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The citeable version of record will appear on [Project Muse](#) in *Hume Studies* 52(1) in winter of 2027.

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Abstract: Some scholars have noted that, in Hume's philosophy, although animals lack the capacity for moral judgment, they can nonetheless serve as objects of moral evaluation. A puzzle arises, however: if animals can be morally assessed, why did Hume maintain that animal incest is not morally condemnable, whereas human incest is? In this paper, I defend the claim that animals' characters and actions can bear moral significance, and appeal to Hume's distinction between natural and artificial virtues to account for his divergent moral assessments of incest in humans and animals. I begin by examining the natural similarities and differences between humans and animals. Drawing on Hume's theory of moral judgment, I then argue that although animals lack the capacity for moral discernment, their characters and actions can, in principle, be objects of moral evaluation. I then introduce Hume's twofold classification of virtues and contend that animals, owing to their natural circumstances and abilities, neither require nor are capable of acquiring artificial virtues. As a result, they can only be evaluated within the framework of natural virtue rather than within that of artificial virtue. On this basis, I argue that the moral difference Hume drew between human and animal incest depends on whether the act provokes moral disapproval grounded in artificial virtue. This difference, I conclude, provides a valuable interpretive key to Hume's moral theory.

Keywords: Hume, David; Animal Ethics; Moral Evaluation; Natural Virtue; Artificial Virtue; Moral Vice; Incest.

Introduction

The study of non-human animals (hereafter referred to as animals) occupies a significant position in Hume's philosophy, serving as a touchstone for the validation of his theory of human nature. Hume believed that the study of animals can lend "additional authority" to his theory, "by which we explain the operations of the understanding, or the origin and connexion of the passions in man" (E 9.1).¹ Yet Hume's treatment of animals appears to exhibit a certain tension: although he consistently affirmed that animals possess reason and passions closely resembling those of humans, he seems to have denied that their characters and actions can bear moral significance. This moral asymmetry becomes particularly salient in his discussion of incest. While he regarded incest among humans as having "a superior turpitude and moral deformity annexed to it" (M 4.8), he asserted that the same relations among animals "have not the smallest moral turpitude and deformity" (T 3.1.1.25). This apparent inconsistency raises questions about the coherence of Hume's moral philosophy.²

¹ See the [Bibliographical Note](#) to this issue of *Hume Studies* for a key to references to Hume's works.

² Scholars such as Tranöy (1959), Clark (1985), and Fosl (2000) have raised concerns about the implications of Hume's emphasis on the moral difference between humans and animals and particularly his suggestion that animal incest is not a moral vice, for the internal consistency of his moral theory. In response, they advocate revising Hume's position to allow for the possibility that animal incest could be considered a moral vice.

In response, scholars such as Beauchamp (1999), Driver (2015), and Boyle (2018) draw a distinction between the capacity to discern moral qualities and the actual possession of such qualities and argue that although animals lack the capacity to distinguish between moral good and evil, their natural similarities to humans imply that their characters and actions can be objects of moral judgment. In this sense, then, animals may be regarded as possessing certain virtues. Along similar lines, Nuyen (1998) distinguishes between virtue and the sense of virtue and suggests that while Hume denied animals the capacity for the sense of virtue, understood as the ability to make moral distinctions, he did not preclude the possibility that animals may still possess virtues. This line of interpretation, developed by Beauchamp, Driver, Boyle, and Nuyen, is undoubtedly illuminating. It not only allows for a recognition of the moral asymmetry between humans and animals but also mitigates that asymmetry by appealing to their shared natural characteristics. In doing so, it offers a more coherent reading of Hume's moral philosophy and, by affirming the moral significance of animals' characters and actions, substantially expands the relevance of Hume's moral theory to the domain of animal ethics. As Boyle (480) contends, acknowledging the possibility that animals may possess moral qualities opens the way for the development of a Humean animal virtue ethics.

The attempt by these scholars to attribute moral qualities to animals, however, encounters significant theoretical challenges. The first concerns the viability of the distinction between the discernment and the possession of moral qualities. Pitson (1993, 2003), for instance, underscores the relevant disanalogies between humans and animals, arguing that animals lack the capacity for moral discernment, which means that their conduct is devoid of moral self-awareness and thus lacks moral significance. At most, their characters and actions may elicit sentiments of approval or disapproval in terms of utility. A second, more fundamental challenge arises from Hume's divergent moral assessments of incest in humans and animals. Scholars such as Beauchamp either disregard the amorality of animal incest or treat it merely as an exceptional case.³ Yet this strategy appears inadequate, given the evident tension between attributing moral significance to animals' characters and actions and acknowledging the amorality of animal incest. Several commentators have expressed doubts about this strategy, particularly for its neglect of Hume's claim that animal incest is not morally wrong. Pitson (1993, 305), for example, considers the amorality of animal incest compelling evidence that animals' characters and actions bear no moral significance. Similarly, Clark (117–18) remarks: "If 'animal incest' and 'human incest' are acts of the same kind, then they are equally evil, or equally indifferent." As he observes, "most commentators are so embarrassed that such a great philosopher should have thought so bad an argument 'entirely decisive' that they pass over it in silence."

In this paper, I defend the claim that animals' characters and actions can be morally significant and explain why Hume offered divergent moral assessments of incest in humans and animals. To that end, I appeal to Hume's distinction between natural and artificial virtues. The argument unfolds in three stages, each corresponding to a central question: (1) Do animals' characters and actions have moral significance? (2) If so, on what level or in what sense can they be morally significant? (3) What accounts for the moral asymmetry between human and animal incest? Specifically, Section 1 begins by examining Hume's naturalistic account of animals, emphasizing that their rational and emotional faculties closely resemble those of humans, while acknowledging important differences in degree and complexity. It then draws on the distinction between the capacity for making moral judgments and that for being judged morally to argue that, although such differences render animals incapable of moral discernment,

³ Beauchamp, Driver and Nuyen do not address the tension between the claim that animals could possess moral qualities and Hume's assertion that animal incest is morally innocent. Boyle (2018, 476) acknowledges this tension but argues that "giving one case in which animals are exempt from moral evaluation does not show that Hume held that animals are always exempt from moral evaluation."

the natural similarities to humans nonetheless make their characters and actions morally considerable in principle and thus their characters and actions can serve as objects of moral evaluation. Section 2 introduces Hume's distinction between natural and artificial virtues, clarifying their respective foundations and the ways in which they elicit moral approval. I argue that, due to their natural circumstances and limited abilities, animals neither require nor are capable of acquiring artificial virtues. Nor do humans regard them as proper subjects for such virtues. Consequently, animals' characters and actions can only bear moral significance at the level of natural virtue. Section 3 builds on this framework to explain the moral asymmetry Hume drew between human and animal incest. While incestuous acts may be behaviourally similar across species (as a matter of fact discernible by "reason"), human incest constitutes an artificial vice because it threatens the stability of human families and society and is thus prohibited by artificial measures. Animal incest, by contrast, occurs outside the domain of human families and society, and therefore fails to provoke the sentiment of moral disapproval at the level of artificial virtue. This moral asymmetry, I suggest, provides an important interpretive key for understanding Hume's moral philosophy.

1. Do Animals' Characters and Actions Have Moral Significance?

This section addresses the debate over the moral significance of animals' characters and actions. The controversy centres on two key issues: how Hume conceived of the position of animals in the natural order, and whether the possession of moral qualities necessarily presupposes the capacity for moral discernment. Doubts about animals' possession of moral qualities are typically grounded in species-based differences: insofar as animals lack the capacity to distinguish moral good from evil, their characters and actions cannot be morally significant and are instead merely objects of utility judgment. In response, I first examine the natural similarities and differences between humans and animals and then consider whether those differences preclude animals' characters and actions from being the legitimate objects of moral judgment.

1.1. The Natural Similarities and Differences Between Humans and Animals

Hume's naturalistic account of animals, grounded in observed similarities in behaviour, affirms a deep continuity between humans and animals. Animals, he wrote, "are endow'd with thought and reason as well as men" (T 1.3.16.1); in particular, they also possess the ability to engage in causal reasoning. Like humans, they can draw inferences about possible outcomes based on "observation of the conjunction of objects in past instances" (T 1.3.16.7). For instance, from previous experiences of being struck, a dog can infer its owner's anger from the tone of voice and anticipate punishment accordingly. According to Hume, the underlying mechanism of such reasoning is essentially the same in both species: an associative mechanism grounded in habit or custom (T 1.3.16.6; E 9.6). Animals also possess a wide range of human-like passions. They display direct passions such as desire and aversion, grief and joy, hope and fear, as well as more complex indirect passions such as pride and humility, love and hatred (T 2.1.12; T 2.2.12). Hume noted, for instance, that swans and peacocks may exhibit pride in their gait and appearance, and that female animals naturally display affection toward their offspring. Moreover, "sympathy, or the communication of passions, takes place among animals, no less than among men" (T 2.2.12.6). A dog, for example, can perceive a companion's sorrow from its howling and express genuine concern. Thus, in terms of both rational and emotional faculties, animals and humans exhibit a high degree of natural similarity.

On the other hand, Hume was careful to note that the natural faculties of animals, while broadly analogous to those of humans, exhibit significant differences in degree and complexity. In terms of reason, the first point of divergence concerns demonstrative reasoning, that is, the

ability to attain certain knowledge through the intuitive apprehension of relations among ideas. At no point did Hume attribute this more sophisticated and abstract form of reasoning to animals.⁴ Moreover, even though he attributed causal reasoning to animals, Hume emphasized significant disparities in both depth and scope. Due to their comparatively weaker capacities for observation, attention, and memory, as well as their inability to sustain extended inferences, to draw general rules from particular instances, or to engage in the systematic correction of error, animals' causal reasoning differs significantly in degree from that of humans (E 9.5n). As Hume put it, the animal is "limited in its observations and reasonings to a few sensible objects which surround it," whereas the human "traces causes and effects to a great length and intricacy; extracts general principles from particular appearances; improves upon his discoveries; corrects his mistakes; and makes his very errors profitable" (DM 5). In short, animals lack the capacity for reflection and the generalizing intellect that enables humans to extend and develop a theoretical understanding of their experience.⁵

Notable differences also emerge in passions. Hume first noted that, due to the limitations of animal reason, passions such as pride and humility in animals "lie solely in the body and can never be plac'd either in the mind or external objects" (T 2.1.12.5), that is, they cannot arise from internal character or external goods such as reputation or property. Second, animals, Hume noted, "are but little susceptible either of the pleasures or pains of the imagination, they can judge of objects only by the sensible good or evil, which they produce, and from *that* must regulate their affections towards them" (T 2.2.12.3). Their love and hatred are thus bound to the immediate pleasures or pains associated with present objects, rather than being mediated by imaginative projection or abstract association. In addition, the limitations of animal sympathy are equally noteworthy. Animal sympathy is confined primarily to bodily experiences and, unlike human sympathy, cannot encompass imagined or abstract pleasures and pains. It is also restricted to nearby, immediately perceptible objects, which makes it difficult for animals to extend sympathy to those distant in space, time, or relations. Moreover, lacking the capacity for reflection and the generalizing intellect, animals are also unable to regulate or correct the effects of sympathy by adopting a "general point of view."

As shown above, on the one hand, Hume situated humans and animals within a unified natural continuum on the basis of their natural similarities, thereby reinforcing his account of human nature. On the other hand, he simultaneously invoked key differences to emphasize the superior position of humans within this continuum. Does this higher position in the natural order entail that only humans can participate in the moral sphere, while animals are excluded from it? To address this question, it is necessary to engage with Hume's theory of moral judgment, particularly regarding whether animals are capable of making moral judgments or of being judged morally.

1.2. Animals as Objects of Moral Judgment

Hume explicitly stated that "animals have little or no sense of virtue or vice" (T 2.1.12.5) and

⁴ Beauchamp (1999, 327) and Boyle (2003, 14–16) both contend that Hume did not ascribe demonstrative reasoning to animals, viewing this as a difference in "kind" between human and animal reason. Boyle further argues that this limitation stems from animals' limited observational and attentional capacities, which render them unable to sustain the complex chains of ideas required for demonstrative inference. Boyle's interpretation appears well supported, as Hume himself, particularly in the first *Enquiry*, explicitly highlighted significant differences between human and animal minds with respect to attentiveness, observational acuity, and the capacity for sustained thought (E 9.5n.1).

⁵ Many scholars have noted that, for Hume, the key difference between human and animal causal reasoning lies in their capacities for reflection upon experience, extension of experience, and the formation of general principles. However, they articulate this distinction in somewhat different terms. Pitson (1993, 302) characterizes it as the abilities to extend thought and to theorize experience; Boyle (2003, 16) describes it as the ability to improve one's reasoning through learning from experience; and Driver (2015, 151) interprets it as a form of metacognitive ability, namely, the capacity to reflect critically about one's own cognitive states.

thus lack the capacity to distinguish moral good from evil in the way humans do. This absence of moral discernment is closely tied to the limits of their sympathy. Specifically, it is tied to their inability to reflect upon and correct its effects.⁶ For Hume, it is not reason but a moral sense or sentiment that enables humans to make moral distinctions. This sense or sentiment arises from the effects of characters and actions, namely, the “*particular* pains or pleasures” they produce (T 3.1.2.3). What gives these feelings of pain or pleasure moral significance is their capacity to be shared and generalized among individuals: “only when a character is consider’d in general, without reference to our particular interest, that it causes such a feeling or sentiment, as denominates it morally good or evil” (T 3.1.2.4). The emergence of this general moral sentiment depends on sympathy, which allows the feelings experienced by one individual to be transmitted to others. Hence, Hume emphasized that “sympathy is the chief source of moral distinctions” (T 3.3.6.1).⁷ However, Hume distinguished between two forms of sympathy: spontaneous and reflective. Spontaneous sympathy refers to a natural contagion of feelings that arises instinctively and is inevitably marked by individual variability and partiality. Reflective sympathy, by contrast, is shaped by reason and corrected through the adoption of a general point of view, enabling one to judge from the standpoint of an impartial spectator. It is this reflective sympathy that forms the genuine basis for moral distinctions. Humans, endowed with more advanced rational and emotional faculties, are capable of transforming spontaneous sympathy into reflective sympathy. Animals, lacking this capacity, are unable to make moral judgments as humans do.

The fact that animals cannot distinguish between moral good and evil, however, does not mean that their characters and actions are devoid of moral significance. According to Hume, moral judgment is directed at the moral good or evil of the qualities and the consequent actions, that is, whether those qualities or actions are virtuous or vicious. Importantly, Hume’s conception of virtue differs markedly from the Aristotelian tradition. In *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle defined virtue as a quality that aims at the mean. This account does not rely on fixed standards or rules but requires the agent, through practical wisdom, to discern the appropriate mean in particular circumstances and to regulate his or her passions and actions accordingly. In this sense, Aristotelian virtue presupposes the agent’s capacity for moral discernment.⁸ Hume, while also treating virtue as a quality or character, defined it in terms of the effects. As he put it, virtue is “whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation” (M App. 1.1.10). The judgment of virtue, then, does not depend on the agent’s practical wisdom but on the effects that the quality or action produces in the spectator. Moreover, Hume provided clear criteria for these effects: a character or action is “useful or agreeable to the person himself

⁶ There is ongoing scholarly debate concerning the reason why animals lack the capacity for moral judgment. Pitson (2003, 651), Driver (2015, 153), and Boyle (2018, 475) argue that, due to their inability to engage in rational reflection, animals cannot adopt a general point of view to correct their sympathy in the way humans are able to and thus cannot form consistent moral judgments. In contrast, Beauchamp (1999, 327–30) and Arnold (1995, 303–16) locate the deficiency on the emotional side, contending, on the basis of Hume’s sentimentalism, that animals lack the sentiment of humanity necessary to qualify as moral subjects. Given Hume’s emphasis on the foundational role of sympathy in moral judgment, I endorse the former interpretation and maintain that this view remains compatible with Hume’s sentimentalism, understood as assigning reason a supporting role in the refinement of sympathy. For further discussion of the relationship between sympathy and the sentiment of humanity, see [note 7](#).

⁷ Some scholars, such as Selby-Bigge (1975, xxv–xxvii), argue that, in recognizing the subjectivity and partiality of sympathy, Hume abandoned sympathy as the foundation of morality in *Morals*, replacing it with humanity as the primary moral sentiment. This reading has been contested by Abramson (2001), Vitz (2004), and Debes (2007). They argue, first, that a crucial distinction must be made between spontaneous and reflective sympathy, with the latter forming the core of Hume’s account of moral judgment; and second, that humanity is not a replacement for sympathy, but rather a sentiment that arises from it. On this view, Hume’s later works retain the centrality of sympathy in his moral theory.

⁸ In *Nicomachean Ethics* (1105a30–34), Aristotle emphasized that a person who can be considered virtuous must meet three conditions: “In the first place he must have knowledge, secondly he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes, and thirdly his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character.”

or to others" (T 3.3.1.30; M 9.1). Crucially, Hume did not require the possessor of virtue to possess the sentiment of approbation on which moral judgment depends. For him, the discernment of moral qualities can be separated from the possession of those qualities. It is entirely possible, on his view, for an agent to perform virtuous actions without understanding moral distinctions or without acting voluntarily.

Driver (2015, 157) also observes that, within Hume's philosophy, the possession of virtue can be understood as a natural ability, implying that the disposition to act morally may not necessarily require the capacity for moral judgment or arise from moral volition. This feature marks a departure from the classical Aristotelian conception of virtue. This point is well supported by Hume's own writings, in which he explicitly claimed that virtue and vice, like beauty and deformity, may be involuntary qualities:

I wou'd have any one give me a reason, why virtue and vice may not be involuntary, as well as beauty and deformity. These moral distinctions arise from the natural distinctions of pain and pleasure; and when we receive those feelings from the general consideration of any quality or character, we denominate it vicious or virtuous. (T 3.3.4.3)

Hence, we may conclude that in Hume's moral philosophy, animals can still be objects of moral evaluation despite lacking moral discernment or volition. Their natural dispositions, being analogous to those of humans, can produce the effects that elicit moral sentiments in spectators, and thus render their characters and actions morally significant in principle.

The moral judgment of animals' characters and actions should not be confused with the utility judgment. Hume acknowledged that, owing to an "effect of the caprice of language" (M 5.1n), virtue is often misinterpreted as "utility," as it encompasses the notion of "beneficial quality," leading to a frequent conflation between moral and utility judgments. Yet he stressed that the two are fundamentally distinct. In the case of animals, this distinction can be clarified from two perspectives. First, the moral judgment of animals is distinct from the utility judgment of inanimate objects. Hume conceded that we may approve of inanimate objects for their usefulness, for example, herbs and minerals may be approved for their beneficial qualities. Such approval, however, being based purely on utility, lacks sentiments such as affection, esteem, and approbation. These can only be elicited when directed toward mental qualities and necessarily presuppose sentient beings endowed with minds. Thus, as Hume noted, approval based on utility is far weaker than moral approval, to the extent that "they ought not to be ranked under the same class or appellation" (M 5.1n). Given their similarities to humans, animals can possess such qualities, unlike inanimate objects. Accordingly, moral judgment of animals is accompanied by a more mixed sentiment of approval and is thereby distinguished from the purely utilitarian judgment of inanimate objects.⁹ Second, it is also essential to distinguish between moral and utilitarian judgments concerning animals. While both types of judgment may involve considerations of utility, they differ in perspective. Utility judgment is always relative to a particular self or individual interest: if an object is beneficial to oneself or others, it is deemed useful. Moral judgment, by contrast, requires that such usefulness be mediated through reflective sympathy and viewed from a general point of view. Only when the usefulness is considered from "a more public affection," prompted by reflective sympathy, can it become "a source of moral sentiment" (M 5.17). For instance, an intelligent dog may be judged useful for helping its owner in daily life. However, only when its intelligence is viewed from a general perspective, that is, only when evaluating whether it would universally elicit sentiment of approval, can a moral judgment be made.

⁹ In an effort to demonstrate that judgments regarding animals are not moral in nature, Pitson (1993, 308) cites Hume's example of trees, noting that the growth of a young tree leading to the destruction of an older one, unlike parricide or ingratitude in humans, would not be regarded as a moral vice. This, however, overlooks the distinction between trees as inanimate objects and animals as sentient beings endowed with minds.

Drawing on the preceding analysis, we are now prepared to address the first question: in Hume's philosophy, animals' characters and actions can, in principle, possess moral significance. Although animals occupy a lower position in the natural order and lack the capacity for moral judgment because of their differences from humans, they can still be evaluated morally rather than merely in terms of utility. This, however, gives rise to a further puzzle: if animals' characters and actions can bear moral significance, why did Hume maintain that incest among animals is not morally condemnable as it is in humans? The crux of the issue lies in how Hume characterized the moral nature of animal incest. To address this, I will turn to Hume's distinction between two types of virtue, natural and artificial, and examine the sense in which animals' characters and actions may be morally relevant. This distinction will serve as the groundwork for the subsequent analysis of Hume's divergent moral assessments of incest in humans and animals.

2. In What Sense Can Animals' Characters and Actions be Morally Significant?

Affirming that animals' characters and actions can bear moral significance does not imply that all of them are morally significant. In Hume's philosophy, animals neither require nor are capable of exhibiting the full range of moral qualities found in humans. This section introduces Hume's distinction between natural and artificial virtues, arguing that the moral significance of animals' characters and actions is confined to the level of natural virtue. Owing to their circumstances and abilities, animals are neither in need of nor capable of possessing artificial virtues, and humans do not regard them as proper subjects for such virtues.¹⁰

2.1. The Distinction Between Two Types of Virtue

Hume distinguished between two types of virtue, natural and artificial, based on their different origin and effects: that is, how a motive arises in the agent and how it elicits moral approval from the spectator.¹¹ Natural virtues include mental qualities such as pride and courage, natural abilities like industry and intellect, and affections such as benevolence and compassion. Artificial virtues include justice and fidelity with respect to property, allegiance to government, and family-related virtues such as chastity and modesty.¹²

The first difference between the two types of virtues lies in their origins. According to Hume, natural virtues are enduring inherent qualities or dispositions which are "entirely natural and

¹⁰ Beauchamp and other scholars may have implicitly recognized that the discussions of animals' moral qualities properly belong within the domain of natural virtue. For instance, when Beauchamp (1999, 329–30) referred to the virtues attributed to animals, he mentioned only natural virtues such as friendliness, fidelity, and ingenuity. However, this recognition has not been accompanied by sustained analysis or theoretical elaboration. In this paper, I seek to address that gap by offering a more systematic account of the distinction between natural and artificial virtues, with particular attention to why animals, within Hume's framework, are capable only of the former. Building on this analysis, I further aim to clarify why Hume regards animal incest as morally innocent, in contrast to the moral condemnation in the human case.

¹¹ With respect to Hume's distinction between natural and artificial virtues, scholars have generally offered two competing interpretive approaches: the evaluative interpretation and the motivational interpretation. The former emphasizes differences in the kinds of evaluative sentiment aroused in spectators, whereas the latter focuses on differences in the kinds of moral motivation operative in agents. For further discussion of this interpretive debate, see O'Day (1994) and Fieser (1997). In this paper, I set aside the debate between these interpretations and instead offer an integrated analysis of the defining features of the two types of virtues. Regarding the criteria for distinguishing between the two types of virtue, see also Baillie (2001) and Cohon (2006).

¹² In *Morals*, Hume structured his moral theory by adopting a fourfold classification of virtues, as qualities that are "useful or agreeable to the person himself or to others." Yet there is no reason to think that he abandoned the earlier distinction between natural and artificial virtues. For instance, although both benevolence and justice are categorized as virtues useful to others or to society in *Morals*, their underlying differences as paradigms of natural and artificial virtues remain intact, particularly with respect to their differing origins and effects. This continuity is explicitly reflected in M App.3. 2, 3, and 9n.

have no dependance on the artifice and contrivance of men" (T 3.3.1.1). This naturalness manifests not only in the fact that such qualities are found in normally functioning individuals, independent of contingent environmental or cultural conditions, but also in their direct motivational efficacy, as they "exert their influence immediately, by a direct tendency or instinct" (M App.3.2). It is precisely this mark of naturalness, evident in both their emergence and functioning, that led Hume to stress that these virtues are natural. Artificial virtues, by contrast, are the result of human inventions. Hume emphasized that they arise "artificially, tho' necessarily from education, and human conventions" in response to certain deficiencies in the natural conditions (T 3.2.1.17). What distinguishes artificial virtues is their essential connection to human life. They are crucial to the formation and maintenance of human family and society, and their emergence and development presuppose certain rational and emotional faculties involved in human affairs. With respect to reason, artificial virtues are "purposely contriv'd and directed to a certain end" (T 3.2.6.6), requiring the agent to have a developed capacity to imagine and anticipate possible long-term consequences. With respect to passions, they depend on reflective sympathy, that is, an ability to overcome the partiality of one's own feelings and coordinate with others beyond the narrow circle through "a general sense of common interest," thereby inducing individuals "to regulate their conduct by certain rules" (T 3.2.2.10).¹³

The second difference lies in the way that these virtues elicit moral approval. Natural virtues arouse the sentiment of approbation in a direct and spontaneous manner. Benevolence, for example, is an affection in human nature that naturally gives rise to acts of kindness. Even when such an act is performed without deliberation, as when the agent is motivated solely by natural disposition, spectators will nonetheless express moral approval through reflective sympathy, so long as this action "upon the general view or survey, gives a certain satisfaction" (T 3.1.2.11). Moreover, since the benefit resulting from natural virtues "arises from every single act and is the object of some natural passion" (T 3.3.1.12), spectators can judge the moral value of this action solely by attending to its motive and effects, without reference to broader social contexts. Artificial virtues, by contrast, differ in two important respects. First, their moral approval depends on social interest: they "produce pleasure and approbation by means of an artifice or contrivance, which arises from the circumstances and necessities of mankind" (T 3.2.1.1). Moral approval of artificial virtues is thus directly contingent on human needs and interests and may vary as those needs and interests change. Second, as Hume stresses, a single act of artificial virtue, "consider'd in itself, may often be contrary to the public good; and 'tis only the concurrence of mankind, in a general scheme or system of action, which is advantageous" (T 3.3.1.12). This means that the moral value of artificial virtues can be grasped only when considered within a stable institutional framework and from a general perspective. For instance, an act of justice may require that judges take from a poor man to give to a rich. Viewed in isolation, such an act may fail to elicit moral approval. Only when it is understood as part of a broader, rule-governed system that secures the overall interest of society, and only through "sympathy with the interests of society," is this action recognized as morally virtuous by spectators (T 3.3.1.12).

Clarifying the differences between the two types of virtues highlights the fact that artificial virtues entail more demanding conditions than natural ones. On the one hand, their emergence

¹³ For Hume, the formation of artificial virtues depends on the emergence of a general sense of common interest and the development of conventions among individuals. As he wrote: "I observe, that it will be for my interest to leave another in the possession of his goods, *provided* he will act in the same manner with regard to me. He is sensible of a like interest in the regulation of his conduct. When this common sense of interest is mutually express'd, and is known to both, it produces a suitable resolution and behaviour" (T 3.2.2.10). This process, in addition to requiring rational capacities such as foresight and complex planning, also crucially depends on reflective sympathy. It is only through reflective sympathy that individuals can overcome their self-interested inclination by shifting perspectives to view situations from a common or general point of view and thereby reflect upon and balance both their own and others' interests, ultimately generating the motivation to regulate their conduct accordingly.

is not only tied to certain forms of artifice or design but also depends on more advanced rational and emotional faculties. On the other hand, their connection to moral sentiment is significantly more complex. The moral value of artificial virtues is contingent upon particular circumstances and needs and may accordingly vary with changes in these contextual conditions. Moreover, moral endorsement of artificial virtues typically requires adopting a more general evaluative perspective. With these differences in mind, we may now proceed to examine the level at which animals' characters and actions can acquire moral significance, particularly whether they are susceptible to evaluation in terms of artificial virtue.

2.2. The Moral Qualities Animals Can Possess

Given the natural similarities between humans and animals, it is reasonable to first affirm that animals are capable of possessing natural virtues. As previously noted, natural virtues consist primarily of qualities, abilities, and affections that are inherent in a being's nature. In his study of animals, Hume, drawing on empirical observations of behavioural and psychological resemblance, affirmed that animals likewise possess such natural traits. For instance, animals exhibit pride or self-esteem based on their physical characteristics; they display a degree of intelligence insofar as they can engage in causal reasoning; and they are capable of affection and compassion toward others through spontaneous sympathy or emotional contagion. As in the case of humans, these qualities, abilities, and affections in animals are not the result of artifice or contrivance, but are innate to their nature, and in a natural sense they are morally commendable. Although animals lack clear self-awareness and cannot discern the moral good or evil of their motives and actions, their traits can give rise to corresponding actions that have real effects on themselves and others, whether animals or humans. Thus, spectators, adopting a general point of view, can make moral judgments through reflective sympathy. Since the effects of such traits are directed at specific individuals, there is no need to appeal to the general public interest; the utility of the conduct itself suffices to arouse moral approval. Therefore, within Hume's philosophical framework, it is valid at the level of natural virtue to assert that the characters and actions of animals bear moral significance.

Artificial virtues, however, are of a different nature. First, animals have no need to develop such virtues. As noted earlier, artificial virtues are human inventions designed to overcome the disadvantages of natural conditions and to serve as means of sustaining human life. Animals, by contrast, do not face analogous predicaments and thus lack a comparable need for cooperation to secure survival in the way humans do. As Hume wrote: "Brute-creatures have many of their necessities supplied by nature, being clothed and armed by this beneficent parent of all things ... But man, exposed naked and indigent to the rude elements, rises slowly from that helpless state, by the care and vigilance of his parents" (Sto 1).¹⁴ Since they face no such predicaments, animals would not be motivated to invent artificial measures to overcome them. Secondly, animals are not equipped with the requisite rational and emotional faculties to acquire artificial virtues. In terms of reason, while animals are endowed with reason and causal inference, their cognition remains limited to immediate perceptual contexts. They lack imagination and foresight and thus cannot engage in the kind of long-term planning or rational construction of rules that artificial virtues require. In terms of passions, although animals exhibit altruistic tendencies such as affection toward kin and companions, such affection is typically narrow, partial, and fragile. It diminishes with temporal distance and degrees of familiarity. Since animals lack reflective sympathy, it cannot extend to broader communal domains. As a result,

¹⁴ Hume frequently highlights the difference between the natural circumstances of humans and animals. For instance, in the *Treatise*, he also remarks that "nature seems, at first sight, to have exercis'd [towards no other animal] more cruelty than towards man, in the numberless wants and necessities, with which she has loaded him, and in the slender means, which she affords to the relieving these necessities. In other creatures these two particulars generally compensate each other" (T 3.2.2.2).

animals cannot participate in social life as humans do. Neither can they regulate their conduct through conventions grounded in a general sense of common interest. Finally, animals are also incapable of expressing moral approval of artificial virtues. Without the capacity for reflective sympathy based on the general point of view, they cannot discern moral distinctions. Moreover, the benefit of artificial virtues emerges only from a long-term and general perspective. This is something that animals, due to their rational and emotional limitations, cannot adopt. As such, they are unable to express the moral approval that these virtues elicit in humans.

Conversely, since animals neither stand in need of nor possess the capacity to develop or endorse artificial virtues, humans do not apply such virtues to them. This is particularly evident in the case of justice. While Hume acknowledged that animals are objects of moral concern; he explicitly denied that they can be proper subjects of justice. He wrote, even of rational creatures who are incapable of making humans feel the effects of their resentment, that “We should be bound, by the laws of humanity, to give gentle usage to these creatures, but should not, properly speaking, lie under any restraint of justice with regard to them” (M 3.18). According to Hume, justice consists of rules concerning the stability of possession, transference of property, and performance of promises. These are conventions that arise from the necessities of human social life. Given this particular conception, interactions between humans and animals, within Hume’s framework, lie outside the scope of justice or injustice.¹⁵ Hume argued that animals are incapable of the psychological operations on which such conventions depend, namely, they cannot experience the pleasures or pains of the imagination, or extend pride or concern to external objects. They are therefore “incapable of [the sight of relations] of right and property” (T 2.1.12.5). Moreover, justice presupposes the capacities to comprehend and follow general rules, to convey complex intentions, and to participate in the formation of conventions. These capacities exceed the limits of animal reason, excluding them from the cooperative human practices involving property and the mutual conventions through which justice constrains human conduct. Although animals may respond with distress or aggression to human cruelty, such reactions do not amount to moral resistance. For Hume, resentment as a moral sentiment requires the capacities to distinguish moral good from evil and to comprehend the rules of justice. Since animals lack these capacities, their reactions cannot be interpreted as expressions of resentment toward human violations of the rules of justice.

With the above considerations in view, we can now answer the second question: in Hume’s philosophy, animals’ characters and actions can indeed bear moral significance, but only at the level of natural rather than artificial virtue. Owing to the natural similarities between humans and animals, it is reasonable to attribute natural virtues to animals. However, since animals neither require nor are capable of acquiring artificial virtues, we do not extend the demands of virtues such as justice to them. This crucial distinction sheds light on Hume’s asymmetrical moral assessments of incest in humans and animals. If human incest is essentially a moral vice insofar as it violates artificial virtues, while animal incest falls outside the scope of such virtues, then the latter would not provoke moral condemnation. Accordingly, our next task is to analyze the moral nature of incest in humans and animals respectively, in light of Hume’s distinction between natural and artificial virtues.

3. What is the Moral Difference Between Incest in Humans and Animals?

Having established that animals are not proper subjects of artificial virtues, we can now return to

¹⁵ As in the case of incest, the claim that animals are not proper subjects of justice has often been taken as evidence that Hume denies them the capacity for virtue (e.g., Seidler [1977, 369]). Yet, as Kuflik (1998, 59) rightly notes, if we accept Hume’s distinctive account of justice as a virtue strictly limited to matters concerning property then it follows that interactions between humans and animals do not fall within its scope. On this basis, I argue that the exclusion of animals from the domain of justice should not be read as a denial of their capacity for virtue per se, but rather as a reflection, within Hume’s framework, of their inability to possess artificial virtues.

the question of why Hume makes a moral distinction between human and animal incest. This section argues that, although incest in humans and animals constitute the same kind of natural act, their moral significance differs. Human incest is morally condemned because it threatens the stability of family and society and is thus prohibited by artificial measures. As such, it essentially constitutes an artificial vice. Animals, by contrast, are incapable of forming familial and social structures in the human sense; their incestuous acts therefore fall outside the domain of artificial virtue and thus provoke no corresponding moral condemnation. This moral difference highlights important features of Hume's moral theory.

3.1. Human Incest as an Artificial Vice

Hume explicitly stated that since incest among humans “being *pernicious* in a superior degree, has also a superior turpitude and moral deformity annexed to it” (M 4.8). Nevertheless, he provided no explicit account of the origin of such an act. Drawing on his analysis of the passions, that is, the motivating principles of action, we may reasonably infer that incest arises from a conflict between two powerful passions: the love of kinship relations and the love between the sexes. For Hume, both are fundamental passions rooted in human nature. The former derives from the fact that “the relation of blood produces the strongest tie the mind is capable of in the love of parents to their children” (T 2.2.4.2); the latter originates in a strong natural propensity toward sexual pleasure, for “nature has inspir'd so strong a propensity; and a propensity that 'tis absolutely necessary in the end to comply with, for the support of the species” (T 3.2.12.6). Incest arises when these two passions overlap, particularly when sexual passion comes to dominate or suppress kinship-love. As for why such an act is pernicious and constitutes a moral evil, Hume explained that the intimate conditions of family life create frequent opportunities for sexual licence and thus threaten the “purity of manners” on which social order depends (M 4.8), and further connected incest with social interests or “public utility” (M 4.9). These considerations suggest that the vice of human incest should be understood as rooted in artificial considerations. Yet Hume did not elaborate on this point. To clarify this matter, we may draw a comparison with chastity and promiscuity, the artificial virtue and vice closely related to sexual desire. This shows that, within Hume's framework, both the moral nature of human incest and its prohibition should likewise be understood as artificial.¹⁶

Chastity, in Hume's view, belongs to “another set of duties” within the category of artificial virtues (T 3.2.12.1).¹⁷ The origin of chastity is rooted in specific human vulnerabilities: the prolonged maturation period of children necessitates biparental care, and men, unlike women, lack natural certainty regarding biological paternity (T 3.2.12.3). Under such natural conditions, if women were promiscuous and thereby made biological paternity uncertain, men would be unwilling to assume their paternal and familial responsibilities. To prevent such social disorder, people developed the virtue of chastity through artificial measures such as education, moral inculcation, and law, particularly directed at women. Women were thereby required to maintain sexual fidelity to their partners and refrain from sexual activity outside of marriage. Moreover, to ensure women's strict adherence to this virtue, people also employed the threat of a “bad fame” to deter potential tendencies toward promiscuity or infidelity (T 3.2.12.4). As a constraint on natural sexual desire, chastity does not yield immediate pleasure; rather, it often causes discomfort by suppressing sexual desire. The benefit of chastity arises only when it is viewed

¹⁶ Hume himself hints at the parallel between promiscuity and incest, and between chastity and the prohibition of incest, particularly with regard to their artificial nature. He discusses these two related pairs in M 4.5–9 and underscores their common connection to public utility.

¹⁷ While most discussions of Hume's artificial virtues have centred on justice, scholars such as Baier (1979), Levey (1997), and Berry (2003) have emphasized the distinctive moral nature and significance of chastity. Their analyses shed important light on how chastity emerges as an artificial virtue and how it comes to be morally endorsed. These insights offer a valuable basis for comparing chastity and promiscuity with incest and its prohibition.

from a general perspective: in patriarchal contexts, it serves the public utility of ensuring proper child-rearing and the orderly succession of property. Recognizing these broader functions generates the sentiment of moral approbation. This analysis demonstrates that chastity exhibits a pronounced artificial nature: it is established only through the subordination of natural appetite to artificial measures, and it receives moral endorsement only when its public utility for the stability of family and society is considered from a general perspective. Its opposite, promiscuity, by contrast, is regarded as a moral vice because it exemplifies the disruptive consequences of unrestrained sexual indulgence for human family and society. Having clarified these features of chastity and promiscuity, we may proceed to consider whether human incest should likewise be regarded as an artificial vice and be prohibited by artificial measures.

Firstly, the grounds upon which human incest is regarded as a moral evil should be examined. As noted earlier, Hume maintained that under natural circumstances, a fundamental tension exists between human desires and the means available to satisfy them. Humans are not, by nature, equipped to fulfill all their needs. This applies equally to sexual desire.¹⁸ On the one hand, the “natural appetite betwixt the sexes” is, according to Hume, “the first and original principle of human society,” as it leads to the “union betwixt the parents and offspring, and forms a more numerous society” (T 3.2.2.4). On the other hand, if this natural appetite were left entirely unchecked, it would cease to serve as a social bond and instead threaten the structures of family and society. The moral vice of human incest, like promiscuity, precisely exemplifies the socially destructive impacts of unrestrained sexual desire. While incest may produce negative natural consequences, such as genetic defects, stillbirths, or birth defects, Hume emphasized that these outcomes are not the basis for its moral disapproval. Rather, its moral nature must be assessed in terms of its detrimental effects on the family and society. When sexual relations occur among close relatives, they disrupt marital arrangements sanctioned by law and custom, thereby weakening the role of marriage as a mechanism through which different families and clans are connected and integrated. Such disruptions would further affect the broader social order, insofar as the conventions governing the orderly succession of property are embedded in these inter-family marital arrangements. Within Hume’s framework, marriage and the succession of property are not natural facts, but rather artificial measures designed to preserve the stability of human family and society. Thus, human incest is morally condemned, on Hume’s view, not for its natural consequences, but because it undermines these measures and the public utility they are intended to serve.¹⁹ This condemnation applies even when incest does not result in natural harm, for instance, in cases involving legal kinship rather than blood relations, since the violation of established artificial measures still poses a threat to the integrity of the social order.

¹⁸ Berry (2003) has offered a detailed analysis of the natural predicament of human sexuality and its inherent tension within social life. He emphasizes that the regulation of sexual relations constitutes a crucial artificial measure for maintaining the stability of both family and society.

¹⁹ Clark (1985, 121–5) challenges Hume by arguing that incest constitutes a natural vice, basing this claim on its biological consequences and asserting that the act is harmful to both humans and animals. Citing empirical studies, particularly research on species such as chimpanzees, which appear capable of recognizing and avoiding incest, Clark contends that the evil of incest is grounded in nature itself. However, the avoidance of incest by certain social animals may reflect an evolutionary adaptation to their social environment, since such avoidance is far less evident among less social species. As such, it cannot by itself establish that incest is a natural vice. Even if this empirical evidence were granted, Nuyen (1998, 95) responds by invoking Hume’s “is-ought” fallacy, insisting that the mere fact that animals avoid incest does not imply they recognize its moral significance or refrain from it with moral self-awareness. Yet these considerations still leave unaddressed a more fundamental question for Hume: even when humans, who are capable of moral discernment, observe incest among animals, they do not morally condemn it, despite the fact that the natural consequences are identical. A more adequate response to Clark requires distinguishing between incest in humans and animals, and recognizing that, for Hume, the moral nature of human incest should be determined by its role within an artificial framework. It is only when the natural consequences are interpreted through the lens of public utility, specifically, when they are seen as threatening the stability of family and society, that human incest comes to be regarded as morally wrong.

Secondly, the prohibition of incest, as a remedial measure against the harmful consequences of incestuous acts, is likewise artificially established and endorsed. This prohibition cannot arise spontaneously from natural motives. As Hume noted, all humans are “apt to over-look remote motives in favour of any present temptation,” and in the case of sexual desire, “the temptation here is the strongest” (T 3.2.12.5). Thus, natural disposition alone is insufficient to motivate compliance with the prohibition of incest. Only when considered in light of the common interests of family and society, namely, public utility in human life, do people come to recognize the dangers of incest. In response, they formulate legal and customary rules and, through education and moral inculcation, internalize these norms, thereby acquiring an artificially cultivated disposition to observe them. Moreover, the moral endorsement of the incest prohibition must also be understood in relation to public utility from a long-term and general perspective. Taken in isolation, the incest prohibition does not bring about immediate pleasure; on the contrary, it may cause suffering by suppressing natural appetite. Only through the exercise of rational and emotional faculties, which enable imagination and foresight about the consequences of incest, as well as the development of a general sense of the common interest of the family and society, can individuals come to recognize, from a more general and forward-looking standpoint, that the prohibition of incest serves a valuable public utility in preserving the proper functioning of familial and social structures. This recognition then gives rise to a sentiment of moral approval toward such a prohibition. The variability of the incest prohibition further supports its artificial nature within Hume’s framework. Given that conceptions of family and society differ across eras, regions, and cultures, understandings of public utility also vary. As a result, the incest prohibition that people endorse, along with its specific content, is subject to variation. For instance, as Hume observed, the definitions of incestuous relations differed between ancient Athens and Rome (M 4.9); someone who would now be deemed guilty of sibling incest (with a paternal half-sister) could, in ancient Greece, be venerated upon his death (M D.13, 13n, and 17).

Based on the preceding analysis, it is reasonable to conclude that, although he does not discuss the matter in detail, within Hume’s framework the moral nature of human incest and its prohibition should be understood as artificial. As with promiscuity, the moral condemnation of human incest rests on the actual or potential harms that the sexual indulgence poses to the artificially constructed structures of family and society. The prohibition of incest, accordingly, constitutes an artificial measure designed to prevent such harms. Like chastity, it is artificially established through education, moral inculcation and legal regulation, and receives moral approbation by virtue of its public utility for maintaining the stability of family and society.

3.2. The Amoralism of Animal Incest

After classifying human incest as an artificial vice, we now turn to the issue of the moral nature of animal incest. In animals, incestuous behaviour is driven by a natural passion, namely the attraction between the sexes (in mating seasons). Like its human counterpart, animal incest may result in similar natural consequences, such as stillbirths. Yet in the moral sphere, the natures and consequences of the two forms of incest diverge markedly.

As previously noted, human incest is considered an artificial vice because of its actual or potential harm to familial and social structures. By contrast, animals neither require nor are capable of establishing such structures, particularly familial structures in the human sense. First, animals lack the relevant motivation. As Hume observed, “among the inferior creatures, nature herself, being the supreme legislator, prescribes all the laws which regulate their marriages, and varies those laws according to the different circumstances of the creature” (PD 7). Accordingly, unlike humans, animals do not need to establish complex familial structures through artificial measures, nor do they rely on laws and customs to regulate marriage and kinship. Second, the human family is an artificial construct designed to remedy various natural disadvantages. In this

process, “the advantages of art are owing to human reason” (T 3.3.4.5). To recognize these advantages, people also must develop a sense of common interest, which in turn motivates them to align their conduct with certain rules (T 3.2.2.10). Lacking the requisite rational and emotional faculties, animals are incapable of forming familial structures in this artificial sense. On the one hand, their rudimentary causal reasoning cannot support the kind of complex planning required to establish customary or legal rules to regulate familial relationships and to guide corresponding conduct. Neither can they, given their limited imagination and foresight, anticipate the broader consequences of violating such rules. On the other hand, deficiencies in their passions, especially the absence of reflective sympathy, render their relations unstable and partial, being shaped merely by biological ties. As a result, animals, in contrast to humans, lack the capacity to develop a sense of common interest within familial relationships, and cannot be morally motivated by reflective sympathy to regulate their conduct in the context of family life. Thus, although animals may form the natural family based on blood ties (for a season), they cannot construct the artificial family in the human sense.²⁰ In this light, animal incest differs fundamentally from human incest: it is a natural, instinct-driven act that may produce only biological consequences, such as reduced offspring viability and genetic disorders.

Accordingly, animal incest, as a purely natural act, fails, unlike its human counterpart, to provoke moral condemnation at the level of artificial virtue. Animals, due to their limited knowledge and understanding, “quickly lose sight of the relations of blood” (T 2.1.12.5), and are therefore more prone than humans to incestuous acts. Yet without the capacity for reflective sympathy, animals are incapable of discerning the moral good or evil of such acts and thus cannot experience or express moral disapproval of incest. From the human perspective, the natural limitations of animals prevent them from forming a sense of common interest with humans and, consequently, from participating in the conventional systems that constitute human community. As a result, animal incest poses no threat to human family or society. Accordingly, the prohibition of incest, like the virtues of justice and chastity, which are artificial virtues established to meet specific human needs, is not extended to animals. Animal incest, therefore, also fails to provoke moral condemnation from humans. It is precisely because incest among animals fails to arouse any moral sentiment either in animals themselves or in human observers that Hume asserted, in contrast to the human case, that “the very same action, and the same relations in animals have not the smallest moral turpitude and deformity” (T 3.1.1.25).

The amorality of animal incest, for Hume, is neither a mere oversight nor an isolated exception, but a key to understanding his moral philosophy. Hume used this example to challenge the rationalist view that regards moral good and evil as objective relations discovered by reason. To the question of why there is a moral difference between human and animal incest, the rationalist view responds that “this action is innocent in animals, because they have not reason sufficient to discover its turpitude; but that man, being endow’d with that faculty, which ought to restrain him to his duty, the same action instantly becomes criminal to him” (T 3.1.1.25). Hume identified two main problems with this account. First, it fails to explain the moral innocence of animal incest. If virtue and vice were grounded in objective relations, and if both human and animal incest produced the same factually bad outcome, then both should be equally morally wrong, regardless of whether reason is present to detect that wrongness. Second, since animals, among themselves, share the same (familial) relations that humans do, if the immorality of incest were grounded in such relations it would follow that “every animal

²⁰ Baier (1980, 1988), in her discussion of the family in Hume’s philosophy, has suggested a distinction between natural and artificial families. She emphasizes that the natural family, grounded in blood relations, holds a primary position, with the artificial family emerging as its extension and being dependent upon it. Building on Baier’s insight, I seek to further sharpen the distinction between these two kinds of family, particularly by emphasizing the more complex requirements involved in the formation of artificial family structures. I then apply this distinction to animals, arguing that while animals may form a natural family based on blood ties, they lack the capacity to establish and sustain an artificial family through the kinds of measures available to humans.

must be susceptible of all the same (familial) virtues and vices, for which we ascribe praise and blame to human creatures" (T 3.1.1.25), a conclusion Hume deemed plainly absurd.

Hume held that a more satisfactory explanation of the amorality of animal incest would demonstrate the superiority of his moral theory over rationalist ethics. To make this case, he first appealed to his sentimental framework, according to which virtue and vice, like sounds and colours, are secondary qualities or "perceptions in the mind" (T 3.1.1.26) discerned through the moral sentiment they elicit. Accordingly, the fact that animal incest is not regarded as morally wrong must be explained not by any objective feature or relation, such as the production of malformed offspring, but by its failure to arouse moral disapproval. Second, to understand why no such sentiment arises requires reference to Hume's distinction between natural and artificial virtues. Animals' characters and actions bear moral significance merely at the level of natural virtue, whereas incest is fundamentally an artificial vice in the human case; therefore, animal incest is not subject to moral condemnation. In this way, Hume could maintain that animals, based on their natural resemblance to humans, may possess certain moral qualities, while avoiding the absurd conclusion that they share the same moral standing with humans.²¹ It is precisely because the case of incest exemplifies both core elements of Hume's moral theory, sentimentalism and the distinction between two types of virtue, that he insisted it is "entirely decisive" (T 3.1.1.25).

Finally, we are now in a position to address the third question and offer a defence of Hume's moral philosophy. For Hume, the moral difference between human and animal incest lies in whether the action arouses the sentiment of moral disapproval at the level of artificial virtue. Although the two actions are naturally similar, human incest constitutes an artificial vice because it threatens the stability of familial and social structures in human life. Animal incest, by contrast, carries no such consequences, and thus fails to provoke moral condemnation. This moral difference does not imply that Hume denied the moral significance of animals' characters and actions. On the contrary, given the natural similarities of animals, we have good reason to believe that they may also possess certain moral qualities within Hume's framework, provided they are confined to natural virtues and not extended to the domain of artificial virtue. The amorality of animal incest exemplifies this boundary. It illustrates that in Hume's philosophy, the natural continuity of humans and animals is compatible with a moral asymmetry: both may exhibit natural virtues, but animals are incapable of artificial virtue. Recognizing the distinct moral capacities of humans, then, does not entail disregarding the moral relevance of animals. Rather, it cautions against the mistaken impulse to elevate the moral standing of animals by projecting onto them moral obligations and responsibilities that presuppose human capacities. In this respect, Hume's discussion of incest offers a valuable insight into how we might acknowledge the moral status of animals without erasing the essential difference that defines human morality.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined Hume's reasons for his divergent moral assessments of human and animal incest. I have argued that, for Hume, animal incest is not regarded as a moral vice, since it does not contravene artificial virtues as human incest does. Such virtues are artificially constructed to sustain familial and social structures, and they presuppose more advanced rational and emotional faculties than those possessed by animals. Nevertheless, animals' natural dispositions, being analogous to those of humans, can still elicit moral sentiments in

²¹ Both Fosl (2000, 120) and Driver (2015, 144–49) have observed that Hume adopted a distinctive stance on the moral status of animals. He did not, like the Cartesians, exclude animals from the moral domain, yet he also resisted equating their moral standing with that of humans. In this paper, I seek to advance this line of interpretation by arguing, through the analysis of animal incest, that the moral differences between humans and animals lie not only in their respective capacities for moral judgment, but also in the kinds of moral qualities each can possess.

spectators and thus render their characters and actions morally significant at the level of natural virtue. This interpretation, by drawing on Hume's distinction between natural and artificial virtues, clarifies the amorality of animal incest in Hume's framework and contributes to the debates concerning the sense in which animals can serve as objects of moral judgment. More broadly, it calls renewed attention to the importance of Hume's classification of virtues, particularly its value for animal ethics in addressing whether, and in what sense, animals may possess moral qualities.²²

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²² I would like to thank the editors and two anonymous reviewers of *Hume Studies* for their helpful comments, especially for urging me to focus more precisely and directly on the central issue of the amorality of animal incest, and for suggesting that I articulate more clearly how this issue might be addressed through the distinction between natural and artificial virtues. This work was supported by the National Social Science Fund of China (NSSFC), project "Hume's Theory of Sympathy and Its Historical Influence" (No. 24FZXB052).

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