

Abstract

Justice versus Benevolence: A Modern Humean View

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This paper is an attempt to "update" and extend David Hume's moral psychology by demonstrating its consistency with the findings of construal level theory as recently developed by Trope, Liberman and others. Following Hume, justice is an abstract virtue the practice of which does not give the individual positive psychological feedback in all cases. A single act of justice may be perceived as contrary to the public or private interest. It often takes a cognitive act of abstract construal to see and to appreciate the value of justice. Benevolence, on the other hand, is a concrete virtue. Its psychological core is the sympathy generated in the agent by the pleasure or relief of suffering the patient experiences in the particular, often immediate, circumstances that present themselves. Construal level theory suggests there is often a "bias" in favor of approving acts of benevolence relative to approving acts of justice. Such a bias has social costs because less justice and more benevolence will tend to be produced than is socially optimal. This is true at the level of inter-individual behavior, in the legislative process, and in the judicial process.