A Humean Interpretation of Feminism

The ethical theories of the Scottish Enlightenment especially David Hume's seems to have a chronological problem. In many ways it was overshadowed by preceding Kant and the grounding of morality in rationality. But along comes feminism with its complex discussion from various perspectives wanting adjustments to the foundations of morality to include such things as care, real life experiences, and an ongoing growth in self awareness of who we are and can become. Alas, the cracks in a Kantian rights and justice approach are shown as incomplete or at the least lacking in its applicability to everyday lives specifically the lives of women and families. Not all feminists recognize that Hume's theory is not a part of the progression toward a rights or justice perspective. The characterization of the enlightenment made by Johann Meechan is not uncommon. Meechan writes, "the Enlightenment story of the gradual and inevitable progress of reason and its concomitant notions of human rights….The metaphysics in which they are grounded are no longer persuasive…"[1] Even though Hume is a part of the enlightenment he would agree with Meechan about the inadequacy of the rights approach.

Hume would have been supportive of feminist scholarship specifically in the area of ethical theory. The conversations forced by feminist scholars is exactly what Hume describes as the best way to knowledge of ourselves and our world and our developing moral sentiments….that is that we learn through relationships and conversation with others. The process by which feminist scholars have earned respect

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and forced cultural progress in women's rights and recognition of women's ideas is in actuality a Humean one. It is Humean because, for Hume, our understanding of ourselves and our morality and political selves change in response to conversation and relationships with others. Feminist understandings and discussions of justice and care and the complex distinction between social construction and the development of what we understand ourselves to be in relation to others are themes feminists have in common with Hume. Feminists force the important (but, unfortunately, not always welcome) conversation and intellectual relationships. As a result individuals (men and women alike) have to face and define themselves and others in a new way. I might add also that in some cases the realizations can be more painful for women and as a result they can be less welcoming to this forced mirroring of who they are and could be than some men are. So we learn and change as Hume explains we do in the company of others. Not as victims of unchangeable social constructs as some scholars would have us believe Hume to be describing but as persons in community and as part of the process of individuals relating to others learning about what we are and what we can be as developing beings not ever statically defined.

There is an important distinction that both Hume's moral theory and feminist theory makes concerning the individual. Neither encourages the promotion or specific priority of individual rights or for a type of Kantian kingdom of ends. Yet, the individual is important in the forming of sentiments, as individuals relating to each other, real individuals in experience with others. This is not the social construct of moral sentiments so often an incomplete characterization of Hume's theory but rather intersubjective moral sentiments formed in the company of others. It is also in

opposition to a static imposed social construct of gender identity discussed and objected to by many feminists.

Catharine MacKinnon describes a construction of women's identity and roles as a response to men being in control. "The centrality of sexuality emerges not from Freudian conceptions but from feminists practice or diverse issues, including abortion, birth control, sterilization abuse, domestic battery, rape …and pornography….Taken together, they are producing a feminist political theory centering upon sexuality: its social determination, daily construction, birth to death expression and ultimately male control." [2] This construction continues, for MacKinnon, to leave out the very possibility of women's sexual identity defined in their terms and not as a male projection. "If women are socially defined such that female sexuality cannot be lived or spoken or felt or even somatically sensed apart from its enforced definition, so that it is its own lack, then there is no such thing as women as such, there are only walking embodiments of men's projected needs." [3] Women, for MacKinnon, cannot separate their idea of themselves from whether they have power not only politically but over their own sexuality or sexual identity. "To say the personal is political means that gender as a division of power is discoverable and verifiable through women's intimate experience of sexual objectification, which is definitive of and synonymous with women's lives as gender females." [4]

Sandra Bartky agrees with Mac Kinnon that "[w]e are born male or female, but not masculine or feminine. Femininity is an artifice, an achievement…" [5] Bartky using Foucault's method of describing persons as being disciplined by culture, institutions, schools etc. to be 'docile bodies' – describes how women's identity and

bodies are controlled and influenced by society and its institutions in a sense anonymously. Judith Butler sees the need for this social construct of gender identity to be understood so that one's sex and the social image that we in a sense inherit through social institutions can be seen as exactly that…constructed and open to a new construction, development and change. "The tacit constraints that produce culturally intelligible 'sex' ought to be understood as generative political structures rather than naturalized foundations. Paradoxically, the reconceptualization of identity as an effect, that is, as produced or generated, opens up possibilities of 'agency' that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed."[6] For Butler, the task for feminists is not to rid women of social construction as if there is an identity without it but to be a part of the construction in a real and dynamic way. In a recognizable Humean style, Butler states that "[t]here is no self that is prior to the convergence (of what Bulter calls discourse routes which are various repetitious practices that serve to define oneself such as being a good mother or a fit worker) or …prior to its entrance into this conflicted cultural field." [7] There is for Butler no pre-discursive "I." Hume would agree that the self is a result of one's experiences in relation to others and one's society.

According to Terence Penelhum, two ideas are at the heart of Hume's moral psychology, one of them is "his view of the self." [8] According to Penelhum, Hume designed his moral psychology "to accommodate the phenomena of our daily experience." Hume, Penelhum continues, "seeks to support them [moral conventions of common sense] anew on foundations of experiment and observation." [9] These experiences, Penelhum wrote of as so important to Hume, must occur with others.

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Penelhum later in his article specifically added the involvement of others to Hume's view of how we see ourselves. According to Penelhum,

> …my own pride is in part the product of the mentality of others, not only my own…my emotional life is such that I shall pride myself on those qualities or objects for which others admire me and be ashamed of those qualities or objects for which they hate (or despise) me. They are co-creators of my self-image.… [10]

Here Penelhum explained the profound influence Hume claimed others have on a person's self-image. Penelhum called this a type of social construction. Yet, it is not only society at large that influences a person's development and self-development but also and necessarily personal relating and observing of others. Penelhum used the following Hume statement to support this. Notice that Hume was speaking of relationships with and observations of others, mirrors through which we see ourselves.

> In general we may remark, that the minds of men are mirrors to one another, not only because they reflect each others emotions, but also because those rays of passions, sentiments and opinions may be often reverberated, and may decay away by insensible degrees" [11]

This process of self formation is described in Susan Brison's article [12] on trauma victims which is a metaphysical approach to personal identity that is not uncommon in feminist scholarship. In Brison's account the self is formed and continues to form over time in "relations to others and sustained in the social context…the self is viewed in an ongoing way, not only because others continue to shape and define us through our lifetimes, but also because our own sense of self is couched in descriptions whose meanings are social phenomena…." [13] In the same article Brison describes a relational account of, strangely enough, autonomy also defended by Virginia Held "in which autonomy does not consist of putting walls

around oneself and one's property…but instead forming essential relationship with others." [14]

Feminist scholarship is in essence doing exactly what Hume claims is done as humans continually define themselves and develop their idea of the self and their sentiments of morality. Feminists are mirroring back to their communities both physically and intellectually what it is that they are and so allowing for change and development in self realization. This is the conversation and the relationships Hume argues are necessary for knowledge of oneself.

A dynamic relatedness to others is central to who we are and are becoming, for Hume. Describing the relations of resemblance and contiguity Hume explained how we learn and grow in the company of others.

> All these relations [family, countrymen, "all human creatures"] when united together, convey the impression or consciousness of our own person to the idea of the sentiments or passions of others, and makes us conceive them in the strongest and most lively manner. [15]

Hume saw the company of others as important to a person's development of sympathies and sentiments.

> Whatever other passions we may be actuated by; pride, ambition, avarice, curiosity, revenge or lust; the soul or animating principle of them all is sympathy; nor wou'd they have any force, were we to abstract entirely from the thoughts and sentiments of others (T 2.2.5.15, 363). [16]

We develop these very human characteristics in the company of others. Sharing in the humanity of others enlarges our own sense of our individual humanity.

Our interest in maintaining relationships with others is central to our moral determinations. "[T]hat every thing, which contributes to the happiness of society, recommends itself directly to our approbation and good will. Here is a principle, which accounts, in great part, for the origin of morality…" [17] Central to what it is we

approve of morally is, for Hume, related to and also a direct response to what we understand is good for others. There are a number of aspects to how our relationships with others influence us. Relations influence us because they are part of our life. We want others in our lives. So we are influenced to please others so that we can have relationships with them. For Hume, characteristics not necessarily offensive to us individually become offensive when considered in relation to others.

> Our fancy easily changes its situation; and either surveying ourselves as we appear to others, or considering others as they feel themselves, makes us enter, by that means, into sentiments, which no way belong to us, and in which nothing but sympathy is able to interest us. And this sympathy we sometimes carry so far, as even to be displeas'd with a quality commodious to us, merely because it displeases others, and renders us disagreeable in their eyes; tho' perhaps we never can have any interest in rendering ourselves agreeable to them. [18]

Even when we do not care specifically for the approval of certain others, their tastes and opinions still influence us.

Does Hume, though, include women as influential especially since Hume in some sense seems to consider women to be not individually but in general inferior? This issue is discussed by Joyce Jenkins and Robert Shaver. [19] There are some inconsistencies in Hume as to whether women are capable of resistance to or influencing male power and control since according to Hume they can and do make their resentments felt. Unfortunately though it was through their charms, for Hume, rather than the scholarship feminists have used to "make their resentments felt" clearly and effectively. The dispute that Jenkins and Shaver write of specifically though is whether Hume thought justice was the correct way to resolve gender inequality which was John Stuart Mill's claim. Hume argues that "we should be bound by the laws of humanity to give gentile usage to these creatures, but should

not, properly speaking, lie under any restraint of justice with regard to them…" [20] Jenkins and Shaver characterize this as Hume's preference to humanity and that "to prefer humanity to justice is to prefer humanity to the introduction of property rights." [21] There is no question that Mill's argument was an appeal for justice rather than relying on the goodness of individuals. For Mill, putting laws in place would protect women and give them legal power. But though arguing for justice he necessarily has to be appealing to men's humanity. An appeal to justice is only effective if one can argue that women are included based on laws already written. For example, to make a justice argument would be to claim that women are entitled to legal protection because they fit the definition of those who are protected. This can be a problem if the present laws are interpreted or written to exclude women. If the existing laws make it impossible to make a connection to them then the argument must necessarily be to the humanity of those who make the laws and are in power. This would be the case in countries where women are not protected and their laws make a justice argument impossible. To add laws protecting women in those countries would only be accomplished by appealing to their humanity or to their mutual benefit. Hume preferred the former. His account of the necessity of appealing to the sentiment of humanity of those in power could possibly be less preference than a point of reality. Those not protected by justice even in a tangential way must appeal to the humanity of those who are in power in order to secure the protections they desire.

The concept of justice along with care and caring are recurring themes in feminist scholarship especially in regard to feminist moral theories. Even though feminists differ the complexity that feminists bring to the conversation of these issues

and of morality in general seems again to have distinct Humean characteristics. Elizabeth Kiss finds the problem with justice its abstractness and prefers to "make justice more contextual." [22] For Kiss, justice begins with an "understanding of the lives of those about whom they theorize." [23] And, for Laurie Shrage, it is a problem for feminists whether to ask for equal justice with the same rules for men and women or a justice that recognizes a difference between men and women and therefore needing different rules to be in fact equal. [24] This conversation again demands the setting of justice and care in response to the understanding that we have of each other. Virginia Held's article on "Rights" asks that feminine moral theory "develop formulations of care and reconceptualize…justice." [25] For Held, "[a]n ethic of care values connections between persons, in contrast with what is seen as the excessive individualism of dominant moral theories." [26] This is in opposition to relying on rules which for some feminists is a typical approach to morality. Yet justice and rights need definition as "[w]omen and children clearly need greater justice in the household" as well as in their public life. [27] Hume would agree with Held and also be particularly in agreement with Joan Tronto [28] in her characterizing of responsiveness and the need for it in our moral development. Tronto describes responsiveness as a way

> we consider the other's position as that other expresses it.
> Thus, one is engaged from the standpoint of the other, but not
> simply be presuming that the other is exactly like the self.
> From such a perspective, we may well imagine that questions
> of otherness would be more adequately addressed than they
> are in current moral frameworks that presume that people are
> interchangeable. [29]

In spite of this ongoing dispute about whether care should be the centerpiece of feminist ethics, feminists do seem to agree that situational context, real relationships and dialogue are important aspects of ethical foundations. Hume also set

the development of ethical sentiments in interpersonal relations, seeing ourselves in others and developing a moral sense in response to our interaction with others.

Hume, though, would disagree that, as Tronto expresses it, "[c]are arises out of the fact that not all humans or others or objects in the world are equally able, at all times, to take care of themselves." [30] Tronto goes on to explain that it is inequality that makes care necessary. Hume argues that the origin of care is instinctual. And from this, the human moral sentiments develop making the care of others or concern for the welfare of others a moral issue. Tronto ties the understanding of the care of others to women specifically and then not as a moral choice, "[i]f care is tied to the 'naturalness' of women's caring then it is either instinctive, or deeply social or cultural behavior, and therefore not a part of the realm of moral choices." [31] Of course, I have some sympathy to this view that the care for others is a womanly thing developed in a society where women, at least the supposedly virtuous ones, are those who care for others. Catharine MacKinnon writes of this more powerfully than Tronto wondering whether women are even aware of their authentic voices or what they would truly chose if they were not so culturally predisposed to the caring role. For MacKinnon women will not know or be able to express their view until they are politically equal. "Take your foot off our necks, then we will hear in what tongue we speak." [32] This is not completely in opposition to Hume who believes that we all have the instinct to care; yet, it can be and is commonly more developed in some people and can be silenced in others. That the development of our natural caring could be activated to be dominant in one gender and quieter or perhaps silenced in

another would be compatible with Hume's theory on the innate concern for the welfare of others.

Andrea Maihofer advocates for a "critical analysis and transformation of essential structural elements of dominant morality (for example, the traditional notion of universalism) in order to make them available for new uses." [33] Hume would read this and wonder why his own carefully crafted theory of universal moral sentiments would not be exactly what would solve Maihofer's demands for a less "monistic conception of universalism and its belief that there can be only one morality or none at all." Hume's theory of moral universality is one that changes with our own self knowledge and that of others. The universality becomes more understandable in its grounding in human nature without an externally impressed rule not related to actual human sentiments and moral tastes. Hume's universality does not preclude rather as a seeming contradiction allows and even demands change and progression in moral sentiments.

According to Alix Cohen (2000), Hume is able to bridge the gap between a stable and fundamental human nature and the possibility for moral progress. For Cohen, in spite of moral progress not being stated explicitly in Hume, the idea of a changing and improving morality was a consistent theme in his work. Cohen sums up what Hume accomplishes in the following statement. Cohen wrote, "that the principles of human nature are in themselves uniform, but that their practical realization differs according to particular circumstances." [34] Cohen listed the two seemingly incompatible notions that Hume's theory included.

1. Human nature must in some way be uniform to allow the possibility of moral judgments by independent spectators.

2. Human nature should not be so immutable that it would not allow the possibility of progress in general and of a progress in morals in particular. [35]

In order to accomplish these two characteristics, Cohen claims, Hume must allow that the stable human nature, specifically moral attitudes and judgments must be influenced by three things: 1. situations and circumstances, 2. education and experiences, 3. progress of civilization. Clearly anything that causes change in the moral sentiments would allow that progress is possible. What Cohen establishes in her criteria is that the change actually is in response to what it means to be human in the community of others. She has generally summed up the many things that can influence people into these three categories. Cohen claimed Hume to have included all three of the characteristics necessary to have a possible theory of moral progressivism. Hume, then, has, according to Cohen, a sound basis for moral progress while maintaining an understandable universal human constitution. The possibility of moral standards and sentiments changing and evolving is what is necessary for feminist moral approaches to be considered and effectively accepted.

Like feminists, Hume, according to Cohen, used the observations made in real experiences to discover what characteristics humankind shares. Hume's words that follow support Cohen's claim.[36]

> By means of this guide [the principle of human nature], we mount up to the knowledge of men's inclinations and motives, from actions, expressions, and even gestures, and again, descend to the interpretation of their actions from our knowledge of their motives and inclinations. The general observations, treasured up by a course of experience, give us the clue of human nature, and teach us to unravel its intricacies. [37]

What Hume found in these observations is that humankind shares sentiments of pleasure and pain. The first—pleasure—is in response to the agreeableness of an

action, the later—pain—to a disagreeable/vicious action. These sentiments are the universal commonality in humankind. Again, people learn about and develop even a more extended version of this commonality in the company of others. Clearly this human development influences what it is people understand in themselves and others. This would make a progressive morality possible in response to this expansion of human commonality and knowledge, especially human self-knowledge and in response to feminist scholarship giving perspectives necessary to expand our understanding of ourselves in a complexity that deepens and forces a new awareness.

Cohen called the way the human mind and awareness develops "the 'perfectibility' of the human mind." [38] Cohen referred to an explanation of this process in Hume's *Enquiry of Concerning Human Understanding*. It is a long and specific footnote in which Hume among other things wrote "books and conversation enlarge much more the sphere of one man's experience and thought than those of another." [39] Here, Hume was specifically referring to the understanding as a faculty that is developed given certain types of circumstances. Hume explained, "It would be easy to discover many other circumstances that make a difference in the understanding of me." [40] The process is not a complicated one to observe what circumstances and experiences influence the development of the human mind or as Cohen stated, "the 'perfectibility' of the human mind." [41] Cohen claimed that this same dynamic operates in the case of one's moral feelings. "Accordingly, one's moral feelings are susceptible to improvement, and also to degradation." [42]

John McDowell also discussed the Humean idea of a combination between human subjective reflection and the states of affairs that are observed and participated

in and called it a "new creation." [43] For McDowell, this is an intricate and complex relation that, in itself, in the interfacing, becomes a "new creation." This, for McDowell, is a better way to view the relationship of human ethical sensibility and the object of approval or disapproval than calling the process a projection or trying to place ethical sentiments in one place or another. It is a dynamic process of morality that Hume's account not only allows but also demands. It is this dynamic process feminist scholars are involved in.

On a final note I do not think it is necessarily important to a feminist if David Hume would have agree or disagreed with them or that the feminist scholarship could be arguably described as Humean. It may not matter if anyone in history agrees with a new idea or social or intellectual movement. But it matters to me because as I see that the conversations forced by the feminist scholars have changed the social, moral, political, religious and legal cultures to include the voices and experiences of women. This points to Hume being correct in that our moral sentiments change and develop as we continuingly learn from each other in conversation and in relationships. Feminist scholarship in its many forms whether focusing on care or a new approach to justice is a revisit to the values and priorities that were at the heart of ethical theory during the Scottish Enlightenment especially David Hume's.

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