

*David Hume – Self-Love, Sympathy, Justice*

After interpreting various aspects of Humean theory, I have come to the conclusion that self-love and sympathy are two parts of a unified whole and that they, as such, can not lie in direct opposition to each other; balance of self-interest and benevolence towards others is thus established through the artificial virtue of justice.

I shall strive in this essay to prove that immediate self-love and sympathy are two parts of one unified whole. The foundation of benevolence is sympathy. In the “Treatise of Human Nature,” David Hume uses sympathy to describe a feeling of admiration towards acts of benevolence, which is a term that Hume uses in his essay “An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals.” The two words are used to essentially specify the same concept, which is indeed that human beings possess primitive instincts that incline them towards benevolence or approval of benevolent conduct. A good example of benevolence is found in the case of a person who slams a door on their hand and causes great injury and pain to their self. With all things being equal, without the pain or lack of it for that person affecting someone who is watching, the bystander will instinctively wince, grimace as if in pain, and will feel discomfort at the sight of another’s pain. This will occur instinctively, without cognitive reasoning. The bystander will not stop and devise thoroughly whether or not he should care; he will instinctively disapprove of pain towards another human being, in this case where his welfare as an observer is in no way affected. David Hume’s argument is founded upon this characteristic of instinctual human sympathy. The scenario that I have thus presented demonstrates that if human beings must choose for others when all things are equal and either choice does not affect

them in any way possible, they will instinctively choose the choice that will be more benevolent for those affected. Following through with this argument, we must understand that the precursor of benevolence is that instinctual sympathy. Benevolence is indeed a core element of human nature, but primal, instinctual sympathy is the root of benevolence itself.

When examining self-love, we will inevitably be drawn to re-examine the case of the slammed door on a hand, and will ask the question “Why do I feel discomfort at the sight of another’s pain?” The answer is found in the concept of self-love. When a completely unaffected bystander witnesses something painful for another human being, he will, as the observer, automatically remember a scenario in which he himself was hurt in the same or similar way. Even if the event witnessed never occurred for the bystander, he will generally have an instinctive idea of what it must feel like. He will thus be able to, in a way, feel the pain of the other person as a faint, instinctual memory. Self-love will ensure that he will dislike the thought of this pain happening to him and he will feel uncomfortable. The pain of others will therefore be connected to his own memories of pain and his own desire to not feel pain, which will in turn lead him to be sympathetic towards others, treating them as he would like to be treated. This is, of course, the scenario in the case when all things are equal, when either benevolence or malevolence won’t directly affect the third-party that is choosing for someone else. The bystander will, according to David Hume, choose sympathy towards others, rooted in his instinctual benevolence, and this benevolence will work together with self-love to give him understanding of the pain and good interests of others as his own. He will thus be

connected to others through his instinctive benevolence and his self-love. The two can therefore not compete, for they are two parts of one unified whole.

After examining these instinctive characteristics of human nature and specifically the instinctive, innate human virtue of benevolence, we will undoubtedly be compelled to further investigate where this shall lead. After reflecting upon the nature of human civilization, I understand that the founding reason for many important human institutions, such as government, law, religion, education, etc, is scarcity. Scarcity is defined as the limited amount of resources, pitted against unlimited appetites of human beings. How we distribute these resources among each other is determined by the artificial human virtue of justice, which balances out self-love with sympathy and benevolence towards others. How much should I keep for myself? How much should I allocate to others? How much more should I keep for myself than give to someone else, when I have perhaps “worked harder” and “earned something more” than another person who is perhaps less able and fortunate, or perhaps unfortunately and simply lazy to work as hard as me? How much should I share with this less fortunate or even lazy person? To answer these questions, we human beings have constructed the artificial virtue of justice, that balances out self-love with sympathy and benevolence towards others. Justice is not instinctive to human nature. It is however, constructed upon foundations of human nature that are indeed instinctive, which are that of sympathetic benevolence and self-love. After thorough and unbiased interpretation and balancing of self-love and sympathy towards others, we arrive at a system of allocating justice. The answer to the overall matter at hand is thus this: when sympathy and self-love conflict, a person should, according to David Hume, balance out the two through mediation, which is called “justice.” The person should

balance out the two in the best possible way, which will ensure a benevolent outcome for others and the satisfaction of natural self-interest, in the most efficient manner. Neither self-love nor sympathy should triumph; they must compromise, and this compromise is called justice, one of the most elemental of artificial human virtues.

We thus come to the conclusion that David Hume constructed a system by which two inseparable instincts of human nature work together. Self-love is a natural instinct of self-preservation and personal welfare, which in turn enables us to identify with the well-being of others and to benevolently choose what is of best benefit for them, demonstrating instinctive, innate human sympathy towards others. By possessing self-love, we are able feel what others feel as our own feeling, to possess sympathy towards others; similarly, by being benevolent and possessing sympathy towards others, we are able to benefit ourselves, due to the fact that it is in the better angels of our human nature to be benevolent. If it is thus in the better human nature to be benevolent and sympathetic towards others, we are directly benefiting ourselves, demonstrating our own instinctive self-love. In the scenario that self-love and sympathy conflict, a person should refer to justice, the artificial human virtue founded upon both instinctive virtues of self-love and sympathy, and as such, accordingly conclude which path is the one that will satisfy both instincts of self-love and sympathy towards other human beings, in the most satisfying manner possible.