

# Moral Sentiments and the General Point of View

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## Introduction

Ever since Adam Smith took note of the concept and developed it into his distinctive moral concept of the "impartial spectator", the general point of view has been conspicuous by its absence in the Hume literature.<sup>1</sup> Recently, however, discussion regarding the concept has become quite active within Hume scholarship. There is no doubt that Hume confers a significant role on the concept of the general point of view. In this paper, I take up recent arguments regarding the general point of view in Hume scholarship, and consider the general characteristic of Hume's concept of morals. Usually, the general point of view is understood as a moral device for making objective moral judgements. I argue that in order to understand the concept, it is not enough just to consider Hume's argument of moral sentiments. The central purpose of this paper is to argue that the concept of the general point of view is concerned with all the relevant concepts of human nature.

Hume himself does not systematically explain the concept of general point of view. Moreover, the concept appears only in Book 3 of the *Treatise*. This is a reason why the general point of view has received a biased treatment. I attempt to show that Hume's general point of view cannot be properly understood until the fundamental principle of the *Treatise* is clarified. In section 1, I outline Hume's argument in Book 3 of the *Treatise*. I argue the particularity of the moral sentiments. Then in section 2, I identify the context in which the concept of the general point of view appears in the *Treatise*. In section 3, I critically examine the interpretations of other commentators, and maintain that the general point of view is a predominantly epistemological concept. In section 4, I survey the concept of "general rules". And in section 5, I discuss the difference between general rules and the general point of view.

## 1. Outline of Book 3

### (a) Morality as Causation

In order to explore Hume's theory of morality, it is necessary to create a basic understanding of Hume's moral theory. As a first step, let me outline Book 3 of the *Treatise* titled "Of Morals" with references to the *Enquiry into the Principle of Morals*, as appropriate. Hume does not spare the trouble of defining "impressions" and "ideas" at the beginning of each Book of the *Treatise*.<sup>2</sup> Hume classifies moral sentiments as impressions of reflection. In the theory of morals in Book 3, the moral sentiments are dealt with as impressions. He says,

It has been observ'd, that nothing is ever present to the mind but its perceptions; and that all the actions of seeing, hearing, judging, loving, hating, and thinking, fall under this denomination. ... perceptions resolve themselves into two kinds, viz. *impressions* and *ideas*. (T 3.1.1.2-3; SBN 456)

It is noteworthy that Hume classifies judging, thinking, loving and hearing as perceptions.<sup>3</sup> In this way, Hume deprives "thinking" of its privileged status. According to Hume's terminology, the distinction between impressions and ideas does not correspond to the distinction between emotion and intellect, and his discussion indicates that he sees emotion as having the same cognitive status as other activities. In this framework of perceptions, Hume sets up the central problem of his enquiry as follows:

*Whether 'tis by means of our ideas or impressions we distinguish betwixt vice and virtue, and pronounce an action blameable or praiseworthy?* This will immediately cut off all loose discourses and declamations, and reduce us to something precise and exact on the present subject. (T 3.1.1.3; SBN 456)

This problem is one of the common concerns among philosophers of Hume's time (Norton, 1993: ch. 6). It is a problem about the foundation of morality, or about how human beings are related to morality. Among many theories, two trends are especially important; one is theological thinkers who are influenced by Platonic philosophy (Stewart, 2003) and the other is egoist theories of morality that reduce morality to self-interest.<sup>4</sup> To this problem,

Hume unequivocally answers that moral distinction is made by sentiments. Hume mentions the important reason for it:

Since morals, therefore, have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows that they cannot be deriv'd from reason; and that because reason alone, as we have already prov'd, can never have any such influence. Morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions. Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular. The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason. (T 3.1.1.6; SBN 457)

Hume understands morality as what causes orderly behaviour. There is an interesting parallelism between moral sentiment and causation in that both are concerned with human behaviour. Based on his theory of causation, Hume first tries to establish that morality is not a matter of reason. This is because reason is inactive and cannot motivate human action. Both causation and moral sentiments represent the qualities of objects, and influence the behaviour of perceivers. Therefore, it is possible to consider that Hume bases the argument of moral recognition on the same theoretical structure as that of causation. In his theory of causation, Hume argues that the "objectivity" of causation is a product of the custom of our minds. In a similar way, Hume concludes that the morality is not derived from reason but from sentiments.

By the positive assertion that morality motivates, he criticises his rationalist rivals who argue that morality consists in a relation detectable by reason. John Locke, for example, advocates a theory that morality consists in a relation that is demonstrative by reason (*Essay* 2.28.4f.). Hume maintains that the factual relationship that reason recognises in morality can be common both in humans and non-humans. His famous examples are "parricide" among trees, and "incest" among animals (Cf. T 3.1.1.24-25; SBN 466-468); while these would be regarded as hideous immorality in humans, they are innocent in non-humans. As morality matters in human behaviour alone, it means that no relation of fact is involved in moral judgement.

Hume's criticism of rationalism is based on the criticism of causality.

Hume demands that if someone tries to establish that morality consists in reason, they must show the moral relation that obtains between inner activities and outside things. Moreover, Hume demands that they must show that the relation has a "necessary connection".

'Tis one thing to know virtue, and another to confirm the will to it. In order, therefore, to prove, that the measures of right and wrong are eternal laws, *obligatory* on every rational mind, 'tis not sufficient to shew the relations upon which they are founded: we must also point out the connexion betwixt the relation and the will; and must prove that this connexion is so necessary, that in every well-disposed mind, it must take place and have its influence; tho' the difference betwixt these minds be in other respects immense and infinite. (T 3.1.1.22; SBN 465)

To indicate the answer to this problem, Hume refers to the conclusion he has shown in this theory of causation, that:

in treating of the understanding, that there is no connexion of cause and effect, such as this is suppos'd to be, which is discoverable otherwise than by experience, and of which we can pretend to have any security by the simple consideration of the objects. (T 3.1.1.22; SBN 466)

In Hume's discussion of causation, his intention is not to deny causation, but to establish causation as a human matter. The same is true in his discussion of morality; he denies the foundation of morality as an eternal truth detectable by reason, but does not deny morality as human causation. He intends to establish morality as a different type of causation in this Newtonian universe (cf. Schneewind, 1998, 361). As Hume describes morality as human causation, he argues how it creates a moral world that enables people to live morally.

### **(b) Moral Sentiments**

After establishing the basic claim that moral distinction is made by sentiments, Hume then proceeds to clarify which sentiment it is that makes a moral judgement:

Now since the distinguishing impressions, by which moral good or evil is known, are nothing but *particular* pains or pleasures. ... To have the sense of virtue, is nothing but to *feel* a satisfaction of a particular kind from the contemplation of a character. The very *feeling* constitutes our praise or admiration. ... We do not infer a character to be virtuous, because it pleases: But **in feeling that it pleases after such a particular manner**, we in effect feel that it is virtuous. The case is the same as in our judgements concerning all kinds of beauty, and tastes, and sensations. (T 3.1.2.3; SBN 417, italics Hume, bold letters mine)

This is the most significant place where Hume explains moral sentiments. On the surface, Hume does not seem to give concrete definition to the moral sentiments. He only describes that as "*particular*" pains or pleasures. But it is necessary to understand wherein the particularity of moral sentiments consists. In fact, Hume is straightforward: what is important in moral judgement is not so much the content or rationality, as it is the "manner" in which the observer perceives. We might call it "the Humean manner-formalism" to contrast it to the more famous Kantian formalism of universality.<sup>5</sup> It is significant that Hume characterizes morality by a particular manner of perception. The Humean general point of view is a perception of order, which lies not in the content of what is perceived, but in the way things are perceived. We should understand the manner literally as leading to the notion of refinement and politeness, which is a key term for developing man's moral capacity and society. For Hume, politeness is the counter concept to enthusiasm.<sup>6</sup> To repeat the point, the general point of view consists in the manner of our perception which accompanies the manner of our behaviour that best accords with it.

Hume asserts that the object of our moral judgement is the motive of an action. We can only observe external physical movements as a sign of someone's character. Human character is treated in parallel with qualities of objects. Objects are known only through their quality.<sup>7</sup> The same can be applicable in the recognition of human character. Character is understood as a quality of a person that tends to cause a certain type of actions. Hume's theory treats moral sentiments from the perspective of an observer, rather

than the cause of one's behaviour. In his criticism of Francis Hutcheson's moral sense theory, Hume denies that the moral sentiments are produced from any original quality of mind. Hume says:

'tis absurd to imagine, that in every particular instance, these sentiments are produc'd by an *original* quality and *primary* constitution. For as the number of our duties is, in a manner, infinite, 'tis impossible that our original instincts should extend to each of them, and from our very first infancy impress on the human mind all that multitude of precepts, which are contain'd in the compleatest system of ethics. (T 3.1.2.6; SBN 473)

Hume's denial of the moral sense theory implies that moral sentiments are independent of the direct governance of natural constitution; moral sentiments are not the direct product of human constitution, but emerge through experiences. This should be understood as part of Hume's strategic shift of moral theory from a substance-centred to a relation-centred approach. There is no inborn moral norm. Morality is exempted from the direct rule of innate nature, because morality is concerned with how to react to the causal effects of an action. Past experiences are the key for orienting ourselves to the present immediacy. This is the fundamental sense in which I argue that Hume sees normativity as empirically produced. Because of this essentially emergent character of moral sentiments, they can control natural sentiments (cf. Baier, 1995), and because of this empirical nature, morality can become a causal force for the formation of society as a system of morality.

In accordance with the tendency of an object to produce pleasure or pain, one comes to have a feeling of either approval which is a pleasant sentiment, or disapproval which is a painful sentiment. "The good" means something to be chosen, and "the bad" something to be avoided. The distinction between the good and bad is thus concerned with the real effects of things or situations, and not just with the behaviour of people. Even if people's actual behaviour does not exactly correspond to their perception of moral sentiments, moral sentiments are not invalid as the principle of morality. As Hume writes,

Let these generous sentiments be supposed ever so weak; let them be insufficient to move even a hand or finger of our body, they must still direct the determinations of our mind, and where everything else is equal, produce a cool preference of what is useful and serviceable to mankind, above what is pernicious and dangerous. A moral distinction, therefore, immediately arises; a general sentiment of blame and approbation; a tendency, however faint, to the objects of the one, and a proportionable aversion to those of the other. (EPM 9.4; SBN 271)

Hume reduces morality to the principle guiding human behaviour; morality literally means that something is chosen or avoided, other conditions being equal. This is a causal perspective of the good and the bad. Things are naturally chosen when they are pleasant, and naturally avoided when they are painful. In this way, Hume rewrites the Thomistic tradition of the natural law that reads, "good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided" (Aquinas, 1988: *Summa Theologiae*, 1-2, q. 94, a. 2). Hume considers this to be a perverse way of speaking, because if things have their natural way, they need not be ordered to go that way, and it is in vain to try to prescribe what is contrary to the course of nature.

Now it is clear that the Humean moral sentiments are concerned with human behaviour. Therefore, the particularity of moral sentiments lies in its causal power to make people generally choose or avoid an object. On the other hand, moral sentiments have a function of making moral distinctions that apply commonly among people. Hume says in the *Enquiries*,

The notion of morals implies some sentiment common to all mankind, which recommends the same object to general approbation, and makes every man, or most men, agree in the same opinion or decision concerning it. (EPM 9.5; SBN 272)

He also says that moral sentiments are "so universal and comprehensive as to extend to all mankind" (ibid.). Hume's universality is different from the Kantian universality, not a universality with no exception, but rather a generality. Everyone has a personal relation to an object. Therefore, the

personal sentiment toward the object is different from person to person. If one object commands a general approbation among human beings, it is because of the *particularity* that causes similar sentiments in observers. Moral sentiments have the particularity of commending the same object as equally pleasant for people in general. This is particular because objects have a different effect on people in accordance with their particular situation. For example, someone's ambition, say his high social status, does not cause everyone the same pleasure as the person himself. Hume's fundamental innovation is to seek for the locus of generality not in the original constitution of human beings, but in the perception of moral objects. This is why moral sentiments can produce an agreement among people.<sup>8</sup> Agreement regarding the perception of moral situations is crucial for moral behaviour. It is the basis for meaningful discussion; by sharing the same recognition of a moral situation, human beings can have similar responses, which make human cooperation possible.

On the other hand, in the moral sense theories that have individual human beings as independent moral agents, common sentiments can only be those that originate from individuals. Most typically, the egoistic sentiments are to pursue pleasure and avoid pain.<sup>9</sup> However, the selfish sentiments cannot serve as moral sentiments, even if found commonly among human beings, because they cannot commend the same things as good to be pursued to everyone. For example, precious metal, apart from its aesthetic pleasure, can cause a particular pleasure only to its possessor; to the selfish sentiment, precious metal is good only to the possessor, but worthless for others. This is why Hume thinks selfish sentiment cannot become a moral sentiment.<sup>10</sup> By the same token, altruistic sentiments, were they to be found universally among human beings, could not be moral sentiments as they are, because an altruistic act for one person does not mean the same thing for another. Among perfectly altruistic persons, there will be a conflict as to how to make the desire for altruism compatible among them. In terms of moral perception, altruistic sentiments alone cannot produce a general agreement as to the moral value of an object. Another method of agreeing what good and bad objects are will be necessary. That method is what the Humean moral sentiments purport to present, which can be applicable regardless of the moral quality of the human constitution itself.<sup>11</sup>



### **(c) Justice as an Artificial Virtue**

Immediately after having established the theory of moral distinction, Hume proceeds to discuss justice. There is no doubt that Hume has a clear intention of revising the natural law theories of justice by transferring them onto the foundation of human nature. He introduces the discussion by asking whether justice is a natural or an artificial virtue. In asking this, he again points to the causal aspect of the morality of justice. He argues that justice cannot be a natural virtue because there is no *cause* in nature that produces justice. Hume then explains the process by which justice comes to be established as virtue from the natural and psychological condition of human beings. Justice is reduced to the manner in which human beings cope with each other with limited but sufficient resources to sustain themselves: here is the reason why Humean justice signifies an unintended explanation of distributive justice. Though justice is artificial, Hume claims that it is by no means arbitrary. He derives the rules of justice from the psychological tendency of human beings to feel attachment to their possessions. Thus, Hume proposes that the convention of adhering to one's own possessions and not violating others' possessions is the basis of the first law of justice of ordering the stability of possessions. In this way, he depicts justice as a feasible rule not inherent in a natural principle.

Hume then provides the rules of deciding property. He declines both the Hobbesian theory of the order by the sovereign and the Lockean labour theory. He indicates as the first rule "present occupation". This shows that he recognises property fundamentally as a matter of custom. As the second law of justice, Hume maintains the law of transference of properties by consent. Hume conceives the concept of consent as the derivative means for adjusting the property relationship, preparing his criticism of social contract theories. In this way, he explains the system that derives from the development of human interaction centring on property.

Based on the first two laws, he proposes the last law of justice, the implementation of promise. Hume explains the third law of justice with similarly detailed argument as he employs in arguing the law of property. He argues that there is no natural motive in implementing promise. Hume considers that promise becomes necessary when the transference of

properties is conducted on a larger scale. Because of physical limitations, there are cases where people cannot physically observe the changes of property ownership. Then, promise serves as a convenient vehicle for conducting such commerce. More generally, promise enables the non-simultaneous exchange of labour which is the basic form of mutual cooperation. Thus promise is established from convention. It turns out that promise is the most comprehensive of all moral systems that enables all kinds of social arrangements. With the system of promise, the potential social system expands drastically. It is no wonder that social contract theories regard promise as the most fundamental basis of morality.

After establishing the three laws of justice, Hume discusses the origin of government. Hume finds the origin of government in the weakness of the human mind; though people acknowledge the observance of the rules of justice, when their self-interest is at stake, they tend to become blind to them, and are quite easily induced to break them. Therefore, they agree to establish a political authority whose task is to force people to observe justice. Government, once established, can command cooperative tasks that are beyond the personal capacity of any individual. In this way large scale projects of public enterprises are carried out through government initiative. Hume shares the idea of basic functions of government with Locke. However, unlike Locke, Hume clearly states that the foundation of government is not promise. For one thing, there is no factual credibility that government is established by promise, and for the other, Hume understands that the most fundamental condition for the functioning of government is the allegiance of the people, rather than their consent.

Hume calls government "composition" or even "the finest and most subtle invention" (T 3.2.7.8; SBN 539). He discusses government in a like manner as he discusses property. In both cases, the principle that supports the system is custom whose essence is the sense of attachment. Just as he discussed the rules of deciding property, Hume discusses the rules that confer authority on government. He maintains as the first principle--long occupation. This is clear evidence that he conceives the theory of government in the same line of argument as the system of property. However, he is no advocate of passive obedience. Hume supports the Glorious Revolution, and asserts the right to resist to protect the liberty of the public for public interest, even

though he deems it absurd to establish exact rules that stipulate when revolutions are desirable.

#### **(d) Natural Virtue**

After establishing artificial virtue, Hume discusses natural virtues, with which he intends to complete the moral system of the *Treatise*. Hume explains the natural virtues in terms of their tendency to make us approve individually. They have the direct tendency to increase the good of society. The difference between artificial and natural virtues consists in the fact that natural virtue produces good on the basis of individual action, and artificial virtue produces good only when mankind concurs in a general scheme. After the scheme of law and justice is established, it is accompanied by "a strong sentiment of morals" which proceed from "our sympathy with the interests of society" (T 3.3.1.12; SBN 580).

Hume considers a possible objection to his theory that if sympathy is the origin of approval, it would be hard to explain the variableness of sympathy in a manner compatible with the requirement of morality as the stability of moral approval. In order to answer this challenge, he claims that we place our selves in "some steady and general points of view" (T 3.3.1.15; SBN 581-582) to prevent contradiction and to reach the stable judgment of things. It is noteworthy that Hume uses the concept of the general point of view for the first time at this late stage. He compares this process to a correction that we make in terms of sensory judgements. At the same time, Hume suggests that sympathy with someone who has commerce with the people we judge is the most convenient means to set the stable standard. Hume indicates four sources of character traits that produce moral pleasure or pain: qualities that are useful or pleasant either to others or to the person that possesses them. He excludes from the sources of moral approval the interest of the observers, apparently reflecting his criticism of the egoistic moral theory. He asserts that unless people choose a general point of view from which to view things, people's feeling and judgement cannot agree with each other. According to Hume, moral interest and pleasure are constant and universal, and only produce particular feelings or pleasures.

Hume discusses the application of the four general principles to concrete cases of virtues and vices. He first explains the mechanism by which pride is

regarded as vice, and humility is regarded as virtue through the principles of sympathy and comparison. Then he discusses goodness and benevolence, and asserts that a general and stable standard leads all people to the same moral evaluation of the good quality. He says that when a person has no undesirable relations with people around him, and with himself, then his character can be considered perfect.

As the final main point of natural virtues, Hume discusses "natural abilities". He remarkably claims that there is no real distinction between natural abilities and moral virtues, because both are equally mental qualities, and are no different in producing pleasures. In other words, as both are in the same standing in terms of causes and effects, it is not possible to distinguish them strictly. Hume explicitly criticises moral theories that ascribe moral value to those people who have the best intentions without accompanying good effects. This can be understood as evidence of Hume's consistent project in the *Treatise* of liberating morality from a narrow confinement to cover the whole range of human activities. Though he makes a famous remark that virtue in rug is still a virtue, this makes sense only as derivative; if the virtue in good cloth has no good effects, then it would not be a virtue. He also asserts that the distinction between "voluntary" and "involuntary" does not make a difference to moral evaluation. By this assertion, Hume criticises the view that ascribes responsibility to free will. The implication of Hume's thesis that moral distinction derives from the pleasant or painful sentiment we perceive from the general contemplation of the quality or character. It is not essential whether the quality is produced voluntarily or not. This is also a result of Hume's position regarding the problem of liberty and necessity. Even if there is no room for free will in human behaviour, it does not mean moral responsibility is impossible. In this way, Hume excludes a theological or non-natural origin of morality, and elucidates morality as a thoroughly human matter that covers the entire range of human activities, including especially the economic. At the same time, Hume's moral theory implicitly and explicitly criticises many rival theories such as egoist theory, rationalist theory, and theological theory.

## **2. Interpretations of the General Point of View**

Let us survey the interpretations of the general point of view by Hume

commentators. I take up four representative interpretations which narrowly focus on the elucidation of the concept of general point of view.<sup>12</sup> Before making my comments on them, I will try to convey the outline of their interpretation.

**(a) Geoffrey Sayre-McCord**

Sayre-McCord's paper "On Why Hume's "General Point of View" Isn't Ideal-and Shouldn't Be" is a groundbreaking work on Hume's concept of the general point of view (Sayre-McCord, 1994). For the first time in the major stage of Hume literature, he brought the problem of the concept to light, and thematically considered Hume's general point of view, especially clarifying the difference between Hume's general point of view and Smith's ideal spectator, which was generally regarded as a development of the general point of view and treated as a nearly equivalent concept.<sup>13</sup> He clarifies that an important focus of the problem is whether the general point of view is real or ideal/hypothetical.

Sayre-McCord presents a clear interpretation of the general point of view that it is not an ideal spectator's point of view. Admittedly, there seem to be clear advantages of taking the general point of view as ideal observer theory; the general point of view can clearly indicate a normative standard for moral judgement. But Sayre-McCord objects to the understanding on the ground that "Hume's standard is a both more human in scope and more accessible in practice than any set by an Ideal Observer" (Sayre-McCord, 1994: 203). Though accessibility is important in Hume, and there are apparently no means for ordinary human beings to become omniscient or angelic sympathies. Hume's task is to explain our moral practice and justify it. Thus, Sayre-McCord proposes that the general point of view accomplishes this without resorting to the advantages of the Ideal Observer.

Our sympathetic responses vary in ways that are not reflected in our moral judgement. Sympathy remains parochial and variable in ways moral judgements are not, and is sensitive to actual effects. This is the weakness of the sentimentalist reading. Therefore, our moral judgement is not simply a reflection of sympathy. It is necessary to find ways of explaining how we can regulate sentiments' influence. According to Sayre-McCord, Hume holds that our moral judgements are appropriately guided not by how we

individually feel at any given time, but instead by how we all would feel were we to take up a general point of view. He interprets the taking of the general point of view as what we would feel from a certain mutually accessible point of view, emphasising that the general point of view must be mutually accessible. Sayre-McCord points out that the situation is perfectly analogous to all the others where we judge of things discovered by sense. In those cases, our standard of correctness is found in how things would appear to a normal observer in normal conditions, which is represented by the general point of view.

As to the reason why we should adopt the general point of view, Sayre-McCord holds that it is to resolve conflict. Were we to remain in the situation peculiar to ourselves, we will never be able to communicate. But intelligibility is not the only reason for adopting the general point of view. Sayre-McCord understands that adopting the general point of view is the basis of moral thinking, which is absolutely crucial to a harmonious social life. Where our sentiments of approval and disapproval are stable, we can have stable plans and projects. In order to embrace a standard that controls for sympathy's variation without losing sympathy's appeal, the only way is to introduce a mutually accessible and stable perspective from which we can all evaluate the world, which is the general point of view. According to Sayre-McCord, the Ideal Spectator's point of view cannot serve this purpose, because it is not sufficiently "accessible". He says,

Our estimates of the Ideal Observer's view of the effects of someone's character will differ in exactly the way our judgements of the actual effects differ. As a result, an Ideal Observer sets an inappropriate standard, not simply because we cannot take up her position ourselves (though we cannot), but because we cannot begin to anticipate what her reactions might be. Ignorant as we all inevitably are of the actual, subtle, and long-term effects of each person's character on everyone who might be affected, even earnest attempts by all to determine how an Ideal Observer would respond would leave us without a common standard around which to coordinate our actions and evaluations. No longer each speaking from her own peculiar point of view, each could still be speaking from her own peculiar take on a point of view she

would not possibly occupy. And this means an Ideal Observer cannot play the role that needs to be filled. (Sayre-McCord, 1994: 218)

In other words, the ideal observer's point of view would not resolve the conflict. On the other hand, the general point of view which represents the usual effects of a character is accessible, stable, and sufficiently univocal, thus serves as the standard to resolve conflicts. Thus, Sayre-McCord asserts that the advantage of the general point of view over other standards is that it is accessible to all of us. Because of the accessibility, he concludes, we can join "the *party* of human kind against vice or disorder, its common enemy" (EPM 9.9; SBN 275).

#### **(b) Rachel Cohon**

Rachel Cohon calls Hume's concept of the general point of view "the common point of view" (Cohon, 1997a). In her "The Common Point of View in Hume's Ethics", she first indicates that there are two problems regarding the interpretation of the common (general) point of view, which she summarises as follows:

First, moral evaluations become inductive, empirical beliefs about what we would feel if we really occupied the imagined common point of view, and hence are the deliverances of causal reason; this contradicts Hume's claim that the making of a moral evaluation is not an activity of reason but of sentiment. Secondly, given Hume's thesis that the passions do not represent anything else, he cannot say that our moral evaluations will better represent the object being judged if they are made from the common point of view. This leaves no clear reason to adopt it, rather than making judgments from our real position. Hume says that left to our particular point of view, we will encounter contradictions and be unable to communicate, but it is hard to see why. (Cohon, 1997a: 827)

Cohon finds the reason Hume introduces the common point of view in his replies to two criticisms: one is that the sentiments of sympathy are variable in accordance with the distance from the object, though moral judgement

should be stable; the other is that we do not disregard virtue even if the virtue is in rags, and does not have any real effect. According to Cohon, it is in order to reply to those two objections that Hume introduces the stipulation that we make moral evaluations from the common point of view. Taking the common point of view, as Cohon understands, is to treat moral judgements as cognitions, especially, beliefs (frequently counterfactual ones) about what someone or anyone would feel if she occupied a point of view close to the person being evaluated. This would make moral evaluations inductive, empirical beliefs, presumably based on past experience of the effects of people's character traits on themselves and their closest associates.

However, Cohon holds that the moral beliefs obtained from the general point of view can be taken as the deliverances of causal reason. Then, she claims that it contradicts Hume's explicit claims that to make a moral evaluation is not to infer or conclude but to feel in a certain way, and that making a moral evaluation is not an activity of causal reason but of sentiment. This is a problem because this can undermine Hume's antirationalism and his sentimentalist position. To this problem of the compatibility of taking the general point of view with his sentimentalism, Cohon answers that:

we feel certain passions from our particular vantage point, and whenever we contemplate the same character from the common point of view we feel another, weaker sentiment. That is, we feel two sentiments toward that same character trait. (Cohon, 1997a: 836)

Therefore, the general point of view, which produces inferential sentiments, does not exclude the sentimentalist reading. Cohon maintains that the two sentiments correspond to calm and violent sentiments. Thus, the common point of view provides calm and steady sentiments. When the two sentiments differ, violent sentiment, with all its fluctuations, is corrected. But Cohon claims that

The situated sentiment is the *general* principle of our praise or blame in the sense that it is the general origin or source of what later *becomes* our praise or blame.... So it [the situated sentiment] is the moral



sentiment, properly so-called, although under the best conditions, in which the steady sentiment converts the situated one, there really is no issue of which is the moral sentiment properly so-called. (Cohon, 1997a: 839)

In this way, as Cohon argues moral sentiments are not confined to the ones that are obtained from the general point of view, she faces the problem of why it is that we need to take the general point of view when situated sentiments are already moral sentiments. Therefore, her second question results from her answer to the first question. She says that since Hume asserts that passions do not represent anything, there is no guarantee that taking the common point of view produces a better moral evaluation than otherwise.

In order to answer this problem, Cohon points out that our moral judgments need to be uniform, mostly "because our moral evaluations always carry with them certain *other* judgments that *are* objective" (Cohon, 1997a: 840). Cohon holds that because of this extra-moral judgment, moral judgment should be uniform. She apparently agrees with Sayre-McCord that the general point of view gives us not a panorama, but an intimate glimpse. It is a viewpoint of those who have a connexion with the person considered. Cohon recognizes an important function of moral judgment to convey important information. Just as we need a stable point of view to inform others about objects, we need the common point of view in moral information. This is why the ultimate test of moral quality is the information of those who are nearest to the person. Thus, she holds that the common point of view with those is "an intimate glimpse of the person herself and her nearest associate" (Cohon 1997a, p. 845). She says,

The common point of view is a privileged position from which to make moral evaluations because it is a privileged position from which to make causal judgments about pride, humility, love and hatred, and moral evaluations are inseparable from these. (Cohon 1997a, p. 846)

In Cohon's understanding, "Hume is not giving an account of what it is for moral judgments to be warranted... he is only explaining the uniformity he

observes in them" (ibid.). Thus, according to Cohon, taking the common point of view is not necessary for making moral judgment. She says,

On my interpretation, then, Hume does not say that we should make moral evaluations from the common point of view because only such judgments are well-grounded. If someone makes her moral judgments not from the perspective of her own interest (this would be wrong kind of sentiment altogether), but from the situated sentiments she feels when she contemplates character traits in general from her peculiar point of view, rather than from common point of view, her resulting judgment is not false and not lacking needed support. (Cohon, 1997a: 847)

In short, Cohon understands the common point of view not as a specifically moral point of view nor as a point of view for justification; she takes "the common point of view as a mere fine-tuning of Hume's moral theory, not an overhaul" (ibid.).

### **(c) Christine Korsgaard**

Korsgaard's paper, "The General Point of View: Love and Moral Approval in Hume's Ethics" is an interesting twist to interpretations of the general point of view (Korsgaard, 1999). As she acknowledges, she does not attempt to be loyal to Hume, but to extend the possibility in Hume of a direction that might realise interesting theory, especially about the complex relation between loving someone and thinking him good or virtuous. Her leading questions in the argument are to explore "why we take up the general point of view", and "why we are inclined to think that the judgments we make from it are normative" (Korsgaard, 1999: 4).

First of all, we cannot appeal to moral ideas in order to explain why we take up the general point of view in the first place. Korsgaard understands that virtue and vice are intimately related to love and hatred in Hume. She modifies the problem into different terms of why there should be a normative standard for love. Then, Korsgaard indicates that the idea of a cause of love can be subject to a normative standard (Korsgaard, 1999: 9). She finds here the key to explaining why we take up the general point of

view.

According to Hume, love can be caused by many things, such as non-moral psychological attributes, physical attributes, external goods and virtue (Korsgaard, 1999:10). However, virtue is not just one of the many causes of love, but, at least "with regard to our mental qualities", the cause of love. Hume seems to maintain that moral approval is a calm species of love, because it is founded on a distant view or reflection. Korsgaard explains the relation between love and moral approval as follows:

When we view a person from the general point of view, we feel a particular calm species of love or hate, which is moral approval or disapproval. The qualities that arouse these calm passions are the ones we call "virtue" or "vices." But these are not merely particular forms of love and hate, on a footing with our more personal and unregulated passions. Moral approval and disapproval are corrective of, and normative for, our more violent personal loves and hates. (Korsgaard, 1999: 12)

In this way, Korsgaard translates the question why we take up the general point of view into why should there be a normative standard for love and why the general point of view should provide the standard. Korsgaard summarises Hume's own answer to these questions as follows.

So Hume cites, as the reason we need to take up the general point of view, the need to avoid the contradictory judgments of unregulated sympathy, the need to stabilize all sensory judgments, and the need to converse on some agreed terms. (Korsgaard, 1999: 14)

It is important and necessary, therefore, that there be some shared point of view other than that one we use. But Korsgaard still questions why a shared standard has to exist, if it is necessary for our conversation or for avoiding contradictions. She says, "the answer cannot be that our judgements about virtue are contradictory until we take up the general point of view, since we make no moral judgements at all until after we take up the general point of view" (Korsgaard, 1999: 16-7). We might be indifferent to whether or not we

concur with others in our loves and hates.

Thus, Korsgaard asserts that there is no answer in Hume's text as to the question of why we take up the general point of view, and why we take the judgements we make from the general point of view to be normative. She argues that the answer lies in that we need to come to some sort of agreement about what makes a character lovable. No one is recognised as lovable or responsible to some action unless she is not a cause of an action. Therefore, Korsgaard claims that "to think someone as a person, we must think of her as having a character" (Korsgaard, 1999: 29).

In order for people to be recognised as having a character, people must be placed among the members of their narrow circle. Their character exists only in the eyes of their narrow circle. Therefore, according to Korsgaard, "to see you as having a character is essentially to take up the point of view of your narrow circle towards you". She points out the factual link of treating people as a person and having the general point of view, summarizing it as follows:

We can now see why the general point of view is essential. To view someone through the eyes of love or hate is to respond to him as a person. To respond to him as a person is to view him as having a character. To view him as having a character is to view him as a cause, that is, a regular source, of happiness and misery to himself and others. And to view him as such a cause is to view him through the eyes of his narrow circle, that is, from the general point of view. A person's character, his personhood, is constructed from the general point of view. Thus the pressure to take up the general point of view is built into the original connection between love and its object, a person. (Korsgaard, 1999: 32)

Korsgaard explains why moral approval is normative for love in general. As Hume separates cause and object in the case of love of people, it is impossible to love people for themselves. But if moral love is the love of character, and character is the person himself, then, Korsgaard insists, we can love the person for himself, by loving his character. Moral approval should be grounded in appreciation of character. She holds "external beauty, rank, or money" cannot rightly be regarded as the inherent standard for

loving a person. Just as baking a cake implies making it taste good, or the notion of knife implies sharpness, "love by its very nature aspires to be the love of character, to find its ground in the person himself" (Korsgaard, 1999: 34). In this way, Korsgaard answers to the question why we take up the general point of view when we think about and respond to people. She sums up her answer as follows:

We take up the general point of view because that is the point of view from which others appear to us as persons. If love and sympathy did not impel us to view the world from the general point of view, our fellow human beings would just be so many useful or dangerous objects to us. According to Hume, it is only when we view the world from the general point of view that the moral world ... the world composed of people who have characters and perform actions ... comes into focus. (Korsgaard, 1999: 35)

In this way, Korsgaard connects the general point of view with the respect of person. It is possible to see that, as a hard-line Kantian, she attempts to present a Kantian interpretation of Hume's theory.

#### **(d) Kathleen Wallace**

Kathleen Wallace, in her "Hume on Regulation Belief and Moral Sentiment", interprets the general point of view as a focusing activity, employing a photographic analogy (Wallace, 2002: 83-111). According to her interpretation, the general point of view is a device for "strengthening of sentiments for those remote and weakening of sentiments for those near" (Wallace, 2002: 83). Wallace claims that her interpretation does not undermine Hume's sentimentalist thesis, but explains how sentiments are properly aroused and directed. She thinks that proper moral sentiments can be understood in a similar manner as the regulation of belief. Proper moral sentiments are like regulated beliefs. Wallace says, "regulating consists in the mitigation, not the wholesale elimination, of the influence of uncorrected beliefs and passions. (Wallace, 2002: 89)" She allies with Sayre-McCord and Elizabeth Radcliffe in thinking there are incorrect moral sentiments prior to the general point of view to be corrected by the general point of view.<sup>14</sup>

Wallace says,

A general point of view eases inter or intra-individual conflict (inconstancy and variation) as well as the tendency toward partiality in one's sympathy by focusing attention on relevant character traits and their typical effects so that the appropriate moral sentiments can be aroused via the mechanism of sympathy. (Wallace, 2002: 93)

Therefore, the general point of view can attain "steady and impartial evaluation". Wallace claims that the broader one's intercourse with others, the more one comes to realise the need for a common point of view (Wallace, 2002: 94). She thinks that the mind creates the general point of view by the "imaginative act of focusing" (ibid.), which she explains by using the analogy of a photographer selecting and focusing and in so doing creating a subject matter. In this way, she claims, the natural sympathetic responses of human beings become "impartial". Wallace takes the general point of view as "something invented" by imagination. In her analogy, she alleges three characteristics in the general point of view, a) a general point of view can make sympathy more extensive, b) a general point of view allows one to produce the appropriate vividness in the idea of the effects of a person's character traits, c) a general point of view facilitates the process of causal reasoning about the matters of fact in question (Wallace, 2002: 95). She notices that Hume tends to emphasize more the defects in our judgement on those distant from us due to the weakness of their impact on us, rather than the vivacity of self-interest and partiality in assessing those who are close to us. But she understands that we correct defective judgements of overestimation by taking the general point of view.

Another important point in Wallace's interpretation is that she tries to understand taking the general point of view as an analogous process to that of correcting beliefs. She understands that the regulation of moral sentiments involves a contrariety just as the regulation of belief involves a mitigating or weakening of an incorrect belief through contrariety. She summarises the process of the spectator making moral evaluation in the following ways:

1. to attend to those to whom s/he might otherwise be indifferent (and

- thus underestimate their character),
2. to be more judicious in assessing those to whom s/he might be partial (and thus overestimate their character),
  3. to make more accurate discernment of the causal relations involved as attention settles on the character traits or qualities and their tendencies rather than the particular persons,
  4. to have the moral sentiments of praise and blame aroused by the steady contemplation of the character traits and their usual tendencies,
  5. (with reasonable discourse) to generate more general principles by which to assess character traits, that is, by which to apportion praise and blame. (Wallace, 2002: 96-97)

Wallace thinks that moral judgment is a result of these processes. It does not matter for her whether these are done through conscious efforts or through unconscious habit. As to the problem between the "conscious efforts" interpretation and the "unconscious habit" interpretation that William Davies formulated, Wallace thinks that it can be both.<sup>15</sup> She applies the analogy of Hume's "wise men" (T 1.3.13.12; SBN 150) who apportion to evidence as a matter of habit. On the other hand, "the vulgar" habitually make unsound inferences; for them adoption of the general point of view comes from conscious effort. Wallace holds that regulation is the crucial factor to have moral belief, and that there would be no common morals at all, without the general point of view (Wallace, 2002: 100). She holds that the difference between the regulation with regard to belief and with regard to morals is that in the case of belief, the conflict is just within one's own mental activity, but in the case of morals, it is social. She formulates the differences as follows:

In Hume's characterization regulation in morals requires in some respects an opposite move from that required in causal reasoning. In the latter, the tendency of the mind is to overextend itself by not distinguishing carefully between accidental and essential connections. ... In morals, the case is more complicated in that one has to both employ the regulative rules of causal reasoning that involves

narrowing, and from a general point of view that requires a broadening of one's point of view, and intensifying of focus so that the relevant object(s), that is, persons, can appropriately affects one's sympathy. (Wallace, 2002: 100)

Wallace thinks that to have impartial moral beliefs it is necessary to broaden one's view and have broad sympathy. She emphasises that the regulation of morals consists not in the wholesale replacement of incorrect belief, but in the production of impartial judgement (Wallace, 2002: 102). Hume's reasonable person, or the "judicious spectator", would focus on the relevant facts and put oneself in the point of view that would allow moral sentiments of appropriation and disapprobation to be appropriately aroused and enlivened.

### **3. Meaning and Significance of "The General Point of View"**

Now let me clarify the understanding of the concept of the general point of view through examining the interpretations of above commentators. These four commentators and their diverse interpretations indicate a fairly accurate picture of the present interpretative situation of the general point of view.

First, Sayre-McCord's contribution is to have clarified that the general point of view is not a moral ideal. He successfully clarifies that to take the general point of view as an ideal spectator's point of view is to confuse Hume's theory with the idealist theory. He considers inaccessibility to be the reason why the ideal spectator's point of view cannot be a moral point of view. If the ideal spectator's point of view should be the moral point of view, every person must decide individually which is the ideal spectator's point of view. Thus there will be no concurrence in moral communication. However, it does not seem that Sayre-McCord solved all the problems regarding the general point of view.

First of all, he does not clarify the exact definition of the concept. Though Sayre-McCord seems to take the point of view of one's close circle as the general point of view, mere accessibility is a weak condition for deciding the general point of view. For example, his understanding does not exclude the delight of the closed circle of a successful thief from moral approval. He