David Hume: Selections from
A Treatise of Human Nature: Book III: Of Morals

I. Moral Distinctions Not Derived from Reason (Part I, Section I, 1-4)

A. What are the two ways that Hume believes reason can influence our conduct? How does this help him to establish that our ability to distinguish right and wrong does not derive from our use of our reason? (3-4)

B. What is Hume trying to get at when he cautions the reader to stay alert for a transition in books on morality from propositions that contain “is and is not” to propositions that contain “ought and ought not”? Why does he believe that being aware of this transition can help us moral distinctions are not derived from reason? (4)

II. Moral Distinctions Derived from a Moral Sense (Part I, Section II, 5-8)

A. If not through reason, then how does Hume believe we distinguish moral good and evil? What does he mean when he says that “To have the sense of virtue, is nothing but to feel a satisfaction of a particular kind from the contemplation of a character”? Why, in particular, does he emphasize our sense of virtue emerges with the feelings we have upon the contemplation of a character? (5)

B. How does he answer the objection that, if his account of morality is accepted, “any object, whether animate or inanimate might become morally good or evil”? (5-6)

C. How does Hume distinguish different senses in which our sense of morality might (or might not) be natural? (6-8)

III. Justice, Whether a Natural or Artificial Virtue?” (Part II, Section I, 8-12)

A. Why does Hume believe private interest cannot be a motive sufficient to account for our sense of justice? (10)

B. Why does Hume believe public interest or public benevolence cannot be a motive that can account for our sense of justice? (10-11)

C. Why does Hume believe private benevolence cannot be a motive sufficient to account for our sense of justice? (11-12)

IV. Of the Origin of Justice and Property (Part II, Section II, 12-22)

A. How does Hume argue that “the rules of justice are established by the artifice of men”? (12-20)

What does Hume mean when we claims “whether the passion of self-interest be esteemed vicious or virtuous, ‘tis all a case; since itself alone restrains it . . .”? (17) Is this claim consistent with his earlier claim (10-11) that private interest cannot be a motive sufficient for our sense of justice?

B. How does Hume distinguish a “natural obligation to justice” from a “moral obligation” to the same? How does he anticipate a point he will make more fully in his treatment of the natural virtues - that sympathy with public interest is the source of our moral obligation to justice? (20-22)

V. Of The Origin of the Natural Virtues and Vices (Part III, Section I, 22-32)
A. How does Hume argue that our capacity for sympathy is the source of our esteem of justice? (22-25)

B. How does Hume distinguish the artificial and natural virtues, arguing that sympathy is the source of both? (25-26)

C. How does Hume answer this objection: since our moral esteem for the virtue of others does not vary with the degree to which these others are close to us or far removed, while our sympathy with them does, sympathy cannot be the source of our moral esteem of virtue? (26-28)

D. How does Hume account for our capacity to forget our own interests in evaluating the moral worth of another’s virtue and, instead, adopt a “common point of view” on the subject? (31-32)

VI. Conclusion (32-34)

A. Why does Hume believe our sense of morality to be derived from “so noble a source”? (32-33)

B. Why does Hume consider the rules of justice “stedfast and immutable”? (33)

C. Why does Hume believe that no “advantages of fortune” can be a “sufficient compensation for the least breach of the social virtues”? (33-34)