

# Hume's Concept of Universality: a Perspective of "Usefulness"

Pingping Yang

Sichuan University, Chengdu 610064, Sichuan Province, China

**Abstract:** There are many arguments about Hume in the history of philosophy, especially after Kant criticized Hume, Kant believed that there is no concept of "universality" in Hume's ethics. By analyzing Hume's text, this article points out that Hume also pursues "universality", and his "universality" is a universality in the sense of usefulness. Not only does his ethics have the concept of universality, but Hume also pursues universality in the field of nature science. This is helpful for the academic community to re-recognize Hume and further promote the study of Hume.

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**\*Corresponding author:** Pingping Yang, 1281756405@qq.com

## 1 A universality in the sense of usefulness

At the very beginning of *A Treatise on Human Nature*, Hume sets forth his whole research goal -- to find a single reliable foundation for all sciences. The only reliable basis for this is the science of human nature, Hume writes: The key to the solution of any important problem is contained in the science of man; None of the problems will be solved until we are familiar with the science. In trying to explain the principles of human nature, therefore, we are proposing a complete system of science based almost entirely on the new foundations on which all science is based<sup>[1]</sup>. Hume believed that there were defects in the existing scientific system and problems in various sciences had not been solved. The reason for this situation was that their foundation

was fragile and the principles adopted had not been carefully examined, but were blindly accepted, which led to the lack of evidence in the scientific system. Why can a complete scientific system be established from the standpoint of human nature science? How can the science of human nature serve as the basis for all other sciences? How is its integrity and unique reliability achieved? Hume argues that the uniformity of the usefulness guarantees the integrity of all science. The so-called consistency of usefulness means that the ultimate goal of every science is man, and all sciences are related to man. Therefore, we can say that Hume's theory of knowledge is a consequentialist orientation. To which he wrote: It is evident that all sciences have always been more or less related to human nature, and that no matter how far they seem from it, they will always return to it in one way or another<sup>[1]</sup>. Since the results are always known, and the results are always clear as to whether they are good or bad for man, it is not difficult to understand why human nature should be the criterion for all other sciences. Secondly, there is the double meaning of universality: first, the universality of man, for whom science is universally useful; One is the universality of science as a whole, because their reliability is based on human nature. This is true not only of morals, criticism, politics, and natural religion, which are closely related to man's social activities, but also of mathematics, logic, and natural philosophy for Hume.

It is suggested that the study should start from the closest place, so Hume analyzes this usefulness from the ethics most closely related to human beings. In this field, he firmly opposed the rationalist's use of reason as a moral distinction. Because this distinction cannot be analyzed by appeal to the usefulness, and the usefulness

of moral behavior is always presented emotionally, including our praise, criticism and avoidance, which are not always rational, but certainly have emotions, so their actions and their criticism should be based on the more general emotions. Hume pointed out that moral sense not only has the significance of value judgment, but also the significance of moral norms through the analysis of the introspection impression of feeling impression, he writes: So the course of the argument leads us to conclude that since vice and virtue aren't discoverable merely by reason .i.e. by comparing ideas, what enables us to tell the difference between them must be some impression or sentiment that they give rise to, so the basis of moral distinction is moral sense<sup>[1]</sup>.

As sentiment of morals is bound up with interest. First of all, based on the analysis of the virtue of justice, Hume pointed out that only people think to perform the contract [because of the limited generosity and resources are limited, we earned income easily by others or by violence or by other means to be transferred to someone else. This kind of financial instability is likely to cause social unrest, this is not to rely on the natural disposition to remedy, can only rely on artificial measures to stabilize financial ownership. So can only be concluded agreement through the possession of foreign object is stable to make everyone enjoys their labor income, also no longer cause disputes.]Is beneficial, the contract will be formed, Hume writes: All that is needed for the formation of this joint action, this convention, is that everyone should have a sense of its being in his own interests to keep this promise....<sup>[1]</sup>. After the formation of the contract, people in order to consider their own interests, consciously abide by the constraints of the agreement. When this interest is established and recognized, a sense of morality naturally and automatically arises for the observance of the rules in a contract, and this sentiment of morality combines to become a stronger constraint, he writes: Later on, a sentiment of morals goes along with self-interest, and becomes a new obligation on mankind. This sentiment of morality about the keeping of promises comes from the sane principles as the sentiment of morality about keeping one's hands off other people's property<sup>[1]</sup>. Hume therefore points out that the basis of moral distinctions is interest and moral sense, he writes: The first interest exists because of the voluntary convention and artifice of men; and to that extend those laws of justice should be regarded as artifacts. Once that interest in social

harmony is established and acknowledged, the sense that morality is at stake in the observance of these rules follows naturally and of itself<sup>[1]</sup>. From this we can see that those beneficial actions will make people happy, while those harmful actions will make people unhappy, and the impression caused by virtue is also pleasant, and the behavior caused by evil is unpleasant, he writes: We needn't spend long on this question! Clearly, the impression arising from virtue is agreeable, and the impression coming from vice is unpleasant. Therefore, what is good to men is virtue, and what is harmful to men is evil<sup>[1]</sup>. Hume believed that not only justice as human virtue is connected with interests, but other virtues are also connected with interests.

To sum up, the usefulness achieved by ethics is beneficial to the society, and the construction of society is precisely to protect the interests of human beings. Therefore, the usefulness of morality studies is beneficial to people. Hume devotes the fifth chapter of *The Study of Moral Principles* to this kind of usefulness, and he thinks that we always rely on this kind of useful condition in our daily life. He defined usefulness as: Usefulness is agreeable, and engages our approbation. This is a matter of fact, confirmed by daily observation. But, USEFUL? For what? For somebody's interest, surely<sup>[2]</sup>. The effect achieved by morality is usefulness to man, and all the effects achieved by science are the same to man; therefore, all the effects achieved by science are useful to man, and therefore the universality of human nature to all sciences is a universality in the sense of usefulness.

## 2 Universality in principle

We already know, through analysis, that all sciences start from and are based on human nature, and that they apply the same principles in human nature. This is the universality in principle, not the universality of everyone, but the universality based on the uniformity of action between people and the similarity between individuals. Hume writes: It is universally acknowledged, that there is a great uniformity among the actions of men, in all nations and ages, and that human nature remains still the same, in its principles and operations<sup>[3]</sup>. This is Hume's most famous line in the *Study of Human Understanding*. Spatially, the actions of people in each country are alike; In terms of time, the actions of each generation are similar. Moreover, the principles of human nature play the same role in the actions of people in all countries and all

ages, and the usefulness achieved by the principles of human nature are the same in the actions for everyone (including not only people of the contemporary, but also people of the past and future eras). In addition to great uniformity in actions, human beings share great similarities in physical structure, nature, character and language. It is this great similarity between people that ensures the identity of the principles of human nature, and all sciences based on the principles of human nature have the universality of principles. Human nature, therefore, is universal in principle to science.

There are all kinds of principles in human nature, and these principles depend on and relate to each other. But people always want to reduce these various principles to a more general and general principle. Hume is no exception, he writes: It is probable, that one operation and principle of the mind depends on another; which, again, may be resolved into one more general and universal<sup>[3]</sup>.

What is this more general principle? Hume still seeks for this more universal principle from the ethics which is most closely related to human beings. Ethics always involves the relationship between people, behavior, and always involves other people's views of us and our views of others. These views have an impact on indirect emotions, but how can other people's opinions have an influence on our emotions and behaviors? Hume believes that there are four principles that influence our indirect emotions: the principle of dual relationship between impression and idea, the principle of impulse in the same direction, the principle of contrast and the principle of sympathy. The previous three principles are always based on the principle of sympathy. Ideas are connected by similarity, proximity and causation, while impression can only be connected by similarity. When both kinds of connections occur on the same object, they can promote each other, which is the principle of dual relationship between impression and idea. In addition, Hume argues that our indirect emotions arise from the same principle of the principle of impulse in the same direction. He believed that the passage of emotion can occur when the emotion is consistent or similar in impulse and direction, and this is the principle of impulse in the same direction. For example, charity (along with the desire of love) is a desire for the happiness of the person we love and an aversion to his suffering, while compassion is the desire to make people happy and hate the suffering of others. Thus, love, charity, and compassion have

the same impulsive direction. Love is then born out of compassion for others. But the principle of the double relation between impression and idea and the principle of impulse in the same direction have opposite effects on our emotions. At this point, the principle of sympathy is needed to regulate the contradiction between the both. So he divided sympathy into weak sympathy and strong sympathy. Weak sympathy is also called narrow sympathy, while strong sympathy is also called broad sympathy. The difference between them is the intensity of the imagination. In the weak sympathy, our imagination is weak, so that we can only sympathize with the impression of his pain. This painful impression, then, by the principle of the dual relationship of impression and idea, causes us to despise and hate him. In the strong sympathy, my imagination is active, I can not only sympathize with his present pain, but also sympathize with his future destiny. By then the other party becomes the object of our concern and compassion, and we will produce love and charity to him through the principle of impulse in the same direction. Thus it can be seen that in Hume's opinion the principle of the dual relationship between idea and impression and the principle of impulse in the same direction are not contradictory, and they play their respective roles by varying degrees of sympathy. These two seemingly contradictory principles are harmoniously unified under the rule of sympathy. Therefore, both the principle of dual relationship between idea and impression and the principle of impulse in the same direction all work on the basis of sympathy. Hume thinks, contrast principle is another important principle that produces indirect emotion. Men are so little governed by reason in their feelings and opinions that their judgments about things are always based more on comparisons than on the thing's intrinsic worth and value[1, 5-6].

The effect of comparison principle and sympathy principle is opposite. By empathizing with the suffering of others, what we feel is pain, but by the principle of comparison, that is, comparing our happiness with the suffering of others, we produce happiness. In Hume's opinion, the principle of comparison cannot replace the principle of sympathy. The principle of comparison presupposes and follows sympathy. Therefore, the principle of comparison is also based on the principle of sympathy. The universality of the principle of sympathy in relation to other principles lies in the fact that the principle of compassion, as its basis, is the basis of

other principles, which can be reduced to a more general and universal principle of sympathy.

### 3 Conclusion

Through analysis, we find that Hume's universality is embodied in two aspects. One is that human nature is the basis of all sciences, and the universality of human nature to all sciences is a kind of universality in the sense of usefulness; Secondly, as the most fundamental principle of human nature, the principle of sympathy is also the most fundamental principle applicable to all sciences, and its universality in all sciences is a kind of universality of principle.

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