
Hume and Hutcheson on Cicero’s ‘Proof Against the Stoics’

Abstract: This article takes its cue from an intriguing passage in Hume’s September 1739 letter to Hutcheson. After appealing to what Cicero proves ‘against the Stoics’ in book four of De finibus, Hume indicates that he and Hutcheson are in some respect opposed to one another as far as their views on virtue and moral motivation are concerned. While this may seem surprising, given the similarities between their approaches to the foundations of morals, careful analysis of Cicero’s criticism of Stoic ethics shows why Hume and Hutcheson should indeed be fundamentally at odds with one another in precisely the respect indicated by Hume.

Key Terms: Hume; Hutcheson; Stoic ethics; moral worth; obligation; honestum

This article investigates the views concerning the moral worth of actions, held by two major figures of Scottish Enlightenment philosophy: Francis Hutcheson and David Hume. To clarify these thinkers’ views on moral worth, I consider their different conceptions of acting from a sense of duty or regard to obligation in connection with the assessment of Stoic ethics found in Cicero’s De finibus bonorum et malorum. My aim is to shed light on how the sentimentalist approach to moral motivation and obligation taken by Hutcheson and Hume relates to a classic text in which the value of the ends of action is treated in connection with the Stoic idea of the honestum.
To begin our advance toward achieving this aim, let me quote one of the more intriguing passages in the history of modern ethics, which is found in a well-known letter of Hume to Hutcheson dated September 17, 1739: ²

You are a great admirer of Cicero, as well as I am. Please to review the ⁴ᵗʰ book, de finibus honorum & malorum; where you find him prove against the Stoics, that if there be no other Goods but Virtue, tis impossible there can be any Virtue; because the Mind wou’d then want all Motives to begin its Actions upon: And tis on the Goodness or Badness of the Motives that the Virtue of the Action depends. This proves, that to every virtuous Action there must be a Motive or impelling Passion distinct from the Virtue, & that Virtue can never be the sole Motive to any Action. You do not assent to this; tho’ I think there is no Proposition more certain or important. I must own my Proofs were not distinct enough, & must be altered.³

A rather perplexing interpretive issue immediately arises in view of the lines just quoted: why is Hutcheson, whose approach to the foundations of morals is in many respects similar to Hume’s, unwilling to assent to what Hume wants to establish by appealing to what Cicero proves? As James Harris has recently put this issue when considering the 1739 passage’s penultimate sentence and its bearing on the relationship between virtue and motives for action:

Hume goes on to intimate that Hutcheson might disagree with him here. This is puzzling since there is nothing in Hutcheson’s moral philosophy to suggest that in this respect, at least, he and Hume are at odds with one another. (2010: 208).
Is it true, then, that there is nothing in Hutcheson’s moral philosophy that should lead him to disagree with what Hume claims to be able to prove regarding virtue and motivation? Or is it instead the case, as Hume seems to assert, that he and Hutcheson are in this regard fundamentally at odds with one another, at least with respect to some aspect of the proof that Hume wants to provide by calling on Cicero for support?

In order to respond to these queries, we will have to determine what Hutcheson does not assent to. There is of course no question that Hume wants Hutcheson to assent to the proposition at issue, i.e., to the proposition that Hume wants to prove when he calls attention to his view of the dependency relation between ‘the Virtue of the Action’ and ‘the Goodness or Badness of the Motives’. Yet acknowledging what Hume would like Hutcheson to do regarding this proposition does not suffice to determine precisely what it is that Hutcheson does not assent to when Cicero’s argument against the Stoics is brought into play. For Hume’s appeal to this argument leaves open three distinct ways of understanding the point of contention to which Hume alludes. First, Hutcheson could reject the proposition itself that Hume wants to prove as certain by appealing to Cicero’s anti-Stoic argument. Second, Hutcheson could hold that what Cicero proves against the Stoics does not in fact establish the proposition that Hume wants to prove as certain. Third, it may be that Hutcheson rejects both Hume’s proposition itself and Hume’s claim that Cicero’s proof against the Stoics can serve to establish that proposition’s certainty.

Taken jointly, these interpretive options pertaining to Hutcheson’s evident disagreement with Hume drive this paper’s overall argument. Section I treats the ‘Proofs’ that Hume mentions in his letter to Hutcheson as well as some basic assumptions of the type of approach to the foundations of morals—specifically, the eighteenth-century rationalist approach—that Hume was opposing
when calling upon Cicero’s proof for support. Section II provides analysis of this Ciceronian proof in relation to Hume’s key claims in the passage quoted above. Against the background terrain cultivated in Sections I-II, Section III comes to grips with the three interpretive options mentioned above by examining how Hutcheson’s sentimentalist portrayal of the origin of our sense of obligation or duty is linked, by way of Cicero, to the Stoic conception of the *honestum*. It is with reference to this conception and its link to the sentimentalist portrayal that we can understand why, and in what sense, Hume and Hutcheson are at odds with one another in their respective accounts of moral motivation and the basis of actions’ moral worth.

I

Let us focus on the proposition that Hume proposes in the September 1739 letter, appealing to Cicero’s anti-Stoic proof, i.e., the twofold proposition that (a) for every virtuous action there must be a motive or impelling passion distinct from the virtue attributable to the action, and (b) virtue (in the sense of moral goodness) can never be the sole motive for any action. This compound proposition requires understanding of the proofs that Hume thinks must be altered on account of their insufficient distinctness, namely, the proofs which he presents in the third book of *A Treatise of Human Nature* (THN). For these proofs are meant to establish, as we will see, the basic principle of the moral value of actions for which the 1739 compound proposition serves as a specifying interpretation.

By way of introduction to his treatment of justice as an artificial virtue, Hume gives in the first section of THN 3.1 a general account of the basis of our ascriptions of merit and moral goodness to actions. In providing this general account, Hume takes the position that an action’s merit depends entirely on the motive for its performance. Moreover, he holds that ‘the first virtuous motive, which bestows a merit on any action, can never be a regard to the virtue of that
action, but must be some other natural motive or principle’ (THN 3.2.1.4). Hume takes this assumption regarding the merit-bestowing character of natural motives to be necessary since the contrary supposition unavoidably leads to a circular explanation of the relationship between the motivational basis for morally good action and the moral goodness of the actions that we are motivated to perform:

To suppose, that the mere regard to the virtue of the action, may be the first motive, which produc’d the action, and render’d it virtuous, is to reason in a circle. Before we can have such a regard, the action must be really virtuous; and this virtue must be deriv’d from some virtuous motive: And consequently the virtuous motive must be different from the regard to the virtue of the action. A virtuous motive is requisite to render an action virtuous. An action must be virtuous, before we can have a regard to its virtue. Some virtuous motive, therefore, must be antecedent to that regard. (THN 3.2.1.4)

Thus, Hume purports to expose the explanatory circle generated by the supposition that the mere regard to an action’s virtue could furnish the primary motive that excites its performance and makes it virtuous. He then goes on to illustrate his position on the connection between the merit of actions and motives by discussing certain morally salient features of the affective constitution of the human being. In doing so, he brings into play a characteristic of the human make that is supposed to lie at the basis of the sense of duty involved in our awareness of parental obligations. He also addresses the natural principle of humanity (or fellow-feeling) that underlies our motivation to perform benevolent actions that promote the well-being of others.

Hume concludes:
In short, it may be establish’d as an undoubted maxim, *that no action can be virtuous, or morally good, unless there be in human nature some motive to produce it, distinct from the sense of its morality.* (THN 3.2.1.7)

There is, of course, an obvious objection to be raised against this basic principle of actions’ positive moral value or moral worth if it is assumed that acting from the sense of an action’s morality can occur in connection with a regard to its obligatory character. For on this assumption it should be possible to understand the sense that we have of an action’s morality as involving a sense of duty or a regard to moral obligation that can provide a motive to act virtuously without any other motive to action being in play. Hume acknowledges this possibility when he recognizes that even a person who lacks the affective capacity to act from a virtuous motive or a principle ‘common in human nature’ can still be motivated to act ‘from a certain sense of duty’ (THN 3.2.1.8). But he also holds that such a person acts from a sense of duty in order to compensate for the deficiency of his affective constitution; therefore, he insists that the possibility of acting merely from a regard to moral obligation does no damage to the view of moral motivation and the grounds of meritorious action at issue in his ‘undoubted maxim’. For that possibility still presupposes the motivational efficacy of conditions that are distinct from the regard paid to the morally obligatory character of actions. Such is Hume’s response to the sense-of-duty objection that can be raised against his undoubted maxim.

This maxim implies, then, that an agent’s capacity to act from the sense of duty (or sense of morality; or regard to moral obligation; or regard to virtue, etc.) depends on her being subject to an affective motivational condition that makes it possible for her to have such a sense. This
implication, I take it, is what provides the key tenet that supports Hume’s general account of the basis of our ascriptions of moral goodness and merit to actions. In other words, it furnishes the grounding tenet of the doctrine of the moral worth of actions to which Hume’s thinking in THN 3.2.1 leads.

The first part of the September 1739 letter’s ‘certain’ proposition expresses this tenet when Hume asserts that for every virtuous action—that is, for every morally good action whose performance is meritorious—there must be a motive or impelling passion distinct from the virtue attributable to such an action. Moreover, it is in view of this grounding tenet that we can understand why Hume would consider the two parts of his 1739 proposition to be the components of a single principle of morally good action. For it is clear from the foregoing considerations on Hume’s THN account of the basis of actions’ moral worth why he would think that these two parts of his compound proposition entail one another. We can discern the character of this entailment if we consider the notion of acting from the sense of duty, in conjunction with Hume’s argument that the regard to the virtue (or moral goodness) of an action cannot be the primary motive for its performance. Let us therefore endorse (for the sake of clarification) the circularity charge that Hume levels against the opposing approach to the explanation of moral motivation. Let us also spell out the contents of the two components of Hume’s 1739 proposition in connection with the sense-of-duty objection that, as we have seen, can be raised against Hume’s undoubted maxim. If we do this, we can see that the following relations obtain between those propositional components: (a) if there must be a motive for action distinct from the virtue that one pays heed to when acting from the sense of duty, then it is not possible to perform an action from the sole motive of virtue; and (b) conversely, if it is not possible to act from the sole motive of virtue (even when paying heed to the sense of duty or a regard to moral
obligation), then there must be a motive for action distinct from the virtue that one pays heed to when acting from that sense or regard. Thus, given the material equivalence of these claims, it is apparent how the twofold proposition at issue in Hume’s 1739 letter to Hutcheson can be considered a specifying interpretation of the undoubted maxim of the third book of THN.\textsuperscript{12}

Even after clarifying the connection between this maxim and the 1739 letter’s twofold proposition, of course, it is not yet apparent why Hume was dissatisfied with the arguments that he had previously provided in order to establish that maxim and, implicitly, this proposition. This is, I believe, an interesting question for the overall interpretation of Hume’s theory of morals in THN.\textsuperscript{13} Nevertheless, for the purposes of this paper’s argument, I take will Hume’s expression of dissatisfaction at face value and concentrate on the following question: Can Hume legitimately appeal to Cicero in order to support the position that he takes on the moral worth of actions in both THN and his letter to Hutcheson?

Before turning to Cicero’s \textit{De finibus}, let me make several very general points regarding the type of philosophical approach against which Hume’s maxim and proposition were directed. I have in mind here the approach to the closely linked issues of the basis (i.e., the origin or source and grounds) of obligation and actions’ moral worth that was taken by eighteenth-century intellectualist or rationalist thinkers when they presented their theories of the foundational principles of morals.\textsuperscript{14} It will be useful to bear in mind the following positional claims, typically at work in rationalist ethics, as we go on in the next section to assess Hume’s use of Cicero’s \textit{De finibus} argument against the Stoics.\textsuperscript{15}

\begin{enumerate}
\item Morality is based on principles apprehended by the rational faculty.\textsuperscript{16}
\item Our moral cognition is itself prescriptive for action insofar as it involves the apprehension of rational principles that are principles of obligation.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{enumerate}
(3) The contents of such principles can furnish motives in the sense that any rational agent can be moved to act simply in virtue of its capacity to apprehend the fundamental deontic requirements of the faculty of reason that those principles express.\textsuperscript{18}

(4) It is on account of this capacity, and not on account of any non-rational feature of our affective constitution, that the human agent is able to act from a sense of duty or a regard to obligation when paying heed to the moral qualities of her actions.\textsuperscript{19}

(5) Insofar as we are motivated to act in paying heed to the deontic requirements of our rational faculty, the sense of duty, or regard to obligation, is fully sufficient to lend an action moral worth.\textsuperscript{20}

II

The previous section was mainly concerned to determine the connection between the two elements of the proposition at issue in Hume’s 1739 letter to Hutcheson. Having clarified this connection, let us now consider the (purportedly) Ciceronian core of what Hume takes to be the basis for adequately proving his proposition pertaining to the moral worth of actions. This core argument (see lines 2-4 of the 1739 passage quoted on page 2) can be explicated as follows: (1) The assumption that virtue is the sole good. (2) On this assumption, the mind must lack any motive that could incite to action, from which it in turn follows that (3) there could be no virtue (hence no good \textit{qua} virtue) with respect to actions. Did Cicero actually achieve what Hume says he did with regard to this sort of logical \textit{reductio} move, which Hume takes to be essential to the anti-Stoic proof that is supposed to support his certain proposition? Let us turn directly to the fourth book of Cicero’s \textit{De finibus} with this question in mind.

There would be a great deal to say about Cicero’s \textit{De finibus} in view of its signal influence on the history of modern ethics as a crucial source for the transmission of Epicurean and Stoic
treatments of good and evil. But I will limit the scope of my comments to De finibus 4:14-48 since these segments of the fourth book contain the key arguments for Cicero’s assessment of Stoic ethics with respect to the concepts of virtue and moral good or moral worth (honestum). My particular focus will be the passage in De finibus that Hume had in view when emphasizing the Ciceronian origin of the argument just discussed.

When examining the principles of Stoic eudaimonism, Cicero wants to understand Stoic thinkers’ special contributions to the account of the supreme good (sumnum bonum). He therefore focuses especially on the role played by the prescription to live in accordance with nature (secundum naturam vivere) in the Stoic version of this account. He demands of his Stoic interlocutor (Cato the Younger) an explanation of why even the earliest Stoic theories of value interpret the secundum naturam prescription in ways that imply a radical break with all hitherto available theories of the good—that is, with theories which standardly sought to combine their accounts of particular natural goods (for example, health, freedom from pain, wealth, and power) with a single, integrated conception of the supreme good for human beings. Cicero’s objective in putting forward his demand is to show that the Stoic view of the honestum as the sole good (solum bonum) is insupportable. Specifically, Cicero wants to demonstrate why, even if we accept that the good for human beings must be understood in terms of the eudaimonic state that constitutes the perfection of the human being as a rational agent, it is implausible for the Stoics to maintain that the honestum furnishes the only possible component of the supreme good. According to Cicero, the implausibility of the Stoic view stems from the fact that Stoic thinkers, starting with Zeno of Citium, provide inadmissibly restrictive interpretations of the necessary connection between living in accordance with nature (secundum naturam vivere) and living virtuously (honeste vivere).
Cicero’s attack against Stoic ethics proceeds along three intersecting pathways in *De finibus* 4:14-48. First, he targets the Stoic doctrine of choice with respect to morally indifferent things (*αδιάφορα*). He does this by arguing that the distinction which Stoic thinkers draw between ‘preferred’ and ‘good’ things amounts to a distinction between things lacking distinguishing features as far as the notion of good is concerned. Second, in keeping with his rejection of the Stoic axiological distinction between ‘preferred’ and ‘good’, Cicero maintains that the Stoics have no viable way of coming to grips with the affective components of the human constitution—the *prima naturae*—that nature itself provides as starting points for the self-perfecting agent’s development of virtue. Third, given the theoretical deficiencies just mentioned, Cicero contends that Stoic ethics creaks under the weight of a fundamental systemic flaw. On the one hand, the proponent of Stoic ethical theory must maintain that natural desire and impulse (*naturalis appetitio*, ‘*ορµή*’) are non-rational motivating factors that have positive normative significance because of the indispensable roles that they play in the emergence of virtue. On the other hand, the Stoic theory of the supreme good is such that these nature-given hormetic factors cannot be integrated with the account of a single end of action that is also an all-embracing good: the *ultimum bonorum*—literally, the ultimation of goods. Stoic ethics is unable to provide a coherent account of a unified supreme good, which according to Cicero is what any viable form of philosophical ethics must be able to provide.

The pathways of criticism just mapped bring us to the *De finibus* passage that Hume had primarily in mind in his 1739 communication with Hutcheson. I quote this passage as it is rendered in the recent Cambridge translation of *De finibus*:\(^29\)
Here is […] a point to which I take great exception. You show, at least to your own satisfaction that what is moral \([quod honestum sit]\) is the only good \([solum bonum]\). You then claim, however, that there are starting-points laid before us which are adapted and suited to our nature, and that it is in selecting from among these that virtue \([virtus]\) may arise. It was wrong of you to have located virtue in an act of selection, since it means that the ultimate good \([bonorum ultimum]\) will itself be in pursuit of some further thing. The sum total of goods must include everything worth adopting, choosing or wishing for, or else the ones who possess it will still want something more … But you Stoics propose as your good nothing other than rightness and morality \([rectum atque honestum]\). All of you who are looking for such a principle will return to nature, […] To you all, nature will make the following just riposte: it is wrong to seek the standard for a happy life \([finem beate vivendi]\) elsewhere, while seeking the principles of conduct from nature herself; there is a single unified system \([unam rationem]\) encompassing both principles of conduct and ultimate goods \([principia rerum agendarum et ultima bonorum]\) […] In just the same way Zeno was wrong was wrong to claim that nothing other than virtue carries any weight in the attainment of the supreme good \([summum bonum]\). It is completely inconsistent of the Stoics to say that one returns to nature to seek out a principle of appropriate action and duty \([agendi principium, id est offici]\). Considerations of action and duty do not motivate us to desire the things that are in accordance with nature. Rather, the latter are what motivate our desires and our actions.
The final sentence of the Latin text—which for stylistic reasons is broken up into two sentences in most English translations—displays the key move in the anti-Stoic proof to which Hume refers when in his letter to Hutcheson he writes: ‘if there be no other Goods but virtue, tis impossible there can be any Virtue; because the Mind would then want all Motives to begin its Action upon’. The question that we must deal with, again, is whether Cicero actually does what Hume thinks he does when making this move. To decide this, let me first provide a (somewhat charitable) gloss for the argument that runs through the passage as a whole:

(1) The basic Stoic position is this: the *honestum* (understood as living virtuously, in accordance with nature) constitutes the sole good. But the Stoics also propose that we are subject to natural motivating factors that have essential normative import for our living in conformity with what the *honestum* requires. For, while the Stoics hold that these factors do not supply constitutive features of the sole good as such, they recognize that our developed capacity to live in conformity with the *honestum* (in the sense of *honeste vivere*) depends on the appropriateness of our selective activity with respect to the things that furnish the natural starting points for the development of virtue. Thus, given the normative significance of these starting points with respect to the end of living happily, the Stoics implicitly acknowledge that the sum total of goods (*summum bonorum*) must include everything that is to be adopted, chosen, or wished for even when they insist that the *honestum* is the sole good.

(2) Hence the monumental inconsistency that underlies and drives Stoic ethics: The Stoics appeal to nature in order to have a single rational ground that would contain both the principles of action and the principle of ultimations of goods (*una ratio qua et principia rerum agendarum et ultima bonorum continerentur*). At the same time, however, their
understanding of the *honestum* as the sole good requires them to hold that nothing other than virtue or vice affects the attainment of the supreme good.

(3) One cannot, then, self-consistently hold *both* that the supreme good must be understood as the *honestum* alone *and* that one returns to nature in order to seek out a principle of action that is also a principle of duty (*agendi principium, id est offici*)—namely, the rational ground of action and duty which contains the prescription that we are to desire the things that are in accordance with nature even when these things are what supplies the impulse for our desire.31

So much for Cicero’s capstone argument against the Stoics in *De finibus* 4:46-48. How exactly does Hume’s basic understanding of this argument, as discussed in the first paragraph of this section (see p. 9), stack up against what Cicero in fact maintains?

In coming to grips with this question, the first thing to notice is a point concerning the semantic content of the final sentence of the Latin text. I refer here to the phrase *ad ea quae secundum naturam sunt appetenda*. In rendering this phrase as ‘to desire the things that are in accordance with nature’, the English translation that I have quoted above does not capture the prescriptive import of Cicero’s use of the gerundive (*sunt appetenda*) in order to express, periphrastically, necessity in respect of action—that is, in order to indicate practical necessity. Here, then, is an alternative translation of the last compound sentence of the Latin passage, a translation that is meant to capture not only the prescriptive force of the gerundive but also to do proper justice to the technical philosophic import of the expression *ratio actionis aut offici*: 
For the rational ground of action or duty does not impel [us] toward those things which in accordance with nature are to be desired. Instead, both desire and action are motivated by these things.

What are the ‘these things’ by which desire and action are motivated? They are the things that in accordance with nature are to be desired. More precisely, they are the things which, in accordance with nature, we ought to desire even if they are what supplies the hormetic impulse to act in conformity with the rational ground contained in the principle of acting that is also the principle of duty which prescribes that things in accordance with nature are to be desired.

That’s it. That is all that Cicero’s argument purports to establish. It is supposed to establish that the Stoics cannot self-consistently maintain that the honestum is the sole good while also adhering to a principium offici that prescribes the attainment of certain natural goods as conditions for the realization of virtue. It is not meant to establish, and it does not establish, that there could be no motive to action—and consequently no virtue with respect to actions—if virtue (in the sense of honeste vivere that features in the idea of the honestum) were the sole good. Nor does Cicero’s argument support either one of the mutually implicative parts of Hume’s certain proposition. It does not prove, nor was it meant to prove, that for every action there must be in the agent ‘an impelling Passion’—that is, a hormetic impulse—distinct from virtue or the regard to virtue. Nor does Cicero’s argument serve to prove that virtue or the regard to virtue cannot be the sole motive to any action.

We may grant, then, that Cicero successfully proves that Hume’s ‘Virtue’ (on its interpretation as honestum and in terms of the corresponding honeste vivere requirement) cannot be the sole good if there is a principle of duty or appropriate action that calls for the attainment
of certain natural goods. Yet it does not follow that this Ciceronian disproof is what furnishes the theoretical platform from which to prove that for every virtuous action there must be a motive distinct from virtue or the regard paid to it. Nor does it follow that one may use the disproof that Cicero directs against the Stoics as a way to establish that neither virtue nor the mere regard to virtue can furnish the sole motive for any action. Thus, Hume’s justificatory appeal to Cicero’s capstone argument against the Stoics in the fourth book of De finibus is off its proper mark.

Moreover, the appeal to Cicero’s capstone argument seems to be straightforwardly counterproductive as far as Hume’s own purpose is concerned. We should note well the contra-Humean circle implicit in the final sentence of that argument, which is in fact the sentence that furnishes the focal point of Hume’s call for support from Cicero. According to Cicero, the things by which virtue-promoting desire and action are motivated are the very things which, in accordance with nature, we ought to desire precisely insofar as they impel us to act in conformity with the rational ground contained in the principle of acting that is also the principle of duty which prescribes that things in accordance with nature are to be desired. Whatever we—historically freighted as we are with all manner of naturalistic fallacy detection equipment—may wish to say about this final step in Cicero’s argument, the least we can say is that it does not offer an obvious way to establish that the regard to virtue, or to duty, presupposes a virtuous motive that is necessarily antecedent to that regard. There is, then, apparently some historical irony in Hume’s justificatory appeal to Cicero. For it may even initially look like the conclusion of Cicero’s argument against the Stoics should lend greater support for an anti-Humean rationalist theory of actions’ moral worth than it does for the theory implicit in Hume’s THN. And indeed, it would do this if the following tenet were essential to the approach to the nature of moral obligation taken by eighteenth-century rationalists—namely, the tenet that actions
motivated solely by the regard to duty are actions motivated on account of a rational ground which prescribes, in accordance with nature, that some things are to be desired insofar as they impel us to act on non-rational grounds.

To my knowledge, though, no eighteenth-century rationalist would be intent on establishing this as an essential tenet of the theory of morals, any more than Hume would try to show that the mere regard to duty can suffice to ensure that an action’s positive moral value derives from its being motivated by such a regard antecedently to every affective motivational condition. Let us recall that the rationalist approach to the foundations of morals may involve the supposition that the sense of duty, or the regard to obligation, is sufficient to lend an action moral worth. It should be noted here that this supposition entails that the regard that one pays to duty and moral obligation can suffice for an action to have a positive moral value independently not only of all opposing or concurrent motives, but also of any motive that might be thought to furnish a condition of our coming to have that kind of regard. When considered using the deontic vocabulary that Hume and his contemporaries link to their characterizations of virtuous action, however, the whole point of Cicero’s capstone argument against the Stoics is to show that conditions of our regard to duty or obligation can perfectly well be furnished by motives for action that cannot be supplied by that regard alone. Thus, while Cicero’s argument does not serve to bolster Hume’s position that the mere regard to duty or obligation cannot supply a motive for any action that has genuine moral worth, neither does it lend support to the rationalist supposition that this sort of regard alone can be sufficient to give an action such worth. This is quite apart from every motive that opposes, concurs with or furnishes a condition of our having and exercising that exclusive regard.
We are now in a position to take up the question that has guided our considerations on Hume and Cicero. That lead question, once again, is this: Why is Hutcheson (whose approach to the foundations of ethics is many respects similar to Hume’s) unwilling to assent to what Hume wants to establish by appealing to what Cicero proves against the Stoics? As I pointed out before, we need to know exactly what it is that Hutcheson does not assent to if we are to respond confidently to this general query. Is it (1) the proposition whose certainty Hume wants to establish by appealing to Cicero’s proof against the Stoics? Or is it (2) that what Cicero is supposed to demonstrate by means of this proof does not establish the certainty of the proposition that Hume wants to prove? Or is it (3) both Hume’s proposition and Cicero’s proof taken together? To be sure, dealing in a philologically responsible manner with all three of these sub-queries would demand a far more nuanced treatment of Hutcheson’s relation to Stoic thought than can be undertaken here. Still, given the results of our analysis of Cicero’s capstone argument against the Stoics, I think that we can state at least the following with quite considerable confidence: Hutcheson has in any event very good reason not to assent to the claim that what Cicero proves against the Stoics establishes the certainty of the proposition that ‘to every virtuous Action there must be a Motive or impelling Passion distinct from the Virtue, & that Virtue can never be the sole Motive to any Action’. For Hutcheson has every reason to reject Hume’s supposition about what Cicero proves—namely, the supposition ‘that if there be no other Goods but Virtue, tis impossible there can be any Virtue; because the mind would then want all Motives to begin its Actions upon’.

Thus, by having shown (in Section II) that this supposition is in fact misplaced—that it is not an assumption shared by Cicero in his De finibus argument against the Stoics—we are able to provide a tenable response to query (2). That is to say, as long as we can accept that Hutcheson
was acquainted with this argument, we can also plausibly conclude that Hutcheson rejects the claim that what Cicero proves establishes the certainty of the proposition that Hume wants to prove.

Now what about the first and third queries? Clearly, our conclusion concerning query (2) brings us to the point of departure for a partial response to query (3) as well. For as long as Hutcheson is willing to hold that there are goods apart from ‘Virtue’ (or the honestum), he can have no reason to repudiate Cicero’s argument against the Stoics—not the argument in its entirety, at any rate—unless he is prepared to endorse what he has every reason to regard as a misplaced supposition about what Cicero proves. Yet this addresses only the second part of the third query. It still leaves wide open the answer to its first part, i.e., the part that is one and the same as the question posed by query (1). Perhaps, though, our investigations thus far furnish us with everything that we need in order to take on even this single remaining question. To see how this can work, let us proceed by spelling out what follows from the rejection of Hume’s misplaced supposition when our analysis of Cicero’s capstone argument is taken in conjunction with the considerations that have already been presented on the sentimentalist and rationalist approaches to the moral worth of actions.

As we have seen, the response to our second specifying query is based on the analytic result that Cicero’s capstone argument proves neither that there must be in the agent a hormetic impulse distinct from honestum-determined virtue nor that such virtue cannot be the sole motive to any action. Consequently, given this negative result, we may sensibly ask whether Hutcheson’s understanding of what Cicero does not prove against the Stoics furnishes him (namely, Hutcheson) with good reason to hold that the regard to virtue—and consequently the sense of duty or the regard to moral obligation—can be the sufficient (and even the sole) motive
to action. If it does, then there will be decisive reason to think that Hutcheson’s sentimental
approach to ethics involves the acceptance of a doctrine of moral worth that involves the
repudiation of Hume’s ‘certain’ proposition concerning the basis of actions’ moral worth.\textsuperscript{39}

The last question posed is also one that takes us well beyond what can be effectively
established in the space of a single article. But it is still feasible to set the stage for a reply that
can be supported by full-fledged investigation. Consider, then, the following lines from Cicero’s
\textit{De officiis}, which are translated from the Latin epigraph inscribed on the title page of \textit{An Inquiry
into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue} (IBV):

\textit{[N]ature and reason [...] hold that beauty, abiding consistency, and order in deliberation and
deed are to be preserved. From these elements is forged and fashioned that honestum which
is the subject our inquiry—something that, even though it be not [generally] esteemed as
noble, is still the honestum; and that by [its] nature is praiseworthy even if it be praised by no
one. You see here the very form and, as it were, the face of the honestum which, if it could be
discerned by the eye, would call forth a wonderful love of wisdom.}\textsuperscript{40}

Let us suppose here that, for a thinker of Hutcheson’s caliber, epigrammatic inscriptions on title
pages are there for the sake of something more than ornamentation. On this supposition, there are
two salient points to underscore when the lines just quoted are viewed against the backdrop of
our analysis of Cicero’s capstone argument against the Stoics. First, Hutcheson clearly
acknowledges that Cicero leaves plenty of ‘room for the honestum’.\textsuperscript{41} Second, even though he
had to be well aware that Cicero repudiates the idea of the honestum as the one and only good,
Hutcheson seems to be suggesting that the investigation of the honestum’s constitutive elements
as well as the \textit{forma honesti} itself can still provide the subject matter for inquiry into the \textit{original}
of our ideas of virtue.
The relevant investigation in this regard is furnished by the second treatise in Hutcheson’s aesthetic and moral Inquiry, namely, his ‘Inquiry Concerning the Original of Our Ideas of Virtue or Moral Good’. As it happens, the underlying centrality of the idea of the honestum for Hutcheson’s foundational theory of morality in this second treatise is well known to us from recent scholarship, especially from James Moore’s examination of the relationship between Cicero-inspired modern uses of that idea and Hutcheson’s conception of benevolence as the ‘Universal Foundation of our Sense of Moral Good’. Thus, presupposing this centrality as already established (at least in principle), I would like to proceed here by focusing on the general account of obligation that Hutcheson provides in the context of his honestum-imbued theory of morals, i.e., the account found in the final chapter of Treatise II.

Hutcheson begins this chapter by endeavoring to show how instinctually-anchored benevolence furnishes the only proper basis for understanding the origin of our idea of obligation as well as the nature of obligation itself. Hutcheson’s approach to the question of obligation thus eschews the attempt to ground moral obligation by linking self-love to the external sanctions of law and to the power of a superior. It also repudiates the attempt to use the tenets of rational egoism in order to account for our sense of obligation without relying on the notions of law and external sanctions. Instead, Hutcheson’s alternative approach is to ground obligation and account for our sense thereof by insisting that benevolence is an original feature of the human affective frame that motivates both moral approbation and action:

If by Obligation we understand a Determination, without regard to our own Interest, to approve Actions, and to perform them; which Determination shall also make us displeas’d with our selves, and uneasy upon having acted contrary to it; in this meaning of the word Obligation, there is naturally an Obligation upon all Men to Benevolence; and they are still
under its Influence, even when by false, or partial Opinions of the natural Tendency of their Actions, this moral Sense leads them to Evil; unless by long inveterate Habits it be exceedingly weaken’d. For it scarce seems possible wholly to extinguish it. Or, which is to the same purpose, this internal Sense, and Instinct toward Benevolence, will either influence our Actions, or else make us very uneasy and dissatisfy’d; and we shall be conscious that we are in a base unhappy State, even without considering any Law whatsoever, or any external Advantages lost, or Disadvantages impending from its Sanctions. (IBV: 176-177)

In this passage, Hutcheson is by no means especially scrupulous about sorting through the range of distinctions that we might care to see drawn between (i) obligation as such, (ii) the obligation to benevolence qua universal natural obligation, (iii) the moral sense that can lead us to evil on account of false or partial opinions of the tendencies of our actions, and (iv) the internal sense and—or—instinct toward benevolence that either influences our actions or else makes us uneasy or dissatisfied with ourselves. Nor does he explain precisely how the moral sense is related to the instinct toward benevolence when that sense is understood as the determination of the mind by which we approve and perform actions. Yet one thing is quite clear from these considerations on the connection between obligation and benevolence: If our basic conception of what binds us to act is couched in terms of an affective determination to perform the actions that our moral sense leads us to approve, then we must understand the obligation to act benevolently as the deontic determination of the human affective constitution. Specifically, we must understand it as the affective deontic determination by which we can be naturally inclined to act without regard to our own interest or to agent-external factors that constrain us to act in obedience to practical laws. In other words, as Hutcheson puts it, the ‘Obligation upon all Men to Benevolence’ (italics mine) must be thought of as the ground of action supplied by, and originating in, the ‘Instinct
toward Benevolence’ (italics mine), i.e., the affective determination of the human soul (or mind) that can move us to act for the good of others independently of every consideration of self-interest, law, sanction, and external advantage.

From the perspective of this paper’s argument, the crucial implication of Hutcheson’s considerations on the natural basis of obligation is therefore this: No motivational condition antecedent to the sense of obligation is required in order to explain how acting from the sense of duty, or from a regard to moral obligation, is possible. For no Humean charge of explanatory circularity (see p. 5) can reasonably be leveled if no such condition can be prior to the obligation that moves us to act. In other words, there can be no plausible circularity charge if there is no motivational condition in play that is distinct from, and hence possibly antecedent to, the determination of our affective frame that moves us to act in the manner that it is our duty to act. And as long as we act in this manner—that is, as long as we are actually moved to act from benevolence as an affective determination—we will necessarily be acting from a sense of duty or a regard to moral obligation insofar as we are aware of what we are doing. Thus, on Hutcheson’s account of the subjective source of obligation, there is simply nothing that could ever keep that kind of sense or regard from being able to be the motive—and indeed, the sole motive—to morally good action, as long as benevolence is understood to be the original determination of the human affective constitution that is itself also a deontic determination.

From Hutcheson’s perspective, then, it seems that this last point ought to provide the crucial component of a general theory of obligation. Such a theory would be grounded in a consistently sentimentalist account of the origin of our sense of obligation, an account that in turn has its place in a foundational ethical theory that treats of the elements and the form of the honestum. Moreover, judging from what Hume writes in September 1739 about his disagreement with
Hutcheson, that same point would also seem to be the essential *Hutchesonian* point that Hume implicitly rejects when he appeals to what Cicero is supposed to prove against the Stoics’ conception of the *honestum* as the sole good. Thus, as long as we can be confident that Hutcheson rejects the supposition that what Cicero proves against the Stoics supports the position that Hume takes regarding the basis of moral motivation, we also have good reason to think that Hutcheson rejects the proposition concerning the moral worth of actions that Hume wants to prove.

If the argument of this paper is sound, then, it goes to show that Hume and Hutcheson are in fact fundamentally at odds with one another in precisely the respect signaled by Hume himself in his 1739 communication. For it clarifies why there is no reason to think that Hutcheson *should* assent to the proposition that grounds Hume’s approach to the question of actions’ moral worth.

REFERENCES


Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 204-222.


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1 Citation of Cicero’s *De finibus* and *De officiis* accords with the book and marginal numbering conventions followed in the respective Oxford Classical Texts editions of these works. References to J. Y. T. Grieg’s edition of *The Letters of David Hume* (= Letters [Grieg]) cite volume and page numbers. References to Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature* (= THN) cite Book, Part, Section, and Paragraph(s) according to the Clarendon Hume Series edition by D. F. Norton and M. J. Norton (Oxford: 2007). References to Hume’s *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* (= EPM) cite Section and Paragraph(s) according to the Clarendon Hume Series edition by T. L. Beauchamp (Oxford: 1998). Hutcheson’s *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* is abbreviated as IBV. In citations of works by other eighteenth-century thinkers, the dates given in square brackets indicate years of first publication. (Where feasible, I have cited editions accessible online.)

2 For discussion concerning the background of this letter as well as its ramifications for Hume’s professional relationship with Hutcheson, see Moore 2002: 376-379.

3 *Letters* (Grieg) 1:35.

4 In the passage quoted, Hume is evidently not claiming that the assumption stated after the colon (‘And tis on the Goodness […] the Virtue of the Action depends’) is part of Cicero’s proof against the Stoics. In the preceding paragraph of the 1739 letter Hume writes: ‘I cannot forbear recommending another thing to your Consideration. Actions are not virtuous nor vicious; but only so far as they are proofs of certain Qualitys or durable principles in the mind. This is a Point I shou’d have establish’d more expressly than I have done’ (Letters [Grieg] 1:34; cf. THN 3.2.1.2-4).

5 We may accept that the proofs to which Hume refers in the final sentence of the passage quoted are linked to the ‘Point’ already mentioned in note 4—that is, the point that Hume thinks he should have ‘establish’d more expressly’ because it concerns the dependency of the moral qualities of actions on ‘certain Qualities and principles in the mind’ (Letters [Grieg] 1:34).

6 The following two paragraphs on THN 3.1.1 draw from an article that has recently appeared in *The Journal of Scottish Philosophy*. My treatment of the arguments that Hume presents in THN 3.1.1 is here reduced to the bare essentials, and various interpretive issues raised by this procedure are addressed in the far more detailed treatment found in the JSP article: see Edwards 2014: 120-135.

7 ‘We blame a father for neglecting his child. Why? Because it shows a want of natural affection, which is the duty of every parent. Were not natural affection a duty, the care of children cou’d not be a duty; and ’twere impossible we cou’d have the duty in our eye in the attention we give to our offspring. In this case, therefore, all men suppose a motive to the action distinct from a sense of duty’ (THN 3.2.1.5).

8 ‘Here is a man, that does many benevolent actions; relieves the distress’d, comforts the afflicted, and extends his bounty even to the greatest strangers. No character can be more amiable and virtuous. We regard these actions as proofs of the greatest humanity. This humanity bestows a merit on the actions. A regard to this merit is, therefore, a secondary consideration, and deriv’d from the antecedent principle of humanity, which is meritorious and laudable’ (THN 3.2.1.6).
Considering the paragraphs leading up to and following the statement of his ‘undoubted maxim’, it seems clear that Hume uses ‘sense of morality’ and ‘sense of duty’ (or ‘regard to moral obligation’) as by and large equivalent expressions. Unless we assume this broad equivalence—consistently with Hume’s later stated views on terminological distinctions that unnecessarily give rise to merely verbal disputes (see EPM Appendix 4)—the lines of argument pursued in these paragraphs cannot be made to cohere.

‘[T]ho’, on some occasions, a person may perform an action merely out of regard to its moral obligation, yet still this supposes in human nature some distinct principles, which are capable of producing the action, and whose moral beauty renders the action meritorious’ (THN 3.2.1.8). On the problems inherent in Hume’s insistence, see Edwards 2014: 123.

That is, let us endorse the crucial Humean supposition on which that argument depends—namely, the supposition that one falls prey to circular reasoning if one assumes that ‘the mere regard to the virtue of the action, may be the first motive, which produc’d the action, and render’d it virtuous’ (THN 3.2.1.4).

This would be the kind of interpretation that Hume could use in order to try to make ‘distinct enough’ his proofs pertaining to this maxim.

11 See especially THN 2.3.3.3-5, 6, 8; THN 3.1.1.4, 6, 9-10, 16, 22, 25; THN 3.1.2.1-3; THN 3.2.1.2-4.

12 When discussing “rationalism” in ethics, I have mind mainly the eighteenth-century thinkers mentioned in notes 16-20. My considerations on “sentimentalism” are directed primarily to Hutcheson and Hume, although Shaftesbury (in his own way), Adam Smith, and Rousseau (of Émile) figure in the background as well. Thus, I would like to underscore the limited use to which I am putting these epithets. While there are plenty of other modern thinkers who can be classified as moral rationalists and as moral sentimentalists, I do not hold that the rationalism vs. sentimentalism opposition can deliver a viable scheme for understanding the history of moral philosophy since the eighteenth century—or even during the eighteenth century for that matter (see note 34).

13 In setting forth these claims I am not attempting to give a definitional account of rationalism in ethics, nor even to furnish a laundry list of assumptions shared by all eighteenth-century moral philosophers who can plausibly be classified as rationalists. My aim here is simply to provide a useful sketch of some key theoretical tenets that were typically involved in, or presupposed by, an approach to the basis of obligation and actions’ moral worth that requires the repudiation of Hume’s ‘undoubted maxim’ and its specifying proposition of 1739.


18 See Clarke 1708 [1705]: 69, 70-71; Balguy 1728 [1727]: 47-48; 56-57; Balguy 1729 [1728]: 15-16; Price 1787 [1758]: 105-106, 186-187; Reid 2010 [1788]: 170. See also Wolff 1976 [1720]: §§ 38, 78, 81, 244; Crusius 1969 [1744]: §§ 137, 166, 194. In saying that such principles can furnish motives, and that a rational agent can be moved to act simply in virtue of its capacity to apprehend reason’s deontic requirements, I mean to signal that one may qualify as a rationalist in ethics whether or not one endorses motivational internalism. Viewed from the perspective of contemporary ethical theory, of course, the very act of signaling these possibilities amounts to a testy issue; but nothing in this paper depends on trying to make this less contestable.

19 See Clarke 1708 [1705]: 69; Balguy 1728 [1727]: 31-32; Price [1758] 108, 187-191; Reid 2010 [1788]: 299-301, 305, 339. See also Wolff 1976 [1720]: §§ 90; Crusius 1969 [1744]: §§ 162, 166, 173, 177.


21 For immensely useful, historically contextualized discussion of Cicero’s work on ethics as well as his particular aims in De finibus as a whole, see Julia Annas’s introduction to Cicero, 2001: vii-xxvii. See also Patzig 1996: 251-272.

22 See De finibus 4:14, 20-29, 43-44.

23 See De finibus 4:20-23, 27, 30-31, 39.

24 See De finibus 4:24, 32-36, 39-47. Keeping an eye on key concerns of eighteenth-century moral philosophers, it is worth noting that William Guthrie renders Cicero’s prima naturae as primary or first ‘affections’ in his 1744 translation of De finibus (see, e.g., pp. 141, 199, 235).


26 See De finibus 4:39-41, 46 (cf. Tusculanae Disputaciones 5:18-19). I gratefully adopt ‘ultimation of goods’ from Guthrie’s 1744 translation, where ultimum bonorum is rendered as ‘Ultimation of Good Things.’ Raphael Woolf
translates the same term as ‘ultimate good,’ but this conceals the distinction between good and goods that is specifically relevant to Cicero’s criticism of the Stoic doctrine of the adiaphora.

For discussion pertinent to this last point, see Annas 1993: 3-10, 47-66, 120-141, 214-220, 439-455.

Norton & Norton helpfully focus on exactly this passage in their annotation to THN 3.2.1.4 (see THN p. 540).

Cicero 2001: 105. I have inserted the square-bracketed Latin terms and phrases into Woolf’s translation in order to facilitate comparison with Cicero’s text. I should point out here that Woolf’s work embodies the best contemporary English translation of De finibus that I know of.

Letters (Grieg), p. 35.

Note well the correlation between Cicero’s impellit […] appetenda at De finibus 4:48 and Hume’s use of ‘impelling passion’ in his 1739 letter to Hutcheson (see p. 1 above).


Recent translation practice has been to render Stoic kathêkon, hence Cicero’s officium, as ‘appropriate action’, ‘appropriate act’ or ‘appropriate function’ in order to dampen down the full-bore deontological connotations of its traditional English rendering as ‘duty’. Given the highly differentiated ways of asserting obligation in classical Greek, I am not entirely confident that this is always good practice, even with respect to the relevant Greek texts and fragments themselves. (Woolf, it may be noted, seems to be sensitive to this kind of background issue when he translates agendi principium, id est offici as ‘a principle of appropriate action and duty’ [italics mine].) But more importantly for the purposes of this paper: the difficulties that we have always had in finding adequate and uniform ways of expressing the range of deontic distinctions at issue in the ancient Stoics’ use of kathêkon should not lead us to ignore the historical circumstance that Cicero’s officium was subject to quite robustly duty-orientated interpretation by seventeenth and eighteenth-century philosophers—from the Grotian natural lawyers to Christian Garve and Immanuel Kant (and well beyond these). One normally does well enough to think of a principium offici as a principle of duty when dealing with a Scottish Enlightenment philosopher’s interpretation of a Ciceronian text.

One might propose that Joseph Butler was (or at any rate ought to have been) prepared to endorse such a tenet on account of his stated indifference about calling the moral faculty ‘conscience, moral reason, moral sense, or divine reason; whether considered a sentiment of the understanding or a perception of the heart; or which seems the truth, as including both’ (Butler 2006 [1736]: 309; cf. Schneewind 1998: 348). If such a proposal could be supported, however, it would only go to show that a moral philosopher like Butler defies classification as either a rationalist or a sentimentalist. I am quite content to accommodate this sort of defiance, especially since nothing in this paper’s argument hinges on overcoming (let alone suppressing) it. I am therefore also equally content to consider sweeping claims like the following one to be historiographically implausible even when restricted to the eighteenth century context: ‘Modern [moral] thought is divided between moral rationalists and moral sentimentalists […]’ (Slote 2010: 41).

Ahnert (2010) and Maurer (2010) have recently surveyed important features of the landscape. In view of the particular issues raised in the final section of this article, my own inclination would be to start with careful analysis of Hutcheson’s translating work and annotations in Books I-VIII of The Meditations of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (2008 [1742]). In view of this task, see James Moore’s and Michael Silverthorne’s superb introduction to this edition of The Meditations.


Hutcheson, of course, does hold that there are goods apart from virtue or moral good. See, e.g., IBV: 85-88.

There will also be good reason to think that Hutcheson’s approach is in this respect foundationaly compatible with the corresponding doctrine that underlies much of eighteenth-century rationalist ethics.


In the fifth chapter of Active Powers Essay 5, Thomas Reid maintains that Hume’s treatment of moral approbation implicitly makes the agreeable and the useful ‘the whole sum of merit in every character, in every quality of mind, and in every action of life’ (AP: 302)—which of course precludes that the view of moral good at issue in Hume’s account of moral approbation could be compatible with the view of the honestum as something intrinsically good. As Reid puts this point, with explicit reference to what Cicero (in De finibus II) considers to be a defensible feature of the Stoic idea of the honestum: ‘There is no room left for that honestum which Cicero thus defines: Honestum igitur id intelligimus, quod tale est, ut detracta omni utilitate, sine ullis premiis fructibusve, per seipsum jure possit
laudari [the honestum, therefore, we understand to be that which, taking away all utility, and without any reward or advantage, is such that it may rightly be praised for its very self]’ (2010 [1788]).

42 See Moore 2002: 365-386 (particularly 372-374). For a brief discussion of further literature and debate in this area of research, see Harris 2009: 161-164 (see also 169-174, 176-177).