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Hume and the Guise of the Bad

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1 Introduction

> 'tis observable that an opposition of passions commonly causes a new emotion in the spirits, and produces more disorder, than the concurrence of any two affections of equal force. This new emotion is easily converted into the predominant passion, and encreases its violence, beyond the pitch it wou'd have arriv'd at had it met with no opposition. Hence we naturally desire what is forbid, and take a pleasure in performing actions, merely because they are unlawful. The notion of duty, when opposite to the passions, is seldom able to overcome them; and when it fails of that effect, is apt rather to encrease them, by producing an opposition in our motives and principles. (T 2.3.4.5)

Hume scholars so far seem to have paid little attention to this passage.[1] But, as I will try to show, its analysis bears fruit for both Humean scholarship and contemporary moral psychology. First, it needs to be understood why the phenomenon pointed out—desiring and taking pleasure in performing certain actions merely because they are unlawful—poses a challenge of sorts to Hume's theory of evaluation (sections 3-4). Second, I propose a solution of the challenge which draws on Hume's treatment of malice, and illuminates the role played by comparison and the self in these apparently paradoxical passions (sec. 5). Third, the solution I attribute to Hume should stand out in contemporary discussions of desiring something "under the guise of the bad" as a particularly promising account of this phenomenon (sec. 6).

2 The context: explaining violent passions

First of all, we should understand the context where this passage is located. At T 2.3.4 Hume has just left off the section on the influencing motives of the will, which famously argues that reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will, and it can never oppose passions either. Towards the end of that section Hume appeals to the distinction between calm and

[1] There are passing mentions in Baier 1991: 169, and Radcliffe 2018: 153.

violent passions, as an explanation of the common mistaken belief in the opposition of reason and passion: given their low or barely noticeable intensity, calm passions can easily be mistaken for the "determinations of reason". What T 2.3.4 (together with the following sections up to 2.3.8) aims to illustrate is which factors make a given passion calm or violent, where the underlying thought is that, depending on circumstances, any passion can present itself as calm or violent (for example, Hume clearly states that resentment can come in calm or violent episodes, T 2.3.3.8-9). While at T 2.1.1.3 Hume seems at first to rigidly classify some passions as calm and others as violent, he immediately goes on to call this distinction "vulgar and specious". His settled view seems rather that

> all depends upon the situation of the object, and that a variation in this particular will be able to change the calm and the violent passions into each other (T 2.3.4.1).[2]

Sections 2.3.5 to 2.3.8 deal with how custom, imagination, contiguity and distance can increase or decrease the intensity of a passion. 2.3.4 instead explains how another emotion or passion may itself increase the intensity of a given passion to the degree required in order to be called "violent". So the "situation of the object" of a given passion in this case consists in its very relation to another passion or emotion of ours. The general principle is this:

> any emotion, which attends a passion, is easily converted into it, tho' in their natures they be originally different from, and even contrary to each other (2.3.4.2).

The process of "conversion" of a passion (or emotion) into the other passion is effectively described by Hume as a process of recruitment of affective strength of one passion by another, based on an emotional hierarchy of sorts: "The predominant passion [later: "the prevailing affection"] swallows up the inferior, and converts it into itself" (T 2.3.4.2). Note that the two passions are independently produced by their "separate causes": so the distinction between predominant and inferior must already be in place in order for the conversion process to occur. In other words, a passion does not become predominant in virtue of the conversion process. The idea of "swallowing up" suggests a "big fish-eats-small fish" kind of scenario played out among the passions. The result of this process is that the predominant passion

[2] There is some debate about how to best characterize the calm/violent distinction. See Paxman 2015 for a recent review (and her own account) of the distinction. As far as I can see, nothing in what follows will hinge on this.

increases its intensity up to the "violent" pitch, precisely by absorbing into itself the affective strength of the inferior one.

Hume speaks as if the predominant and the inferior passion need not be related by anything more than the fact that one attends or follows the other. It may be sufficient that the inferior passion simply happens to be felt around the same time as the predominant one in order for the latter to absorb the former. One of Hume's examples seems to fit this possibility. When politicians are about to reveal a piece of information which would excite a strong passion—e.g. a scandal which would cause people's resentment towards a rival politician—they can make that passion even stronger by first exciting people's curiosity about what they are going to reveal (2.3.4.3). Resentment is in this case the predominant passion, while curiosity is the inferior passion whose affective strength will be recruited to swell the resentment up to a violent pitch. Note that the temporal order does not really matter: resentment is taken by Hume to be predominant relative to curiosity even if there isn't in this case any resentment *prior* to curiosity. What does the trick is simply that resentment quickly follows heightened curiosity; this is enough of a relation between the two passions. Curiosity need not even be curiosity about *what this politician did*: it could simply be a generic curiosity ("you can't imagine what I'm going to tell you!"). The two passions can have in this case totally separate causes.[3]

Hume's other illustrations instead do involve some relation of ideas between the predominant and the inferior passion, and these cases are more interesting for my purposes. The "little faults and caprices" of a lover and the resulting "jealousies and quarrels" are indeed "unpleasant and related to anger and hatred" (ibid.). But when these negative emotions are inferior relative to the love we feel for our lover, their affective strength can be recruited and go to increase the intensity of our love. (Hume has already warned that the conversion process can occur even when passions are contrary to each other, so that anger contributes to love should not come as a surprise.) In this case there is more than temporal proximity between the passions. There is an obvious relation of ideas: both the causes of our love and the causes of

[3] About this example, Radcliffe says that "anxiety intensifies curiosity" (2018: 161). I rather take Hume's point to be that curiosity (and the *accompanying* anxiety) intensifies "the passion they [the politicians] design to raise" (2.3.4.3), whatever that may be. Similarly, exciting Othello's curiosity intensifies his jealousy: "This is the artifice practised by Iago in the famous scene of Shakespeare; and every spectator is sensible, that Othello's jealousy acquires additional force from his preceding impatience, and that the subordinate passion is here readily transformed into the predominant one" (*Of Tragedy* 13). In this essay Hume applies this very same model to explain the great pleasure we take in the misfortunes of theatre characters.

our unpleasant feelings stem from *the same person*—our lover, even if our love is caused, at least originally, by different characteristics than his or her faults and caprices.

Hume's other example (presented immediately before the desire for the forbidden) really contains two parallel cases. One is where a soldier's courage is increased thanks to positive emotions related to fellow soldiers on his side; for example, the agreeable feeling one gets from perceiving uniformity and regularity in one's own military formation increases one's resolution to fight. The second is a case of conversion among contrary passions: a soldier's fear is increased when the agreeable feelings from uniformity and regularity are associated with the enemy's army: here a positive emotion of (roughly) aesthetic appreciation contributes to increasing a negative one (fear). Like in the lover case, the two passions (courage-aesthetic appreciation or fear-aesthetic appreciation) have a relation of ideas, since both the idea of my fellow soldiers and of the enemies are plausibly related with the objects of courage and fear, even though Hume does not pause to consider what these objects exactly are.

3. How "we naturally desire what is forbid"

It is not entirely clear whether the case of desire for what is forbidden described in paragraph 5 of T 2.3.4 is meant to be simply another illustration of the mechanism already exemplified, or whether there is something that makes it different from the previous cases. Hume introduces it thus:

> Since passions, however independent, are naturally transfus'd into each other, if they are both present at the same time; it follows, that when good or evil is plac'd in such a situation, as to cause any particular emotion, beside its direct passion of desire or aversion, that latter passion must acquire new force and violence. This happens, among other cases, whenever any object excites contrary passions. (T 2.3.4.4-5)

It might seem that Hume had already described at least one case of a passion acquiring "new force" due to the same object exciting contrary passions: our affection for our lover is intensified when it recruits the contrary (and inferior) passion of anger caused by the very same lover. So why does Hume introduce this phenomenon as if he had not covered it right before? The answer is twofold. First, here he focuses specifically on what makes *desire and aversion* violent, whereas his previous cases had ranged over various passions (love, courage,

fear etc.). Second, and more centrally, the contrariety between passions here is not simply resolved by the predominant passion swallowing up the inferior one. As he goes on to explain (see the full quote at the beginning of the paper), the opposition of passions here gives rise to a "new emotion". It is then *this* new emotion that in turn increases the intensity of the predominant passion: "This new emotion is easily converted into the predominant passion" (T 2.3.4.5). How does it do so? Essentially, the new emotion is what enables the predominant passion to overcome the opposite inferior passion, which presents itself as an obstacle, in particular, to the fulfilment of a desire: "The efforts, which the mind makes to surmount the obstacle, excite the spirits and enliven the passion" (T 2.3.4.6).[4] In the case of love increased by anger at our lover's little faults and caprices, the relation of contrariety does not give rise to any new emotion, but simply the predominant passion takes in its trail the inferior one. In fact we can say that in that case there is *contrariety without opposition* in the sense intended here by Hume.

So, in the case of the desire for what is forbidden, we need to have two opposite passions to start with. The first (and predominant) passion is a desire for X, for example, a desire for a juicy fruit hanging from a neighbour's tree.[5] The second, opposite (and inferior) passion stems from "the notion of duty" or the related notions of "forbidden" and "unlawful." I take it that Hume means by this that the subject is making a genuine moral judgment to the effect that obtaining the desired object would be wrong (*qua* stealing the neighbour's fruit, in this case), and that this judgment is identical to, or at least accompanied by, some form of uneasiness or displeasure at the prospect of taking the fruit.[6] Remember that by this point in the *Treatise* Hume has already argued that only a passion can oppose another passion, so it is clearly not any purely rational notion of a duty not to steal that can be opposed to the desire to take the

[4] "Difficulties encrease passions of every kind; and by rouzing our attention, and exciting our active powers, they produce *an emotion*, which nourishes the prevailing affection" (*Of Tragedy* 14, my italics).
[5] "I may lawfully nourish myself from this tree; but the fruit of another of the same species, ten paces off, it is criminal for me to touch" (EPM 3.37). This is reminiscent of Augustine's recollection of stealing pears for its very wrongness (1955, book II, ch. viii, sec. 16).
[6] Even if there can be duties to perform actions which are recommended by the natural virtues, in Hume the notions of duty and lawfulness have a distinctive role to play in connection with the artificial virtues (see e.g. T 3.2.5.6). That is why I chose theft (an instance of injustice) as the running example. And given that the consequences of particular cases of injustice tend to be somewhat remote, and thus harder to sympathize with, it is clear why Hume specifically singles out "contrary to duty" and not some other moral notion as prone to increasing our desire rather than inhibiting it. The judgment that an action would be inhumane or ungenerous would be far less likely to increase our desire for it. Moreover, "duty" is a general idea, and as such it is more obscure, and thus motivationally less effective, than the idea of the forbidden object (say, the fruit): see T 2.3.6.2.

fruit. Moreover, for a sentimentalist like Hume, moral and more generally evaluative notions are to be explained in affective terms of some sort.

So the moral uneasiness about stealing the fruit acts as an obstacle to fulfilling our desire to get the fruit. At this point, it is crucial that such moral uneasiness must not be so intense as to outweigh the desire: the desire establishes itself as the predominant passion, and the moral feeling as the inferior one. But it is also important that the desire, though predominant, is not so strong as to be capable of outweighing the moral feeling all by itself—otherwise the desire for the forbidden would not be needed. It is under these conditions that a "new emotion" is (or anyway can be) produced in response to the opposition of passions. This emotion is a *new desire* for the fruit, with a related *new pleasure* at the prospect of getting it. The desire and the related pleasure are new, because they are not caused by the fruit as a tasty thing (which is what presumably caused the original desire), but as something forbidden. The new emotion thus responds to the negative moral evaluation by turning it on its head (more on this soon). And since this new emotion concurs with the original desire for the fruit, it is "converted" into it, in the sense already explained of increasing the intensity of that desire.

Can we say that the opposite and inferior passion (the negative moral evaluation) has been absorbed into the resulting desire like in the other cases? Hume's text suggest a "yes and no" answer. It is not clear that the predominant passion gets increased simply because it recruits the affective strength of the negative moral evaluation. The predominant passion rather gets its extra "fuel" thanks to the new emotion (the desire for the fruit as forbidden). This is after all why this case deserves an explanation of its own. On the other hand, though, the new emotion is parasitic on the negative moral evaluation: if we did not feel some moral uneasiness at the prospect of stealing the fruit, we would not form a desire to steal it *qua* doing something immoral. And while it is not clear whether we can talk of a transfer of affective strength from the moral evaluation to the predominant desire, it can still be said that the process results in the inferior passion being "swallowed up": instead of being a successful obstacle to the predominant desire, the negative moral evaluation actually contributes—via the generation of the new emotion—to increasing the desire "beyond the pitch it wou'd have arriv'd at had it met with no opposition".

4. The problem for Hume's account of evaluation

So far, so good. However, the generation of this new emotion should strike any attentive reader of Hume as somewhat puzzling. Remember that what gets generated is a desire for something as forbidden or "unlawful". Hume repeatedly explains desires as arising from pleasure (and aversions from pain).[7] More precisely, a desire is produced either by an impression of pleasure (such impressions always have some influence on our motives) or by a belief about an existing or prospective pleasure associated with the object of desire.[8] The desire for what is forbidden is no exception. In fact, Hume does here talk of taking "a pleasure in performing actions, merely because they are unlawful". Presumably, then, a belief about the prospective pleasure offered by performing such actions, or an impression of pleasure associated with such actions, is the immediate cause of the desire. Again, so far, so good.

What is puzzling is how we can get to associate pleasure with the prospect of doing something unlawful, under this very description ("merely because they are unlawful"). According to the reconstruction above, the prospect of doing something unlawful must in the first instance excite a negative feeling or uneasiness, or else there wouldn't be the "opposition of passions" which is a prerequisite to the phenomenon here discussed. Hume has presumably in mind an agent who both understands immorality and takes it seriously enough—not someone who is making an inverted commas judgment of sorts about their action being "immoral", that is, merely conventionally forbidden or judged to be wrong by society around them.[9] So, how can such an agent respond to the opposition of passions by turning the idea of unlawfulness—that is, the idea of something "bad"—on its head and making *that* the object of pleasure rather than pain, and in turn of desire rather than aversion?

A ready-made answer may seem to be found in T 2.3.8, where Hume explains the greater admiration we (or at least some) feel for people very distant in time. It is difficult for imagination to travel far back in time (at any rate, more difficult than for it travel forward in time, or across geographical space). But this difficulty, when it does not put us off, has rather the effect of "invigorat[ing] the soul" as we overcome it. In doing so, the difficulty "supports and fills the passions" (here, admiration), and therefore results "agreeable to us" (T 2.3.8.6). It is the surplus of pleasure so generated which explains (among other things) the greater

[7] T 1.3.10, 2.1.1, 2.3.9.
[8] Though there are also desires which "produce" rather than "proceed from" pleasure (T 2.3.9.8)
[9] In this case Hume is clearly illustrating an opposition arising from "internal motives" (T 2.3.4.6). The notion of my action being merely disapproved by society would instead be an "external obstacle" to my desire.

admiration for people far back in time. In turn, we may even come to desire the distinctive pleasures of challenge.

Like the case of distance in time, something being contrary to duty presents us with a challenge, and turns out to be pleasurable. Two possibilities suggest themselves. (a) Does the unlawful become pleasurable to us *qua something challenging*? In other words, is it exactly the very same desire type we end up with in both cases? This possibility seems ruled out by Hume's explicitly describing the desire for an action "merely because it is unlawful". The unlawful attracts us as such, rather than because it gives us opportunity for an exercise of problem-solving. (b) The other possibility is that the unlawful becomes pleasurable, and an object of desire, *as a result* of the effort of overcoming the challenge posed by moral duty. The effort (as it involves "invigoration") would explain the pleasure, while pleasure gets associated with the source of the challenge (the unlawful as such). This might seem truer to the text. But it cannot serve as an account of desiring the forbidden. Pleasure for the forbidden is not a mere by-product of the effort to solve a problem. The conversion of immorality-induced pain into immorality-induced pleasure is *itself* the way we (or some of us at least, some of the time) solve the problem of what to do when duty opposes a passion of ours: we embrace immorality, i.e. associate pleasure to it. Despite some similarities, then, we cannot look at T 2.3.8 for an answer. The basic question remains: how can being morally wrong—something constitutively pain-giving—be made into something pleasure-giving?

5. A solution: malice and the principle of comparison

We can approach an answer if we reflect on why Hume himself regards the phenomenon as worthy of attention, but not theoretically daunting, or in any way "perverse". It is significant that Hume says we "naturally" desire what we find immoral.[10] Hume at several junctures does not hesitate to point out the "perversity" or the "artificiality" of certain people, characters, or modes of thinking. For example, perverse is the frame of mind of a man who has "no relish for virtue and humanity, no sympathy with his fellow-creatures, no desire of esteem and applause" (*The Sceptic* 29). But the desire for the forbidden, as seen above, actually stems from at least some measure of regard for morality. Further, "artificial" (in a derogatory sense) are the lives dominated by superstition or philosophical doctrines:

[10] This is not to deny that this desire, as a violent passion, disrupts *customary* associations (Paxman 2015).

An experiment…which succeeds in the air, will not always succeed in a vacuum. When men depart from the maxims of common reason, and affect these *artificial* lives, as you call them, no one can answer to what will please or displease them. They are in a different element from the rest of mankind; and the natural principles of their mind play not with the same regularity, as if left to themselves, free from the illusions of religious superstition or philosophical enthusiasm (EPM, Dial. 57).

But the desire for the forbidden is not grounded on any peculiar or uncommon belief, and it is taken into consideration by Hume precisely in order to illustrate the "natural principles" of the human mind. Finally, perverse is the "absolute, unprovoked, disinterested malice" Hume describes here:

A creature, absolutely malicious and spiteful, were there any such in nature, must be worse than indifferent to the images of vice and virtue. All his sentiments must be inverted, and directly opposite to those, which prevail in the human species. Whatever contributes to the good of mankind, as it crosses the constant bent of his wishes and desires, must produce uneasiness and disapprobation; and on the contrary, whatever is the source of disorder and misery in society, must, for the same reason, be regarded with pleasure and complacency…Absolute, unprovoked, disinterested malice has never, perhaps, place in any human breast; or if it had, must there pervert all the sentiments of morals, as well as the feelings of humanity (EPM 5.40).[11]

Now, there is *something* in common between absolute malice and the desire for the forbidden. First, in both phenomena there is an inversion of ordinary sentiments in response to the "images of vice and virtue". Second, on the assumption that what is forbidden is, directly or indirectly, a source of "disorder and misery in society", the desire for the forbidden and absolute malice may well motivate similar kinds of behaviour. However, absolute malice is regarded by Hume as, practically, something less than human. Where is the difference? Absolute malice, as described here, would have to be an "original" or primitive affection, in particular, one that does not bear any connection to a prior sense of virtue and vice, nor does it arise as a "solution" to the psychological problem of strongly desiring something that we

[11] Compare Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1738), section titled "Human Nature incapable of sedate Malice" (treatise 2, section 2.7, pp. 152-154). In *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections* (1728) Hutcheson writes that "the Misery of another is only grateful as it allays, or secures us against a furious Pain; and cannot be the Occasion, by itself, of any Satisfaction" (treatise 1, section 5.5, p. 141). On Hume's view, as we see right below, malice is joy in (and consequent desire for) others' misery, independently of past or prospective injuries caused to us. Whether Hume disagrees with Hutcheson on this matter depends on whether Hume's explanation of malice as based on comparison (rather than on any thoughts about injury) means that others' misery is not "by itself" the occasion of joy. I believe Hume paints a darker picture here than Hutcheson, but I won't pursue this issue.

ourselves morally condemn. The absolutely malicious simply hates humanity—wishes the worst for it, this is the "constant bent" of his desires—and this is why he rejoices in people's misery, and pursues vice, as a cause of this misery. By contrast, desiring something *as* forbidden can only take place in the very human context of an agent making moral distinctions and feeling their pull, at least to some extent. And, unlike absolute malice, it does not flow from a constant hatred for humanity, but can be said to be a "provoked" response, where the "provocation" consists in the opposition of morality to the fulfilment of one's strong desires.

These points of contrast establish *that* desiring something as forbidden is not in any important sense "perverse",[12] but do not yet explain *why*, i.e. what is the *natural* mechanism that gets us to take pleasure in what is unlawful as unlawful. Following on the quote just discussed, we can indeed make progress by comparing this case with the humanly possible, and real, version of malice.

Malice "gives us a joy in the sufferings and miseries of others, without any offence or injury on their part" against us (T 2.2.8.1). Malice presents an explanatory challenge similar to the desire for the forbidden. Joy is a pleasant impression felt "when good is certain or probable" (T 2.3.9.5). But others' misery is hardly something good, nor is malice a self-interested passion in the sense that someone else's misery is calculated to bring some benefit for ourselves. Still, if it is indeed joy that one feels in malice, then we need to make sense of how others' misery gets to be *something good* from the malicious person's viewpoint.[13] Hume's explanation appeals to comparison. We get to feel joy from considering another's misery if and when "the misery of another gives us [by comparison] a more lively idea of our happiness" (T 2.2.8.8). Roughly, the comparison between your misery and my (relative) happiness makes me shine by contrast, and thus I get to associate your misery with a positive feeling. The comparison therefore not only manages to block the idea of evil and the unpleasant feeling otherwise associated (through sympathy) with another's misery, but it works to present another's misery as something good, as is required in order for joy to set in

[12] Hume does probably intend to convey tacit disapproval of this desire, if for no other reason that it belongs to the violent passions, which are more often than not opposed to the virtues. But Hume's aim in the *Treatise* is not prescriptive.
[13] Again, "good" here simply means an object of pleasure.

as a response to it.[14] In turn, we can make this joy the object of dedicated malicious desires: "the unprovok'd desire of producing evil to another, in order to reap a pleasure from the comparison" (T 2.2.8.12).[15] Now, this desire *is* self-interested, but it is clearly parasitic on the prior mechanism which produced joy at others' suffering.[16] So, in the case of malice, comparison with our own situation is what turns something otherwise bad into something good, that is, into an object of pleasure.

Can an analogous mechanism account for the desire for the forbidden? Let's start with what is *not* analogous. First, clearly the desire for the forbidden does not involve *the very same* comparison process. It makes no sense to claim that we are simply comparing the forbidden with our own situation and receiving pleasure as a result. Second, there seems to be "nothing personal" in the desire for the forbidden and even in the harm we may as a result cause to other people (for example, through an unjust act). Neither is the desire inspired by an explicit consideration of other people's condition, nor are its possibly harmful consequences for other individual people what is regarded with pleasure. But there is always something personal about malice, because—both as a form of joy in, and as a desire for, others' suffering—it consists in a certain way of relating to other concrete people and their condition.

Still, I believe we should follow the lead that the phenomenon of converting bad into good (or vice-versa) has, like in the case of malice, *something* to do with the workings of comparison. In Hume's psychology comparison is very often called out (and faulted) for misleading us about the "intrinsic value" of objects,[17] and both malice and the desire for the forbidden are

[14] The idea of our own happiness therefore is not itself part of the content of malicious joy, say *others' suffering compared to our own happiness*. It rather plays a facilitating role for others' suffering to be the content of our joy. I take this point to be compatible with Postema's interpretation, according to which "the self is not only *operative* but is a very present *object* or focus of the heart's movement, an essential and consciously represented *term* of the relation from which the sentiment is generated" (2005: 276). The sentiment, *thus generated*, is still directed at others' misery. Our own good fortune, as compared to others' misery, seems instead to be the content of a passion very different from malice, namely the serenity felt upon safely watching a shipwreck from afar (T 3.3.2.5).

[15] The fact that this desire is "in order to reap a pleasure from the comparison" is the key difference between malicious desire and that desire for others' misery (or aversion to others' happiness) which is the result of hatred towards them (see e.g. McIntyre 2000: 80). It is also one difference between this "human" malice and the absolute malice described in EPM. Both are "unprovoked" and without a view to one's own long-term interest, but the former (at least when expressed in desire) involves the all too human element of seeking pleasure for oneself. Another difference is that "human" malice contains an element of relativity to self, to the extent that another's misery gets to appear good through comparison with one's own situation (see previous fn.). No such mechanism is presumably needed by an "absolutely" malicious creature.

[16] See Rickless 2013: 341-2.

[17] See T 2.1.6.4, 2.1.8.8, 2.2.8.2, 2.2.8.8-9, 3.2.7.2, 3.2.7.8, 3.3.2.4.

cases in point: joy at others' suffering and desire for something immoral *qua* immoral both involve something intrinsically bad appearing good to us.

However, in the case of the desire for the forbidden comparison acts at a less immediate level.[18] Let us consider what lies behind our judgment that something is forbidden or contrary to duty. Hume's analysis in Book Three makes moral judgment a function of sympathetic responses corrected in various ways by taking the general point of view. Our judgment that taking the fruit from a neighbour's tree would be for example unjust, and thus contrary to duty, presupposes at some level both an awareness of the interests that would be undermined by my action (interests which, in the case of justice, belong to the "whole scheme", and so need not be identified, say, with harm done to a particular person), and at the very least a tendency to have a sympathetic reaction of uneasiness at the thought of these interests being undermined by my action.[19] Now, my hypothesis is that, when we desire to steal the fruit, while knowing that it is contrary to duty, we might proceed to comparing the prospective pleasure of getting the fruit with the prospective harm consequent on our action. The effect of *this* comparison is somewhat humbling: our own pleasure must seem a rather small thing compared to the harm suffered by our neighbour *and* by society at large due to our acting contrary to duty. Thus our self is "diminished" by the comparison; and the more so, since (by assumption) we very much wanted to get that fruit (remember the original desire is here the predominant passion). But if our pleasure gets to encompass the very thing which humbles us—if we make *that* a source of pleasure for us—then our self can, as it were, lift up its head

[18] In Hume's text in fact there is room for an even more immediate role for comparison in turning bad or evil into an object of desire, and good into an object of aversion. Comparison seems to operate directly on any kind of good or evil, for example beauty and deformity:

> Deformity of itself produces uneasiness; but makes us receive new pleasure by its contrast with a beautiful object, whose beauty is augmented by it; as on the other hand, beauty, which of itself produces pleasure, makes us receive a new pain by the contrast with any thing ugly, whose deformity it augments. The case, therefore, must be the same with happiness and misery. The direct survey of another's pleasure naturally gives us pleasure, and therefore produces pain when compar'd with our own. His pain, consider'd in itself, is painful to us, but augments the idea of our own happiness, and gives us pleasure. (T 2.2.8.9)

If the result of comparison is, in the latter case, taking pleasure *in* others' pain (or pain in others' pleasure, as in envy), it seems that by parallelism in the aesthetic case the result must be taking pleasure *in* deformity (or pain in beauty), which would be just the aesthetic analogue of taking pleasure in immorality. But it is not clear that this is what Hume intends. On a natural reading of this paragraph, comparison with the ugly makes the beautiful appear more beautiful (i.e. makes us take more pleasure *in it*) than it would otherwise appear, rather than generate any favourable response towards the ugly. As Postema convincingly argues, in Hume comparison operates at various levels, and malice and envy are distinctive in that they involve a form of "reversal-comparison" (2005: 275).

[19] It is fair to assume that Hume has in mind cases of injustice when he talks about "contrary to duty." See above footnote 6.

once again. Pleasure in the forbidden thus would have the effect of "invigorating" the self in response to a humbling comparison. Like in the case of malice, it is the way the idea of self is affected by a comparison which plays the central role in converting something bad (others' misery, or the wrongness of our action) into something good, i.e., into a source of pleasure.

While this hypothesis goes beyond Hume's text, it is supported by an analogous explanation Hume gives of what he calls the "irregular appetites to evil", or desires for self-harm (T 2.2.8.11). How can the prospect of pain for ourselves give us pleasure and thus be desired? It is worth quoting one of the two examples he considers:

> [A] person may extend this malice against himself, even to his present fortune, and carry it so far as designedly to seek affliction, and encrease his pains and sorrows...A person, who indulges himself in any pleasure, while his friend lies under affliction, feels the reflected uneasiness from his friend more sensibly by a comparison with the original pleasure, which he himself enjoys. This contrast, indeed, ought also to enliven the present pleasure. But as grief is here suppos'd to be the predominant passion, every addition falls to that side, and is swallow'd up in it, without operating in the least upon the contrary affection. (ibid.)

In other words, the comparison between our miserable friend and ourselves has a humbling effect on us rather than an "enlivening" one. There is a good sense in which we are shamed by this comparison (had it been a stranger's misery, we would probably feel either pity or malicious joy instead). In turn, we come to regard with pleasure the prospect of inflicting harm to ourselves, as this harm would compensate for the difference and would "avoid so disagreeable a contrast" between us and our friend (ibid.). This is how we see pain for ourselves as something good and thus desire it.

There are several points of contact between desires for self-harm and the desire for the forbidden. First, in both cases there is a "predominant passion" (note that Hume uses this very expression in both contexts)—sadness for our friend, or the strong desire for a fruit, say—which is interfered with—by our present pleasure in the first case, by morality in the second case. Second, in both cases this interference "feels bad", and therefore it is something we are disposed to get rid of. According to my hypothesis above, the interference feels bad for roughly the same reasons: as the self is shamed by the comparison with the friend's suffering, so is the self diminished or weakened when its pleasures are contrasted by something—duty, hence collective interests—with which, to some degree, we sympathize (of course we need not *represent* this contrast to ourselves in just these terms—the idea or rather feeling of duty

is sufficient to do the job). Third, getting rid of the conflict in both cases involves the predominant passion "swallowing up" the inferior one (again, Hume uses this metaphor in both passages): our own pleasure or joy is swallowed up by sadness for our friend; moral qualms are swallowed up by the desire for the forbidden fruit. And the "swallowing up" results in both instances in taking a contrarian attitude: our own pleasure is made the object of aversion rather than desire; the forbidden is made the object of desire rather than aversion. Finally, both the desire for self-harm and the desire for the forbidden emerge as compensatory mechanisms for a perceived weakening or diminution of self. Desires for self-harm, in their own paradoxical and "irregular" way,[20] do appear to play a self-preserving function in our mental economy ("since my friend is suffering so much, I can't live with myself if I don't suffer too"). So in both instances we see at work the combination of a self-humbling comparison, followed and resolved by an attraction for what is ordinarily known as something bad.

The reasons in favour of explaining the desire for the forbidden in this way are therefore two. First, assigning in this case a decisive role to comparison dovetails with the (usually) distorting effects comparison has in the context of passions. Second, the interpretation fits well with the explanation Hume gives of the "irregular appetites", which present a similar explanatory challenge to Hume's view of desire. Moreover, if this interpretation is correct, it will also explain why Hume at T 2.3.4.5 does not spend time on providing much psychological detail: the fundamental mechanisms at work have been illustrated before, in the section on malice (T 2.2.8). An attentive reader should not find the desire for the forbidden any more puzzling than malice and the irregular appetites already accounted for.

6. Hume's place in the contemporary debate

Can people desire something bad simply *qua* bad? In recent philosophical literature there have been three identifiable approaches to this question. One approach can be called *negationism*: when people seem to desire the bad *qua* bad (and claim to be doing so), they are essentially mistaken about their own desires. They do not really desire something bad (say, something contrary to duty) *qua* bad, rather they perceive or believe there to be something positively

[20] "Irregular" is not the same as "perverse". Desires for self-harm are irregular, presumably, because pain never ought to be the object of attraction, and because such desires are an *apparent* exception to the general claim that desire is produced by ideas of pleasure. Still, they are not outside the remit of the "natural principles" of the mind, they are fully accountable.

good about the bad action.[21] A second approach can be called *parasitism*: people can really desire the bad *qua* bad, but they can do so only "parasitically", i.e., against a background where they normally take the bad as something to be avoided rather than pursued. It is a case of an exceptional desire which confirms the rule.[22] A third approach is *at-face-valuism*: there are no limits to what people can desire and for what reasons—in particular, a desire for the bad *qua* bad (just like the notorious desire for a saucer of mud) should not be any more puzzling than any other desire. Notably, at-face-valuism seems to be an implication of the Humean theory of motivation as defended by Michael Smith:

> the considerations that are motivating reasons are fixed by the dispositions we have to be moved in certain ways, depending on what means-end beliefs we have, and…there is no a priori restriction on what we might be disposed to do. (Smith 2012: 393)[23]

In this debate, I believe Hume occupies a distinctive and attractive standpoint, according to the reconstruction presented above. On the one hand, it would not be wrong to say that the desire for the forbidden is explained by Hume as a desire for what is bad *as good*, in the pleasure-based sense "good" is understood by Hume in the context of explaining desire. We do conceive of the object of our desire as good, to the extent that we associate pleasure with doing what we take to be forbidden. But this does not make Hume a negationist. It is not as if we must be regarding the prospect of pleasure or enjoyment as *itself* the attractive or good-making feature of doing something forbidden. Pleasure in Hume's theory of desire should not be understood as the aim of all our desires. Pleasure (or its idea) seems rather to be the efficient cause of desire—something without which desire (and many other passions besides, e.g. pride or love) would not get started.[24] Thus, when Hume mentions taking "pleasure in performing actions, merely because they are unlawful", it should be obvious that pleasure is not the focus of our desire for such actions, but rather it is the way in which *the unlawful* makes itself attractive to us.

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[21] Elizabeth Anscombe: "the good of making evil my good is my intact liberty in the unsubmissiveness of my will" (1963: 75). For a description and criticism of negationism see Velleman 1992.
[22] See Raz 1999: 32-34, and 2010. Sussman (2009) could also be put under this rubric, even if for him the "normal" background which makes (what he calls) perversity possible is social rather than individual.
[23] This is also the view defended in the classic piece by Michael Stocker (1979). But one does not need to be a Humean to embrace at-face-valuism: see Gregory's (2013) view of desire as normative belief, or Tenenbaum's (2018) view, where desiring the bad as such is an attitude of '[holding good] doing something bad'. Arguably for these two latter views desiring the bad as such is possible, but in some way irrational.
[24] This interpretation is defended among others by McGilvary 1903, Cohon 2008, Kail 2007.

Is Hume a parasitist? It might seem that he is, because in our reconstruction we saw how the desire for the forbidden only sets in under "normal" psychological conditions in which the bad does make us uneasy to some extent.[25] On the other hand, explaining this desire, just like in the case of malice and desires for self-harm, is a matter of telling a story about how "good" (i.e. pleasure) *is* associated with something known to be bad or otherwise taken to be bad. To the extent that "the rule" is to desire the good (i.e. what appears pleasant), these desires are really no exception to that rule, even though they might appear to be. If parasitism includes the idea of a suspension in the normal course of desire, Hume cannot be said to belong to this camp.

Since Hume's desire for the forbidden is both a genuine desire for something bad *qua* bad (despite the role played by pleasure), and a puzzling, but not exceptional case of desire, then we are left with at-face-valuism. I do think that Hume belongs to this camp as I defined it, but it is fair to wonder where exactly Hume's view stands here. Consider Smith's quote above. Would Hume agree with Humeans that desires consist in practical dispositions, and that there is no a priori restriction on what we might be disposed to do? Probably not—desires are passions, and as such they have a distinctive feel.[26] More importantly, it is not as if we could desire just about anything—what we can desire is limited by what we can associate pleasure with. So the question is whether there are any a priori restrictions on what we can associate pleasure with. Especially when it comes to "irregular" desires, Hume is doing his best to explain how we can associate pleasure *even* with the prospect of pain for ourselves. But this does not mean that Hume must deny any a priori restriction. In the end, it is not clear whether Hume would (or should) agree with contemporary Humeans on this point.

It is also not terribly important for the present purposes. What matters here is to highlight the advantages of Hume's solution. Unlike negationists, Hume does take at face value the experience of wanting certain things because they are bad, and his explanation in terms of pleasure associations does not impugn the self-understanding of people with such experiences, because pleasure does not play the role of the actual, if somewhat hidden, focus

[25] Since it is (part of) a violent passion, the desire for the forbidden is an unstable, volatile passion, not a "settled principle of action" (Loeb 2002: 5-6, Paxman 2015). But that alone does not make it parasitic upon other passions.

[26] It is true that "there are certain calm desires and tendencies, which, tho' they be real passions, produce little emotion in the mind, and are more known by their effects than by the immediate feeling or sensation" (T 2.3.3.8). But the very fact that passions always have a place on the calm-violent spectrum entails that feeling or phenomenology is an essential trait of passions, including desires.

of these desires. The bad attracts us when it feels good, but it is not feeling good that we seek, when we seek the bad for its own sake. Unlike parasitists, Hume does not need to come up with a speculative story about what is normal desire and what is not, or about the sense in which the normal "makes possible" the abnormal. The desire for the forbidden is puzzling, but not abnormal. Finally, unlike some versions of the at-face-value solution, Hume does not need to claim that desires could have just any old object. Moreover, he is committed to providing an explanation of desires, whereas others would simply take it as a brute fact that the forbidden gets to be someone's object of desire.[27]

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[27] Hume's view could be compared to Jennifer Hawkins's (2008). Both appeal to positively valenced feelings as partly making sense of desires, including desires for the bad *qua* bad. But where Hawkins resorts to "a primitive feeling *as of* certain responses *making sense* or *feeling right*" (2008: 259), Hume's desires stem from simple pleasures, characterized by feeling good rather than by a proto-normative "feeling right". For this reason (among others), I remain agnostic on whether one could usefully interpret Hume as proposing a guise of the good thesis of sorts, i.e. an evaluative or normative view of desire.

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