Is moral motivation a reflection of natural dispositions?

HUME ON SYMPATHY
In his Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, David Hume argues that at the heart of morality are feelings of approval and disapproval. To say something is morally wrong is to disapprove of it; to say it is right is to approve of it. Why do we have these feelings?

Well, let us start with the question of what kinds of thing we approve or disapprove of. Hume argues that we approve of what someone does, or of their character, if we find it pleasant or useful to other people. We approve of what helps people and what makes them happy.

We could think, then, that this is because it is in our self-interest for other people to behave like this. I approve of what you do because it helps me or makes me happy. But, Hume argues, this can’t be right. First, we approve and disapprove of actions that have absolutely no effect on us personally, e.g. events we read about in the papers happening on the other side of the world. Second, we can distinguish between what is morally right and what is in our self-interest. So we don’t always disapprove of something that harms us, e.g. if you and I apply for a job, and I don’t get it, you do, I don’t disapprove of your success. Or again, if I need some money, and you get it for me by stealing it from someone else, I don’t approve of what you’ve done. Third, we don’t try to persuade people to feel approval or disapproval for a particular action by considering how it affects them, but for example, how it hurt or helped someone else.

The origin of our feelings of approval and disapproval, says Hume, is sympathy. It is just a fact – a fact of human nature – that we feel pleasure at other people’s pleasure and pain at their pain. Would you, could you, deliberately tread on someone’s toes for no reason? Can you look at someone in pain and be completely unmoved? Sympathy is the root of approval and disapproval, and the root of moral motivation. We conform to the expectations of morality because we care about other people. We don’t have to justify that care any more than we have to justify self-interest; it is just as natural to care about other people as it is to care about ourselves.

Of course, sympathy can come into conflict with self-interest, and on many occasions, self-interest will win. But that’s a different point – it doesn’t show that we don’t feel sympathy. In fact, it shows that we must, or there would be no conflict!

SYMPATHY AND SELF-INTEREST
If sympathy is basis of morality, can it be strong enough to counter self-interest when the two come into conflict? Sympathy, says Hume, ‘is much fainter than our concern for ourselves’ (Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, § V, Part II). But, he argues, sympathy is not in fundamental conflict with self-interest. Helping others gives us pleasure, both at the time and in memory. If you could choose to be either self-interested or sympathetic
to others, if you are wise, you will chose sympathy. Hume echoes an argument from Aristotle, that the quality of our relations to others is central to our personal happiness.

SYMPATHY AS THE FOUNDATION OF MORALITY
Nevertheless, we may think that making sympathy the foundation of morality will lead to biased action. After all, we feel sympathy much more for people we know and love than people we don’t. Surely we are right to think that morality requires that we treat people equally in certain ways, whether we are close to them or not.

Hume agrees, and so he supplements his account of sympathy. When we are making moral judgments, we should put aside our personal connections to the people involved ‘and render our sentiments more public and social’. Notice that there is a distinction between sympathy and like or dislike. We can think that someone we dislike is still a morally good person; and that someone we like behaves badly. This shows that we can distinguish our feelings of sympathy, which is about people in general, from our personal feelings. But to do so, says Hume,

in order to pave the way for such a sentiment, and give a proper discernment of its object, it is often necessary, we find, that much reasoning should precede. (Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, § I)

What reason does here is not create sympathy where there was none. But it can appeal to our feeling of sympathy and redirect it. For instance, we can reason that there is no difference between a child starving in some distant country and a child starving in our street. And this can motivate us to give to charity, even though we don’t personally know about the people the charity helps.

SYMPATHY AND ARGUMENT
If morality is based on reason, then someone who acts immorally is acting unreasonably. But if morality is based on sympathy, it seems that we cannot necessarily say this. It is not rationally obligatory to be moral, it seems. If we say to someone ‘you must do this’ or ‘you mustn’t do that’, is this legitimate? Don’t we have to say ‘if you want to be sympathetic, you must do this’? – in which case, the person could say ‘I don’t care about sympathy’.

But how serious is this objection? While we can’t say that this person is irrational, we can still say that they are immoral, cruel, selfish, or whatever. Is it a stronger criticism that someone acts irrationally than that they act selfishly?

However, it is true that we cannot argue someone into morality. If appealing to their sympathy, and then also to their self-interest (since the two are connected), doesn’t work, then nothing will. But there will be very few people for whom this doesn’t work. Somebody who is completely without sympathy will be a sociopath; and we don’t reason with sociopaths, we either lock them up or treat them as mentally ill! To lack sympathy is to cease to be fully human in some way.
DOES ALL MORALITY STEM FROM SYMPATHY?

Sympathy disposes us to approve of what is pleasurable and useful, and to disapprove of what is painful and useless. So, if morality is based on sympathy, then what is morally good must either be useful or pleasurable. But many people have thought that morality includes commitments that are neither. For example, within religious moralities, there is often an element of self-denial, the idea that in ourselves we are sinful, and it is only through God’s love and forgiveness that we have value. These thoughts, and the life of penitence and self-sacrifice that they can motivate, seem neither pleasurable nor useful, and do not seem to express sympathy. And so Hume rejects them – they should be no part of morality.

But is this too quick? Religious people can have great integrity and wisdom, and through their self-sacrifice can contribute a great deal to the happiness of others. But, they would argue, it is not possible to keep the integrity, wisdom and self-sacrifice (since they are useful) and simply get rid of the idea of self-denial. The connections run too deep.

The point can be made more generally. We sometimes value things as morally good quite independently of the pleasure or use they bring. For example, we might say that someone has led a ‘worthwhile’ life in fighting for a cause they really believe in (e.g. saving the rainforests) – even if the battle causes them stress and in the end they don’t succeed. If this is right, then Hume’s view that morality should always aim at the useful and pleasurable seems too narrow.