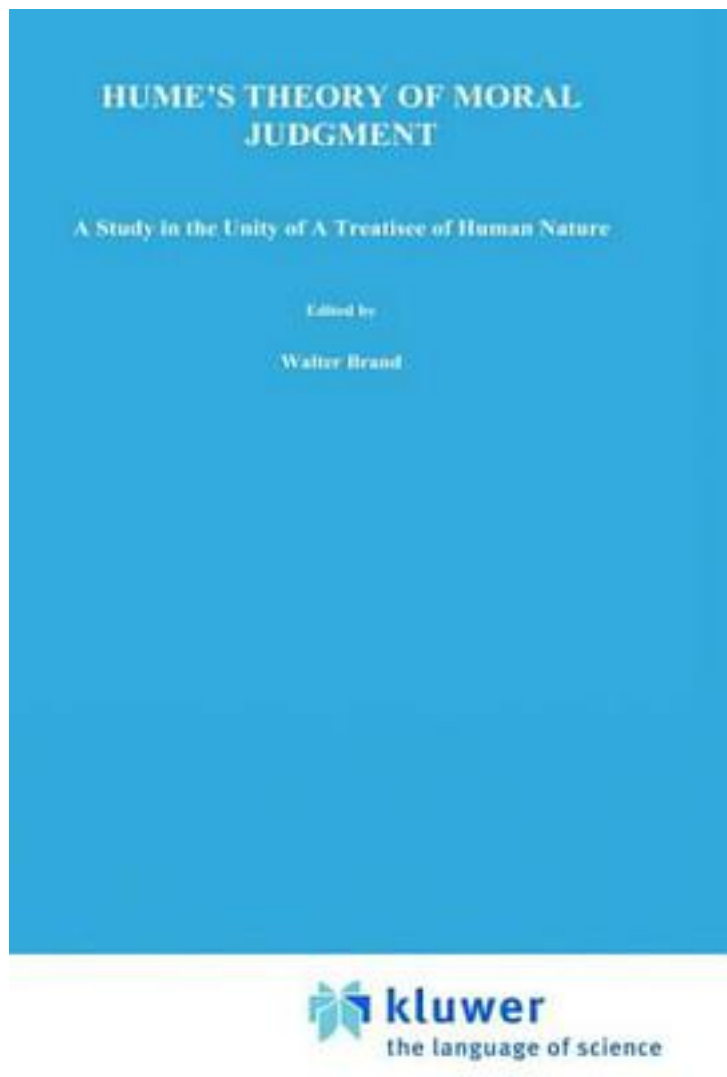


Hume's Theory of Moral Judgment



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Although Hume insists that sympathy, or fellow feeling, is fundamental to moral judgment, he recognizes that sympathetically acquired feelings vary in strength according to a number of circumstances that are irrelevant to an impartial spectator. How can the changeableness of sympathy be reconciled with a stable moral judgment? It emerges that sympathetic judgment becomes corrected by adopting more 'general points of view'. Specifically, the theory of belief and general rules in Bk. I of the Treatise accounts for the prejudice which besets the moralist and the method which corrects such prejudice. It is urged that without a full appreciation of Hume's doctrine of belief and general rules in Bk. I of the Treatise, his ideas about moral judgment in Bk. III are far too brief to be understood and are therefore subject to a number of misconceptions. Part One of the present work examines Hume's ideas about human reason and Part Two aims to clarify Hume's notion of sympathy. Both parts seek to explain how certain 'trivial' tendencies of imagination are responsible for the unreasonable judgment of fact and the partial judgment of merit. These over-generalizing tendencies generate the general rules of the imagination. It is by means of the general rules of the understanding, the rules which regulate initial judgments by an act of reflection, that factual judgments become reasonable and moral judgments impartial. What is of interest is the ongoing dialectic of the two sorts of general rules, a conflict of reason and imagination, which Hume never resolves. Although it is concluded that Hume's theory of moral judgment ends with the same skepticism as does his theory of belief and general rules at the close of Bk. I, it also emerges that reason and imagination play a positive role in the development of science and morality.

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