

# How We Are Moral: Benevolence, Utility, and Self-Love in Hobbes and Hume

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**ABSTRACT:** In this paper, I reconstruct Hobbes' theory of self-love. I then examine Hume's arguments that (i) self-love does not properly account for moral behavior and (ii) self-love is unnecessary for moral theory. I argue that Hobbesian self-love can account for both of Hume's objections. Further, I use an analysis of Hobbes' *Deliberation* to show, contra Hume, that self-love does not entail a lack of intention in moral action.

## A Brief Overview Of Hume's Moral Philosophy

David Hume grounds his moral theory in the benevolent nature of humans, which he supports with an argument against the theory of self-love. Self-love, which can also be referred to as psychological egoism,<sup>1</sup> "accounts for every moral sentiment by the principle of self-love," or the ultimate concern with one's own happiness and preservation.<sup>2</sup> His moral theory is based on utility, which means that all social virtues are defined by their usefulness

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1. Hume uses the term "self-love" in writing, but for the purposes of this paper I will use the synonymic term "psychological egoism" interchangeably with self-love.

2. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Ed. Tom L. Beauchamp, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998): 109.



## ***How We Are Moral***

to the individual or the society. Hume posited that morality is determined by man's naturally occurring sentiments rather than reason because pleasant sentiments indicate traits that are useful, such as prudence, courage, kindness, and honesty.<sup>3</sup> These virtues inspire "our approbation and goodwill" because they "contribute to the happiness of society."<sup>4</sup> However, our approval of these virtues, and in turn our concern with the welfare of society, is motivated by benevolence because the "principles of humanity and sympathy enter so deeply into all our sentiments."<sup>5</sup> In other words, man values and praises what is beneficial to him and his fellow men because of his love for humanity. Hume's theory suggests that "desires and aversions themselves are the main motivating forces" of moral behavior because of their role in moral evaluation.<sup>6</sup> However, unlike Hobbes, Hume posits that these desires and aversions are prompted by external events according to man's benevolence, including more specifically sentiments of sympathy, humanity, and natural concern for the welfare of others.

### **Hobbes' Moral Philosophy**

Both Hume and Hobbes believe that moral virtues are based in utility and underscored by the passions. However, their views diverge when it comes to accounting for the mechanisms that motivate adherence to utility, i.e. how and why the passions are related to moral behavior. Although Hobbes does not make an explicit argument for self-love, his argument promoting the notion can be presented as follows: notions of desire and pleasure proceed from nature or experience, and desire and pleasure necessarily relate to what is good for the preservation and happiness of the individual; and since what we consider to be moral virtues are ultimately derived from notions of expected desire and pleasure, it must follow that moral virtues

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3. *Ibid.*, 160.

4. *Ibid.*, 109.

5. *Ibid.*, 117.

6. Alan H. Goldman, *Moral Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 1988): 55.

are ultimately rooted in what is good for the preservation and happiness of the individual, i.e. what is in the individual's self-interest. On a slightly different but equally important note, Hobbes' argument promoting self-love in moral action can be presented as follows: moral actions are voluntary actions, and "all voluntary actions aim at happiness or at some good to the agent."<sup>7</sup> Voluntary actions necessarily arise from "Appetites to the thing propounded," as well as, "Aversion, or Feare of those consequences that follow the omission."<sup>8</sup> When actions are motivated by appetites or aversions, the object of the action is "[an individual's] own Good."<sup>9</sup> It follows then, that the object of all moral actions is personal good.

Like Hume, Hobbes posits that moral decisions rely on the passions. Hobbes explains that "whatsoever is the object of any man's Appetite or Desire" is that "which he for his part calleth Good."<sup>10</sup> In other words, positive emotions and the desires associated with them lead man to a conception of what is moral, and likewise aversions to what is immoral, because values like "Good" and "Evil" are "not to be found in the objects themselves."<sup>11</sup> The passions are guides towards self-preservation in that "what men feel strongly about or desire strongly is what helps them to survive."<sup>12</sup> In this way, Hobbes can be seen as a subtle egoist. However, it should be noted that Hobbes is not advocating an image of man as guided blindly by his emotions; according to Goldman, "the interpretation of good as the object of rational desire is coherent with Hobbes' overall moral theory and psychology."<sup>13</sup> Desires, or appetites, can be rational or irrational, and a rational desire is one that "[results] from a precedent Deliberation,"

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7. Goldman, *Moral Knowledge*, 24

8. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991): 36.

9. *Ibid.*, 83.

10. *Ibid.*, 32.

11. Goldman, *Moral Knowledge*, 20.

12. Richard Tuck, "Hobbes on Skepticism and Moral Conflict," in Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Tuck, 341.

13. Goldman, 30.



## ***How We Are Moral***

which is essentially a sequence of alternating appetites resulting in the act of willing.<sup>14</sup>

Hobbes and Hume agree that virtues are such because of their utility.<sup>15</sup> For Hobbes, moral virtues are derived from the state of nature and are considered good, or moral, because “the practice of them conduces to peace, which every man must acknowledge to be good” by virtue of its usefulness to both the individual and other members of society.<sup>16</sup> According to John Kemp, Hobbes did not seek to simply “derive my moral obligation to keep my promise from the purely selfish consideration that I shall be worse off if I do not.”<sup>17</sup> Rather, in the context of Hobbes’ commonwealth, there is an “identity of interest” between the individual and the public insofar as the security of the individual depends on the security of others;<sup>18</sup> likewise, the happiness of the individual is dependent on the happiness of others, and because happiness cannot be cultivated without security, it must sometimes be the case that an individual sacrifices immediate pleasure for the “Expectation [of happiness or security], that proceeds from foresight of the End.”<sup>19</sup>

### **Hume’s Argument Against Self-Love: Scope**

Hume allows that self-love is a principle of human nature.<sup>20</sup> However, in Hume’s philosophy, self-love is not a moral principle, and in fact “competes with moral principles such as benevolence.”<sup>21</sup> According to Hume, thinkers like Hobbes deduce the motive of self-love because they observe that virtues have “a tendency to encrease the happiness [of man-

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14. Hume, *Enquiry*, 109.

15. John Kemp, *Ethical Naturalism: Hobbes and Hume* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1970):19.

16. *Ibid.*, 19.

17. *Ibid.*, 18.

18. *Ibid.*, 20.

19. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 33.

20. Tom L. Beauchamp, “Introduction,” in Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Beauchamp, 24.

21. *Ibid.*, 24.

kind]”, whereas vices contribute to “the misery of mankind.”<sup>22</sup> From these observations, egoists then discern the existence of a “union of interest” between the public and private as simply “modifications of self-love.”<sup>23</sup> Hume agrees with philosophers like Hobbes that, “the interest of the individual is, in general, so closely connected with that of the community,” but it does not follow from this that all interest for others is nothing but redirected self-love.<sup>24</sup> All humans have some degree of concern for public interest, and it is this aspect of human nature that Hume sees as problematic for an egoist account. Hume sees self-love as a theory that renders public interest, when separate from our own, “entirely indifferent to us,” which we can easily observe to be false.<sup>25</sup>

It should be noted that Hume’s argument does not directly engage Hobbes, although his argument is likely a response to a theory of self-love like that presented by Hobbes. The principle of self-love that Hume argues against is not exactly the same principle that Hobbes advocates; however, the basic principle that all actions are motivated by self-interest is held in common. Hume’s argument against the version of self-love that he presents rings true in many ways. However, due to its narrow conception, by itself it does not seem to say much. Hobbes’ version of self-love is more robust than Hume’s, and when the two are pitted against one another, we can gain a greater understanding of the nature of moral action.

In essence, Hume’s argument against self-love can be divided into two main points: (a) the principle of self-love is not a moral principle because it is limited in its ability to account for moral behavior (and thus it is faulty); and (b) it is unnecessary for moral theory. First, Hume argues that self-love is limited in calling upon “the voice of nature and experience [which] seems to plainly oppose the selfish theory.”<sup>26</sup> For Hume, the

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22. Hume, *Enquiry*, 108.

23. *Ibid.*, 108.

24. *Ibid.*, 108.

25. *Ibid.*, 109.

26. *Ibid.*, 106.



## ***How We Are Moral***

theory of self-love is faulty because (i) of instances in which the interest of the individual is either separate or wholly opposed to that of the public, “and yet we observe the moral sentiment to continue” in the interest of the public despite its opposition to private interest;<sup>27</sup> and (ii) spectators enjoy and praise the virtues or moral actions of others even though it has no effect whatsoever of the spectators themselves, and thus yields no benefit for the spectators.<sup>28</sup>

Hume argues (i) with examples in which there is disunity between public and private interest. Self-love cannot account for a situation in which a mother, for example, sacrifices her own interest and well-being to take care of her sick child.<sup>29</sup> In this case, the private interest of the mother is at odds with the comparatively public interest of the child, and yet the mother’s moral sentiment leads her to attend to her child’s interest. Hume cites this as a case of benevolence divorced from self-love,<sup>30</sup> for it seems that compromising one’s health and wellbeing for that of someone else cannot be rooted in self-love.

In Hume’s second objection (ii) to the scope of self-love, he argues that “it can never be self-love which renders the prospect of [another’s virtuous character] agreeable to us, the spectators, and prompts our esteem and approbation,” because there is nothing in it for the spectator.<sup>31</sup> While the virtuous agent enjoys the advantages of his character and the recipient of his actions enjoys their utility, the spectator gains nothing by means of utility or good moral character by his approbation of the virtuous agent’s actions. Rather, Hume claims that spectators enjoy moral behavior because of the “pleasing sentiment of sympathy and humanity” that the observation inspires due to man’s benevolent nature;<sup>32</sup> it is this sentiment of sympathy that is necessary in order to qualify a “genuine moral evaluation.”<sup>33</sup>

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27. *Ibid.*, 109.

28. *Ibid.*, 119.

29. *Ibid.*, 167.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*, 119.

32. *Ibid.*, *Moral Knowledge*, 120.

33. Goldman, 63.

Although instances like the mother who sacrifices herself for her child in (i) ring true to human nature and provide a strong objection to self-love, when considered from a Hobbesian point of view, they can be related to self-love. For example, Hobbes claims that man endeavors to do what contributes to his good so far as he is able to anticipate.<sup>34</sup> The motivation of voluntary actions by appetites and aversions is a process described as follows: people develop an opinion “of the likelihood of attaining what they desire” through deliberation and act based on this likelihood.<sup>35</sup> In this case, the mother’s desire is the welfare of her child. The mother can be seen as acting out of self-love because “the satisfaction of desires for the welfare of others would count as contributing to an agent’s good on [Hobbes’] view.”<sup>36</sup> This is not to say that the mother is not acting morally, or that she lacks genuine concern for her child. In Hobbes’ view, benevolence is the “desire of good to another,” so the mother can indeed be said to have acted benevolently in this situation.<sup>37</sup>

As for situations such as that described in (ii), which may seem to lie outside the realm of self-love, Hobbes’ self-love may account for them in terms of rational desires. For Hobbes, we approve of moral behavior even when we are not directly involved because we are always involved on some level. Our approval perpetuates the existence of virtues, which allow us as individuals to have security, and from there, happiness. Hobbes’ construction of moral rules, which might be compared to Hume’s virtues, holds that even people who lack a concern for others “should be rationally motivated to obey [moral rules]” regarding the welfare of others because it is in their best interest as members of a society.<sup>38</sup> Although approbation may not be a moral rule, the idea is that individuals are inclined to appreciate the moral behavior of others because it contributes to the welfare of

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34. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 83.

35. *Ibid.*, 33.

36. Goldman, *Moral Knowledge*, 25.

37. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 33.

38. Goldman, *Moral Knowledge*, 25.



## ***How We Are Moral***

society as a whole, therein benefiting the individual as a member of that society.

Hume would likely object to this idea for its reduction and simplicity, and claim that it is contrary to the way people think: people do not consciously evaluate whether and how an outside event could possibly end up contributing to their own good before making a positive moral evaluation—they feel good about it immediately. Hobbes might respond to this objection by arguing that, as mentioned above, people desire and enjoy things that aim at their own good. This does not mean that an individual must be thinking about the way in which a given observation contributes to his personal good, but rather that it is his instinct to be attracted to it, and because a moral society is in an individual's best interest, the desire for a stranger to behave morally is rational.

### **Hume's Argument Against Self-Love: Necessity**

In the second half of his argument, Hume claims that the theory of self-love is unacceptable because it is unnecessary for moral theory. For Hume, morality can be accounted for by benevolence and utility and it is useless and even detrimental to moral theory to “seek for abstruse and remote systems” to explain the motivation for moral behavior.<sup>39</sup> He claims that if the principle of self-love were true it would mean that “while all of us, at bottom, pursue only our private interest, we wear these fair disguises,” such as that of the friend, the lover, the helpful neighbor, and so on.<sup>40</sup> However, we do not need this kind of explanation, Hume argues, because benevolence is the “obvious and natural ... source of moral sentiment.”<sup>41</sup>

Here, Hume's conception of self-love is narrow, unbridled selfishness that necessitates indifference to the welfare of others. However, if we adopt a Hobbesian perspective of self-love, we can account for how we are

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39. Hume, *Enquiry*, 164.

40. *Ibid.*, 164.

41. *Ibid.*, 109.



benevolent and why we care for and consider others. Hume “argues that passions and sentiments underlie our evaluations” and execution of moral behavior;<sup>42</sup> Hobbes merely takes this idea a step further to argue that self-interest underlies the way in which the passions and sentiments drive us toward evaluation or executing a certain moral behavior the way we do. This step is necessary for moral theory because it provides an accurate explanation of the mechanism underlying moral behavior. Further, this step is important for Hume’s moral theory because it can account for the roles of utility and approbation where Hume’s Benevolence falls short.

According to Beauchamp’s reading of Hume, “benevolent acts are directed at promoting the good” of others as based in the sentiments of sympathy and humanity.<sup>43</sup> However, when this conception of human benevolence is considered in concert with utility and approbation, the moral waters are muddied. On one hand, humans are moral because they selflessly desire good for others; on the other hand, humans are moral because it is useful to others and yields approval, which is beneficial to the agent.

What, then, motivates moral behavior? If it is benevolence then the concepts of utility and approbation are unnecessary; if benevolence were the main principle of human nature that motivated moral behavior, moral theory would not need a concept of utility or approbation to perpetuate virtues because they would be automatic, and the moral agent would be indifferent to the approval of his peers because his end would simply be the good of others. However, if it is utility and approbation that motivate moral behavior, the mechanism that attracts the moral agent toward these must conduce to that of appetites and aversions. For if utility and approbation cannot be divorced from a conception of what it is to be moral, then it can be said that no moral act can be performed with utility and approbation in mind; and if all moral acts are performed with utility and approbation in mind, then all moral acts are performed with some idea of benefit

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42. Goldman, *Moral Knowledge*, 53.

43. Beauchamp, “Introduction,” 35.



## ***How We Are Moral***

to the agent because of the obvious benefits of virtues. This does not mean that all moral acts must be performed with the consciously selfish motive of “good-for-me.” What it does mean is that humans desire good for others, and that satisfying this desire is good for the individual.

Here, it seems that Hume’s theory must give way to Hobbesian self-love. Even if the end of moral action “nowise affects us,” the approval or the expectation of approval associated with the action must ultimately become the end of a given moral action, and thus acting in the name of utility can only be motivated by self-interest.<sup>44</sup> Hume might respond by arguing that it would be false to reduce “all our concern for the public” to “a concern for our own happiness and preservation.”<sup>45</sup> However, what Hume is missing here is the all-pervasive idea of identity of interest. In Hobbes, utility and approval create the identity of interest between public and private sectors, so that any moral act performed in the interest of another is at bottom performed because it is also in the agent’s interest on some level.

Thus, it is not a coincidence that benevolent acts are met with approbation because we only know what virtues are by the public approval they elicit, so it cannot be said that we act virtuously without the expectation of approval. For all of these reasons, it seems that Hume’s principle of utility is more compatible with Hobbes’ self-love than Hume’s benevolence.

### **Rescuing Intention: The Role of Deliberation**

The remaining objection Hume raises to self-love is that it removes intention from moral behavior. If self-love is the motive for all actions, then making a “moral” decision can be compared to seeking food when we have hunger or drinking water when we have thirst.<sup>46</sup> However, Hobbes’ self-love does not render all actions a result of crude, automatic instinct. First,

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44. Hume, *Enquiry*, 109.

45. Hume, *Enquiry*, 108.

46. Hume, 168.

as discussed above, Hobbes holds that moral actions are voluntary actions, which implies the notion of purpose.<sup>47</sup> Second, Hobbes' concept of deliberation can account for the process involved in making moral decisions. Hobbes explains that deliberation is "the alternate succession of Appetites, Aversions, Hopes and Fears," and the consideration of the "good and evil consequences of the doing, or omitting the thing propounded."<sup>48</sup>

Hobbes distinguishes between present pleasure or pain and expected pleasure or pain, placing much more importance on the expected for voluntary actions.<sup>49</sup> Weighing these sets of desires, which can be different or opposed to one another, is the work of deliberation, and is the activity that allows the agent to choose the rational desire, or that which is more closely connected with that agent's expected good.<sup>50</sup> It is true that, in some instances, self-love can compete with expressions of benevolence or other moral principles; in other words, an individual's selfish desires can interfere with or even directly work against the desires of others. However, for Hobbes, these are likely instances in which the individual chooses to follow his irrational desires, for choosing one's own selfish desires over or in spite of the desires of others is often detrimental to one's good. In situations like this, reputation, reciprocity, and other important social mechanisms that help to secure an individual's good are at risk, so the decision to act without concern for these is ultimately irrational.

Additionally, Hobbes admits that an individual can mistakenly choose the wrong course of action according to its "apparently good or evil consequences that one envisages in deliberating."<sup>51</sup> These factors in mind, intention can be rescued from mere reduction to self-love because, in deliberation, the agent must consider present vs. future, self vs. others, rational vs. irrational, and so on. Moral decisions for Hobbesian self-

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47. Goldman, *Moral Knowledge*, 24.

48. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 35.

49. F.S. McNeilly, "Egoism in Hobbes," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 16:64 (July, 1966): 197.

50. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 36.

51. Goldman, *Moral Knowledge*, 20.



love cannot be accounted for by an automatic, self-serving instinct—they require many more dimensions. Thus, the concept of deliberation and its role in voluntary action allow for the importance of intention by placing evaluations and actions motivated by self-interest in the domain of moral consideration.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Hume and Hobbes are more compatible than what initially appears to be the case. When considered fairly, it seems that Hobbes' self-love is not a terribly shocking conclusion. However, Hobbes' theory is by no means flawless: can desire be divorced from self-interest? If it can, then Hume may be right and Hobbes' theory may find itself void of meaning. There are many more objections to psychological egoism that Hobbesian self-love may not be able to hold up against. However, Hobbes' self-love is only a non-normative theory, and even if self-interest is the motivation for human behavior, it does not necessarily imply that it ought to be. Hume's moral theory may be better suited as a normative theory that says that benevolence *should* be the basis of moral action. In any case, it seems that neither Hobbes nor Hume can be said to be completely right or completely wrong in their respective accounts of morality—neither philosopher helps us ascertain distinct moral rightness or wrongness. However, their theories do lend themselves to one another, and by finding a common ground between them, we may be getting close to a theory that encompasses both the accurate and the ideal in moral theory. ❖