

Hume's Theory of Role Morality and Government

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Abstract: Hume argues that the form of a government determines the roles of its officials and that what matters for a good, or bad, government is the nature of the official roles, not who occupies them. The ideal form makes it ‘the interest, even of bad men, to act for the public good’ (*Essays*, 15-16).¹ Hume is thus committed to what we call role-morality, distinguishing in his *Histories*, for instance, between normative judgments of the private character of monarchs and their public role.

No matter what its form, a government will have officials — from a monarch, say, to those lesser officials who carry out the responsibilities essential to any government. Those officials occupy roles, and what matters for good government, Hume argues, is not their character, but what the roles require them to do.

§1. Forms of government

Hume distinguishes between the different responsibilities imposed by different forms of government on its leaders. The Polish form of government at the time ensured that ‘every nobleman, . . . has a distinct hereditary authority over his vassals,’ but that Poland itself ‘has no authority but what it receives from the concurrence of its parts.’ Were Poland invaded from the

¹ David Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller, 2nd ed. (LibertyClassics: Indianapolis, 1987). References are in the text as *Essays* followed by the page number.

east, a nobleman to the west would need to decide whether to come to the defense of a fellow nobleman. To do so would be to enter into a war, risking himself, his vassals, and his land, when the invasion might peter out or be constrained by the fellow nobleman. Since Poland consisted of quasi-independent fiefdoms, nothing required any nobleman to aid any other. Self-interest worked against the cooperation needed to ensure a united response.

In Venice, the situation was reversed. Each nobleman only had ‘power as part of the whole body.’ Were Venice attacked, a Venetian prince will help defend it because the form of the Venetian government makes it in his self-interest to act.

We can draw from these views corresponding moral claims. Positions of power -- roles -- within a form of government carry with them the morality suited to that role. A Polish prince would be morally remiss to plunge into a battle because of an ideal of a united Poland not shared by fellow princes. A Venetian prince would be morally remiss not to aid his fellow countrymen. What the roles entail is determined by the form of government that created them.

§2. The role of monarchs

Of Henry III the man, Hume says, ‘Gentle, humane, and merciful even to a fault, he seems to have been steady in no other circumstance of his character;...’ (II.15).² As King, ‘he was found in every respect unqualified for maintaining a proper sway among those turbulent barons, whom the feudal constitution subjected to his authority’ (II.15). He was not fit to be king. Summing up Henry’s reign, Hume says, ‘The most obvious circumstance of Henry’s character is his incapacity for government,... Instead of reducing the dangerous power of his nobles,...; he was seduced to imitate their conduct, and to make his arbitrary will, or rather that of his ministers, the rule of his actions’ (II.64-5).

Henry III would have made a good friend, but was a disastrous ruler. Hume makes the same separation in judging Queen Elizabeth I as a monarch and as a person, but to opposite ef-

² David Hume, *The History of England* (Indianapolis: LibertyClassics, 1983), Volumes I - VI; references are in the text with the volume number in Roman numerals followed by the page numbers.

fect: she was less than admirable as a person, but perfectly fitted to be monarch. She feigned reluctance to execute Mary, queen of Scots, but did everything to ensure that she was executed, that Parliament and the people would be held responsible, and that her secretary, Davison, would be the culprit.

Henry III might be thought amiable as a person, but unfitted for a monarch. Elizabeth would be thought anything but amiable as a person, but a shrewd monarch in removing someone she perceived as a threat to her throne and doing so in a way that she could continue as a much beloved monarch.³

The personal character of monarchs obviously matters for their successes and failures in their official role. Queen Elizabeth I needed the capacity to feign sadness and regret at executing Mary. But Hume's fundamental point is that a government's form determines how those within it are to act — whatever their personal inclinations, 'their humours and tempers,' or their beliefs and preferences.

§3. The role of minor officials

What holds for monarchs holds for every role within a government. Hume says that the '[in] the smallest court or office, the stated forms and methods, by which business must be conducted, are found to be a considerable check on the natural depravity of mankind.' 'Why,' he asks, 'should not the case be the same in public affairs?' (*Essays*, 24) An official is constrained by the role the official occupies.

A nice example comes where Hume lays out the troubles Charles I had in obtaining funds from Parliament to counter the 'Discontents in Scotland.' After the Magna Carta, no taxes were to be levied without the consent of Parliament except that when faced with an immediate foreign threat, the crown could tax sea ports to provide, with help from adjacent counties, either ships or money sufficient to supply ships for the country's defense. But 'the prerogative,...[had been] abolished, and its exercise almost entirely discontinued, from the time of Edward III' (V.247).

³ For a more thorough analysis of Elizabeth's role in the execution of Mary, see my 'Hume the Moral Historian: Queen Elizabeth I,' *The European Legacy* (Vol. 18, No. 5, August 2013), pp. 576-87.

But Charles had imposed a ship-money tax in 1634 and expanded it to include every citizen. He taxed ‘the whole kingdom;...’ with ‘each country [being] rated at a particular sum, which was afterwards assessed upon individuals’ (V.235). Citizens were being taxed without representation and in defiance of the rights they won in the Magna Carta.

Charles compounded this breach by changing ‘the whole system of church government’ in Scotland (V.252). The Scots believed in an immediate relation between God and men, unmediated by a Pope or other ecclesiastic authorities. But Charles created a system of bishops, putting them between God and the Scots, and he did so without consulting the church or parliament. He made the church dependent upon his will, breaching the established policy of the ‘independency of the ecclesiastical upon the civil power’ (V.262). The fear was that he would do the same for the civil government, taking out of Scottish hands decisions they thought properly belonged to their representatives.

He did all this because, Hume says, he ‘considered himself as the supreme magistrate to whose care heaven, by his birth-right, had committed his people,...’. If he judged that circumstances required him to act contrary to ‘ancient laws and customs,...national privileges...must yield to supreme power;...’ (V.236). He thought himself the ‘sole judge of the necessity’ of acting without Parliament’s consent and so subjected ‘all the privileges of the nation to his arbitrary will and pleasure’ (V.246-7). He betrayed ‘a very different idea of the constitution, from that which began,...to prevail among his subjects’ (V.236).

By empowering bishops, Charles diminished the power of the nobles and other Scots, and they formed an army to support their claims against him. Through a series of missteps, Charles found himself, after forming and disbanding one army, without enough funds to support another. So ‘very near the time allotted for opening the campaign against the Scots,’ he called a Parliament, ‘after above eleven years’ intermission,’ and demanded an immediate decision (V.269).

But Parliament was angry. Charles had raised questions of national importance about the relation of king to country that ‘were canvassed in every company; and the more they were examined, the more evidently did it appear to many, that liberty was totally subverted, and an unusual and arbitrary authority exercised over the kingdom’ (V.248). Into this tinderbox of resent-

ments, fears, anger, and concerns, the King's secretary, Sir Harry Vane, threw a torch. He told Parliament, 'without any authority from the king,' that

1. *The king would abolish ship-money.* Yet as Hume points out,

scarcely any argument, more unfavourable, could be pleaded for supply, than an offer to abolish ship-money; a taxation, the most illegal and the most dangerous, that had ever, in any reign, been imposed upon the nation. And that, by bargaining for the remission of that duty, the commons would, in a manner, ratify the authority, by which it had been levied; at least, give encouragement for advancing new pretensions of a like nature, in hopes of resigning them on like advantageous conditions (V.275).

It is no wonder Sir Vane's offer was greeted with derision. Sir Vane asked Parliament to give compensation to the king for giving up a right he did not have.

2. *The king needed 'a supply of twelve subsidies, about six hundred thousand pounds'* (V.273), but Parliament knew he did not need that much. You insult those you ask for help when they know what you need and you ask for more. 'Do you take us for idiots?'
3. *The king needed an immediate answer since to delay was to deny* (V.273). Charles created the crisis by not calling Parliament in a timely manner. He set the timeframe to try to coerce Parliament into acting precipitously.

Parliament was in no mood to satisfy such an outrageous request, especially since the king's desperation gave them a chance of forcing the king to recognize their pre-eminence and reconsider his understanding a British monarch's role.

Hume says that Sir Vane's request proceeded from 'indiscretion, if we are not rather to call it...treachery' (V.275). Sir Vane was traitorous if he aimed to thwart the King, perhaps to force him to recognize Parliament's pre-eminence. He was indiscreet, i.e., incompetent, if he failed to understand how Parliament would receive his demands.

In either case, a secretary to a king ought not to act for the king without the king's permission. This is an ethical judgment: as an emissary of the King to Parliament, Sir Vane's responsibility was to relay to parliament the King's position.

§4. Other normative judgments

It may help us understand the judgment Hume makes of Sir Vane by comparing it with other kinds of normative judgments Hume makes. He says, for instance, that King James I was impolitic in bestowing 'kighthood on no less than 237 persons' within a few weeks of becoming King and failing 'of obliging the persons, on whom he bestowed them' (V.5). He thus displayed abysmal political judgment, failing to follow what Hume calls an axiom of politics: rulers should obtain something in return for what they give. He devalued his power and gained nothing of value. These are normative political judgments, not moral. We can find many similar examples in Hume's *History*.

Another sort of normative judgment Hume makes might readily be mistaken for those involving roles. Those are judgments about certain professions and callings. He remarks in 'Of National Characters' that

The uncertainty of their life makes soldiers lavish and generous, as well as brace: ...Being employed only against a public and an open enemy, they become candid, honest, and undesigning: And as they use more the labour of the body than that of the mind, they are commonly thoughtless and ignorant (*Essays*, 199).

Accurate of soldiers or not, Hume's claim is that individuals within certain professions have, or come to have, certain character traits.

Thus, of monks he says,

Celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, solitude, and the whole train of monkish virtues; for what reason are they everywhere rejected by men of sense, but because they serve to no manner of purpose; neither advance a man's fortune in the world, nor render him a more valuable member of society; neither qualify him for the entertainment of company, nor increase his power of self-enjoyment? (*Enquiry*, 73).

Different professions no doubt attract different sorts of persons, but whatever traits individuals bring into a profession, the profession encourages a distinct set of traits different from those encouraged in other professions. A monk will not become 'lavish and generous, as well as brave.'

Hume is making judgments about how a person's character is formed by a profession, contingent statements that can be confirmed or disproven by looking at monks and soldiers. He is saying that those who become monks will come to have certain traits, but not that the role requires them to have those traits, let alone that they ought to have such traits. A monk free of the monkish virtues would be an anomaly, but not morally remiss. Were a monk appointed secretary to a monarch, the position would require representing the monarch's position — even if the monarch wanted Parliament to banish monasteries and seize the Church's wealth.

The case of James I is more complicated. That he was politically obtuse was not only a liability for himself, but for the monarchy as well. He not only weakened his own political power in being so profligate in bestowing knighthoods and so impolitic in getting nothing in return, he also damaged the monarchy, devaluing knighthoods for later monarchs and thus diminishing the power of the monarchy. So in judging James I wrong, Hume may be making a moral judgment about the monarchy.

Whether or not James I is to be faulted for failing to fulfill the role of a monarch, we have ample evidence from Hume's judgments of Sir Vane and his careful separation of the personal

character of British monarchs from their role as monarchs that he was committed to a distinct kind of normative judgment, an ethical judgment dependent upon the official roles played by them and their successes and failures in fulfilling their responsibilities in those roles.

§5. Role morality

Since not all governments are ‘wisely constituted,’ leaving space for ‘bad men’ to act for their self-interest rather than ‘the public good,’ the offices within governments ought to be designed to constrain ‘the natural depravity of mankind.’ We can draw out what officials ought to do by examining their roles. We thus rightfully criticize Sir Vane for not acting as he ought as secretary to James I.

That ‘ought’ is moral, and its ground is a set of statements about his role. As Dorothy Emmett puts it,

The notion of a role has built into it a notion of some conduct as appropriate. It thus provides a bridge...between factual statements about social situations and conclusions that something ought to be done in them.⁴

Hume concluded that Sir Vane’s responsibility was to tell parliament the King’s position, and he faulted him for failing.

Such conclusions raise at least three questions that require more complicated analyses and more comprehensive responses than I can give here:

- What kind of judgments are they?

They seem matters of fact about what we ought to do. It is a matter of fact or not that Sir Vane had such a responsibility, and yet it tells Sir Vane and us what he ought to do. None of the cate-

⁴ Dorothy Emmet, *Rules, Roles, and Relations* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), p. 40.

gories Hume has at his disposal seems to fit. They are neither relations of ideas nor just matters of fact, and if they were matters of fact, they are neither proofs nor probabilities, both of which depend upon causal reasoning. Hume has no other category in which to put them.

- How do they follow from official roles?

Hume says, ‘So great is the force of laws, and of particular forms of government,...that consequences almost as general and certain may sometimes be deduced from them, as any which the mathematical sciences afford us’ (*Essays*, 16). It seems a stretch for such conclusions to be deductions, but perhaps that is what Hume means.

- Do they fit any of the usual ways of understanding Hume’s views on moral judgments?

None of the standard ways of understanding Hume on the nature of moral judgment obviously fits. On one view there are no moral judgments, nothing that is true or false, only feelings of approval and disapproval. On another, moral judgments are descriptions of such feelings or, on a third view, a description of something so constituted as to cause such feelings. On a fourth view, moral judgments are feelings of approval or disapproval along with moral beliefs. This is, of course, a very simplified overview of the prevailing views on Hume on the nature of moral judgment, but all require a feeling. Yet our feelings about Sir Vane are irrelevant to his role carrying with it certain responsibilities. That the king’s secretary ought to relay the king’s position to Parliament is not a judgment that depends on anyone’s feelings.

We may feel that in not relaying what the king wanted, he did right in trying to undermine the king and support the pretensions of Parliament, but that feeling itself depends upon the prior moral judgment that he was obligated by his role to tell Parliament what the king wanted. We have to understand what his role as the king’s secretary entailed regarding his responsibilities, that is, if we are to have any feelings of approval or disapproval for what he did or failed to do in fulfilling any responsibility in that role.