomas Gordon, also Regent at King's College Aberdeen. According to Gordon, 'the only way prior to revelation, by which we can discover the proper business or duty of man is to consider the real constitution of his nature; and from what it leads him to, to deduce *what he was designed for*'[20] (my emphasis). What this remark reveals is a conception of human nature quite at odds with Hume's.

[20] Quoted in Wood, op. cit., p. 144.

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In the case of the engine, its nature in the sense of its proper functioning is that intended by the designer. For Reid, there is no less a designer of human nature than of other artefacts, namely God.

In the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* Hume uses the expression 'the Author of Nature'. So does Reid in the *Essays*. In the mouth of Hume it is no more than an idea. In Reid, there is every reason to think, it is a reality. Here, arguably, we find the fundamental difference between them. Scientific inquiry for Hume is a matter of discovering observable, brute fact. For Reid it is a matter of uncovering providential design. This difference colours their respective philosophies. In particular, I suggest, it results in radically alternative conceptions of human nature, which in turn explains why, despite many appearances of convergence, they are in the end as fundamentally opposed as they supposed themselves to be.

It would be wrong to claim for these observations too great a novelty. Broadie's solution to the puzzle about the dispute between Reid and Hume is somewhat similar. 'Hume faced with the full list of Reid's principle's of common sense would say yes to all of them. The philosophy starts after that. It is plausible to maintain that for Reid, not philosophy but theology starts after that'.[21] But if my contention that at the heart of the dispute lie rival conceptions of human nature is sound, this is not correct. Hume could only accept Reid's list by re-interpreting them, by understanding them to be empirical generalizations about the actual operations of the human mind, rather than the regulative principles of its proper operation, which is how the normative language he employs implies that Reid understands them. The question arises as to which is the more adequate conception of course. At this point, however, *pace* Broadie, Reid's arguments are *not* theological, but moral philosophical, that is, having to do with standards of intelligibility. I have no doubt that Broadie is right in supposing that Reid took theology seriously in a way that Hume did not. But for all that, the difference between them with respect to human nature, and hence the 'science of mind' of which they both have high expectations, is a difference between philosophical conceptions and not between philosophy and theology.

My conclusion is this. When Scottish moral philosophy is characterized as introducing and deploying an idea of moral sense, this claim, so far as it goes, is true. But once we look a little closer we can see that, despite the similarities of first appearances, the interpreta-

[21] Broadie, op. cit., p. 118.

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tion of this idea which made it part of the wider conception of 'Common Sense' philosophy is not that which figures in the more famous contentions of Hume. Most people, I imagine, think that Hume's belief that morality is a matter of feeling *rather than* judgment is central to the moral philosophy of the period. But while it may be true that his is the more prominent view (nowadays), that of the Common Sense school construes moral feeling as the *outcome of* judgment. More importantly, Hume's being in the minority on this point is no accident. It arises from a radical difference behind an otherwise superficial agreement that the proper way to do moral philosophy is as a branch of the science of mind, a methodology that Hume interpreted in a way quite at odds with that of his contemporaries.

University of Aberdeen

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