

Cambridge Elements

Elements in Ethics

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HUME ON THE NATURE OF MORALITY

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-70656-8 — Hume on the Nature of Morality
Elizabeth S. Radcliffe
Frontmatter
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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India
103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108706568
DOI: 10.1017/9781108587952

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First published 2022

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-108-70656-8 Paperback
ISSN 2516-4031 (online)
ISSN 2516-4023 (print)

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Hume on the Nature of Morality

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DOI: 10.1017/9781108587952
First published online: January 2022

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Abstract: David Hume's moral system involves considerations that seem at odds with one another. He insists on the reality of moral distinctions, while showing that they are founded on the human constitution. He notes the importance to morality of the consequences of actions, while emphasizing that motives are the subjects of moral judgments. He appeals to facts about human psychology as the basis for an argument that morality is founded, not on reason, but on sentiment. Yet, he insists that no "ought" can follow from an "is." He thinks that our motivation to justice must derive from our nature. Yet, he wonders how to explain why anyone would be motivated to follow rules when doing so does not further their personal interests. As an empiricist, his approach is descriptive, yet morality is prescriptive. This Element addresses these puzzles in Hume's moral theory, with reference to historical and contemporary discussions.

Keywords: ethics, Hume, morality, sentimentalism, virtue

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ISBNs: 9781108706568 (PB), 9781108587952 (OC)
ISSNs: 2516-4031 (online), 2516-4023 (print)

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