

Hume on Practical Morality and Inert Reason

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That's good, but right now I'm not interested in what's good; I'm a bad fellow.

Cal Trask (James Dean), *East of Eden*

INTRODUCTION

David Hume's dramatic conclusions concerning the role of reason in practical life are well known. According to him, "reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them" (T. 415).¹

In serving and obeying the passions, Hume recognizes, reason can of course influence our behavior by changing our view of the world. It might inform us that four dollars are more than two, or that one course of action will have certain effects while another will not, or that what appears to be a glass of wine is one of water. If we are concerned to have more money rather than less, or concerned to bring about certain effects, or concerned to have wine rather than water, reason's conclusions will make a difference to what we do. Yet, when it comes to our concerns, to setting ends and adjudicating among them, reason not only takes

Thanks are due to Don Garrett, Mike Ridge, John Corvino, Adam Cureton, and Sophie Botros, for very helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper, and to audiences at NYU's Conference *Reason and Emotion* and at the Ohio State/Maribor/Rijeka Conference *Reason and Action* in Dubrovnik, as well as to the members of the Philosophy Department at Bowling Green State University, the Chapel Hill Metaethics Group, and the Wisconsin Metaethics Conference, for probing feedback.

¹ Quotations from Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40) are indicated with a "T." followed by the page number.

a back seat to the passions, it remains utterly silent. Indeed, Hume maintains,

'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger. 'Tis not contrary to reason for me to chuse my total ruin, to prevent the least uneasiness of an Indian or person wholly unknown to me. 'Tis as little contrary to reason to prefer even my own acknowledg'd lesser good to my greater ... (T. 416)

Much as these preferences and choices might offend morality or prudence, they are not contrary to reason, as Hume understands reason. In fact, according to Hume, no preferences, choices, or actions can be contrary to reason. Nor, he claims, can reason have any influence upon the will without the cooperation of the passions, over which it has no say.

In contrast, Hume holds that preferences, choices, and actions can be contrary to (or conform with) morality and he holds as well that morality can, by opposing or approving of the preferences, choices, or actions, have an influence upon the will.

This contrast, Hume argues, shows that moral distinctions between right and wrong, good and bad, virtuous and vicious, cannot themselves be derived from reason (alone). "Reason is wholly inactive," he writes, "and can never be the source of so active a principle as conscience, or a sense of morals" (T. 458).²

Hume's argument has been incredibly influential. It has also been the source of a great deal of controversy. By and large, though, I believe Hume's grounds for thinking that reason alone is inert have been misunderstood. That misunderstanding has been complemented by another, I think, concerning the way in which morality is supposed, by Hume, to be practical. These misunderstandings have gone hand in hand with seeing Hume as embracing two views about moral judgment: (i) *motivational internalism*, according to which moral judgments, sincerely made, are intrinsically motivating (to some degree), and (ii) *non-cognitivism*, according to which moral judgments are properly seen not as expressions of belief that might be true or false but as expressions of certain non-cognitive attitudes, that is, passions.

There is, I believe, good reason to think Hume was neither a motivational internalist nor a non-cognitivist. And, I will argue, there is good reason too to think that the arguments Hume actually offered do not commit him otherwise. As a result, Hume's reliance on the arguments he offers causes

² While Hume does not dwell on the point, the same observations, considerations, and arguments, hold with respect to prudence as hold with respect to morality, and he thinks that the requirements of prudence, no less than those of morality, cannot be derived from reason.

no problem for the coherence of his position. But my purpose here is not so much to defend the over-all coherence of Hume's view (that would take going in to his positive account of moral judgment³) as to uncover what I think are his compelling arguments against the rationalism he was attacking.

THE (NOW) STANDARD READING

Hume's arguments, and the now Standard Reading of them, are pretty familiar in outline. Without trying to do the arguments justice just yet, let me recall the main line of thought.

A good place to start is with Hume's claim that reason is inert. Hume is clear that, when using the term "reason" strictly, he is referring to the capacity to (and/or the faculty by which we) determine truth and falsity. And the determinations of reason are those beliefs (or judgments, or opinions) of ours that are arrived at through reasoning. According to Hume, such beliefs (judgments, or opinions) emerge in one of two ways, either as a result of the comparison of ideas (when the reasoning is demonstrative) or as a result of inferences from matters of fact discovered by experience (when the reasoning is probable). In making claims about reason, then, Hume is referring to beliefs (at least those arrived at as a result of inference) and the processes by which we arrive at them.⁴

To the extent the beliefs are arrived at through demonstrative reasoning, Hume argues, they will concern only the realm of ideas. Yet, since "the will always places us in that of realities, demonstration and volition seem, upon that account, to be totally remov'd, from each other" (T. 413). Of course, the realm of ideas can quickly become relevant to volition, but only when the demonstrations have implications for things that are of concern to an agent.⁵ Similarly, probable reasoning will be relevant to volition, but only when its conclusions are related to things that are

³ I offer an account of Hume's theory of the nature and role of moral judgment in Sayre-McCord (1994). See also Garrett (1997).

⁴ There is some reason to think that Hume distinguished among beliefs as between those that are the product of reason (i.e. some form of inference) and those that are caused by, but not inferred from, experience. This can make a difference to whether one thinks that in arguing that moral judgments are not a product of reason Hume is thereby arguing that they are not beliefs or only arguing that they are not inferred.

⁵ The crucial steps in the argument are: "Abstract or demonstrative reasoning ... never influences any of our actions, but only as it directs our judgment concerning causes and effect." Yet "It can never in the least concern us to know, that such objects are causes, and such others effects, if both the causes and the effects be indifferent to us" (T. 414).

of concern to an agent. Whether one believes something as a result of demonstration or of probable reasoning, coming to believe it will have no influence on action if the agent is wholly indifferent to what is discovered.

Yet, for an agent to be other than indifferent is for her to be concerned with, or engaged by, the matter in question, and that is itself for her to have (in Hume's broad sense) a passion, to which it is related. Remove all such passions and the discovery of truths or the uncovering of falsehoods will influence the agent's actions not at all. In every case, Hume claims, reason's impact turns upon the presence of an appropriate passion. Beliefs cause action only if the agent also cares about what the beliefs are about. Reason alone, Hume concludes, is inert, since reason's influence depends on the passions. It is in this sense that reason is inevitably a slave to the passions.

Hume first offers this argument in Book II of the *Treatise*. There his aim is to establish the essential role of the passions in determining the will: no action, he argues, in the absence of the passions. When he refers back to the argument, in Book III, Hume's aim is to show that moral distinctions cannot be founded exclusively on reason.

In the Book III discussion, Hume contrasts reason with morality, arguing that "Morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions. Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular. The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason" (T. 457).

In offering this argument (which I will refer to as the Motivation Argument), Hume simply adds to his Book II conclusion—that reason alone is inert—the observation that morality (presumably alone) is not inert. Morality alone, he suggests, provides a motive to action. If that is right, then morality cannot itself be (merely) a conclusion of reason, since (we have seen) the latter never, alone, provides such a motive, and an "active principle can never be founded on an inactive" principle (T. 457). Thus, while morality's rules may depend in part on reason, they must be in part the products of aversions or propensities—otherwise they could not themselves motivate action.

Rendering this as a valid argument requires some work and additions. Most commonly, people recast it along these lines: Moral judgments, alone, motivate. No judgments based on reason, alone, motivate. Therefore, moral judgments are not based on reason, alone. Put this way, Hume's claims about reason and morality become, specifically, claims about *judgments* (moral and otherwise). Thought of in this way, the argument relies on motivational internalism about moral judgment as a premise. And it has non-cognitivism about moral judgment as a pretty direct implication, since moral judgments could (on Hume's view) intrinsically motivate only if they

were in some way expressions of aversions or propensities, and not merely beliefs.⁶

Few people who find these arguments in Hume think that, as they stand, they are fully compelling. For instance, a number of people accuse Hume of artificially restricting the reach of reason (by limiting it to the discovery of truth and falsehood and so ruling out, from the start, practical reason). Others accuse Hume of begging the question against those who hold that moral judgments themselves provide a compelling counter-example to his claim that beliefs alone never motivate. And still others accuse Hume of begging the question (in the other direction, so to speak) by assuming that moral judgments do, by themselves, provide a motive for action.

In addition, few people who find these arguments in Hume think that they are compatible with all that Hume himself seems to believe. For instance, Hume appears explicitly to reject motivational internalism about moral judgments when he notes that "'Tis one thing to know virtue, and another to conform the will to it" (T. 465) and he in any case acknowledges that people can recognize what is good or right and still, as the sensible knave does, utterly fail to feel its pull. Hume does of course want to explain morality's influence—its capacity to motivate. That is central to his project. But he does not assume it motivates everyone, nor does he assume that if it motivates someone sometimes, it motivates that person always. Quite the contrary.⁷

Moreover, later in the *Treatise*, Hume develops carefully a standard of moral judgment that parallels closely his account of our judgments of primary and secondary qualities. In each case, he maintains, our capacity to make the relevant judgments depends on our having experiences of certain kinds, but the making of the judgments is not to be identified with having the experiences. It is one thing to have the experience of something as being red, it is another (Hume recognizes) to judge that it is red. Similarly, Hume holds, it is one thing to have the experience of moral approval of something, it is another to judge that it is approvable. Along with judgment in these areas comes both the possibility of distinguishing how things appear from how they are, and the possibility, it seems, of having corresponding

⁶ For influential interpretations along these lines see Harrison (1976), Stroud (1977), and Mackie (1980).

⁷ Hume does advance—as an undoubted maxim—the claim that "no action can be virtuous, or morally good, unless there be in human nature some motive to produce it distinct from the sense of its morality" (T. 479). But whatever that distinct motive is, it will not be one provided by *morality*, let alone by morality alone, nor will it be more specifically the result of moral *judgment*. See Cohon (1997) for an interpretation of the motivation argument that avoids a commitment to non-cognitivism.

beliefs. Hume's careful and elaborate account of moral judgment thus suggests that he thinks that moral judgments, no less than judgments of shape and of color, express beliefs (even as these judgments depend on very different kinds of experience), which is incompatible with him advancing non-cognitivism.⁸

Finally, given Hume's official view that "Any thing may produce any thing" (T. 173), his apparently *a priori* determinations that reason alone cannot cause passions, volitions, or actions, and that passions must always be present seem quite dubious, to say the least.⁹

THE ARGUMENT AGAIN, WITH MORE DETAIL

These concerns about the force of Hume's arguments and the possibility of his advancing them consistently, given his other commitments, recommends revisiting them with more care.

It is important, first, to note that Hume's motivation argument plays out against the background of one argument—the only argument offered in full in both Book II and Book III—for thinking reason alone is inert (which is crucial to his argument for thinking that, since morality is practical, its standards are not derived from reason alone), which I will call the Representation Argument. The Representation Argument receives a bit less attention than the others Hume offers, but it is nonetheless central to understanding Hume's position.

The Representation Argument addresses a worry that can be put this way: Suppose beliefs can produce action only with the cooperation of passion. If reason can nonetheless produce passions or volitions, as well as beliefs, then reason alone—by producing both beliefs and passions or volitions—would be able, after all, to produce action.

But putting the worry this way continues a common mistake embedded in my initial description of the motivation argument. That mistake needs to be cleared up. It consists in thinking that Hume assumes—or is in some way committed to thinking—that reason alone cannot cause action, period. This is a more sweeping claim than he accepts and than his argument requires (though he does sometimes write as if he accepts this sweeping claim). And it is more sweeping than he can legitimately claim given his proper acknowledgment that causal relations can only

⁸ See Sayre-McCord (1994) for an interpretation of Hume's account of the standard of moral (and other) judgment.

⁹ For these and other worries about Hume's argument, see Harrison (1976), Stroud (1977), and Mackie (1980), as well as Borros (2006).

be established empirically. What Hume actually assumes—and needs—is that reason cannot cause action "by contradicting or approving of it" (T. 458).¹⁰

Here is how the Representation Argument goes: passions, as well as volitions and actions, are 'original existences' and contain no representative quality of the sort that would render them "a copy of any other existence or modification."¹¹ In other words, they do not represent things, either relations of ideas or matters of fact, as being a certain way. Truth and falsity, though, turn specifically on whether such representations conform or not to how things actually are. "Truth or falsehood consists in an agreement or disagreement either to *real* relations of ideas, or to *real* existence and matter of fact" (T. 458). As a result, passions, volitions, or actions are simply not the sorts of thing that can, themselves, be either true or false. And that means that it is impossible for them to be "oppos'd by, or be contradictory to" reason (T. 415; see also T. 458). This entails in turn, as Hume notes, that "reason can never immediately prevent or produce any action *by contradicting or approving of it.*"

Claiming this is, of course, perfectly compatible with holding that the process or the products of reasoning might immediately cause all sorts of things—headaches, or various pleasures, or particular passions, or the urge to move. And these might combine with various beliefs to prompt action.

¹⁰ Hume does repeatedly, both in Book II and Book III, summarize his claim without limiting its scope. Of course, this *could* be because he actually believes the more sweeping claim. But there are multiple reasons for thinking that he does not rely on the sweeping claim. One is that his arguments do not establish it. Another is that he clearly holds that reasoning does cause some things (e.g. beliefs), so he cannot think that reason is utterly inert. Still another is that he offers the Representation Argument explicitly to "confirm" the conclusion of his initial argument in Book II, and, in Book III, he offers the Representation Argument alone to support the claim, as he puts it (unrestrictedly) that "reason is perfectly inert, and can never either prevent or produce any action or affection" (T. 458). Since there is no doubt that the conclusion of the Representation Argument is the more restricted claim that reason cannot cause action "by contradicting or approving of it," it would be uncharitable, to say the least, to think Hume saw that argument as confirming or establishing a conclusion that was unrestricted. These considerations are not decisive. But they do provide substantial grounds for thinking Hume is not actually relying on the unrestricted claim, especially if his position does not require it (which is what I argue in the rest of this paper).

¹¹ Some have objected to this claim, highlighting that our passions have intensional objects that mean they do have some representative quality. Annette Baier (1991) dismissed as silly (and unnecessary to the argument) Hume's view that passions have no representative quality. While she is right that that view is silly and Hume does not need it, Hume does need the claim that, whatever representative quality passions might have, it is not such as to render them copies that might then be true or false.

What Hume rejects is the idea that reason could have these results by *contradicting or approving* the pains or pleasures or urges.¹²

Taking this into account, and moving back to the core argument that the Representation Argument is supposed to support, it should change how we understand the putative contrast between reason and morality.

According to Hume, the power reason lacks is the power to influence action specifically by contradicting or approving of actions (or the passions and volitions that give rise to actions, in conjunction with an agent's beliefs). Morality, in contrast, does (according to Hume), have the power to influence actions by contradicting or approving of them (as well as the passions and volitions that give rise to them, in conjunction with an agent's beliefs).

If indeed morality can contradict or approve of things not because they are false or true, but on some other grounds, an important part of the contrast Hume needs will be in place. Morality, of course, can. Its terms of appraisal are not 'true' and 'false' but 'good' and 'bad', 'right' and 'wrong', 'virtuous' and 'vicious' and those appraisals can and do apply to things that cannot be either true or false. The fact that passions, volitions, and actions are not representational, in the way required for them to be true or false, poses no obstacle to morality approving or disapproving them. Moreover, the moral standing of various actions can, according to Hume, make a difference to what people do. "The merit and demerit of actions," Hume notes, "frequently contradict, and sometimes controul our natural propensities." Yet "reason," Hume observes, "has no such influence" (T. 458). And that is true whether or not reason sometimes causes actions: reason never does so by contradicting or approving the action, because, in principle, it cannot.

According to Hume, for a passion, volition, or action to be contradicted by morality is for it to run afoul of the standards of virtue and vice that would secure approval from the general point of view. And according to him, sometimes, the fact that morality disapproves an action does have an impact on behavior. "[M]en are often govern'd by their duties, and are deter'd from some actions by the opinion of injustice, and impell'd to others by that of obligation" (T. 457). Often, but not always.

Here, as elsewhere, Hume avoids claiming that morality always has an influence. What he does claim, and needs to claim, is that morality can contradict or approve of actions and can, by contradicting or approving of

¹² The limit on reason's causal powers, such as it is, is no offense against Hume's general doctrine that particular causal relations are all established only by experience. But it is a limitation discovered a priori and depends on Hume being right both that reason contradicts and approves only what is capable of being true or false and that passions, volitions, and actions can never be either.

them, have an influence on the will. That is enough for his purposes, given that reason cannot contradict our behavior at all. For that is enough to show that the standards of morality, which enable it to approve or contradict passions, volitions, and actions on grounds other than truth and falsity, must go beyond what reason alone can provide.

NO ACTION ABSENT PASSION

While I will not go through the arguments here, it is worth noting that Hume considers various ways one might try to show that, ultimately, the morality of an action can actually be traced to truth or falsity, so that moral distinctions might after all prove to be in the ken of reason. He looks both to the causes of actions and to their effects, as well as to the relations between actions and the circumstances in which they might be performed. In each case, he argues, moral distinctions between right and wrong, virtue and vice, do not coincide with truths that reason might discover. He bothers to do this because the success of any of these proposals would establish, contrary to his Representation Argument, that reason might, after all, contradict or approve of actions after all, albeit by discovering of their causes, or effects, or relations something true or false.

In addition to various specific replies to proposals, Hume offers a general argument that moral distinctions cannot be a matter simply of truth and falsehood. If they were, he points out, there would be no moral difference "whether the question be concerning an apple or a kingdom, or whether the error be avoidable or unavoidable" (T. 460). Moreover, since truth and falsehood do not admit of degrees, such a view would provide no grounds for distinguishing among the virtues or among the vices as between those that are better or worse.¹³ Significantly, Hume is not here (or elsewhere) arguing that moral judgments might not be true or false or that reason, in light of experience, could not have a role in discovering which are true and which false.¹⁴ Hume's crucial point is that what makes the true judgments

¹³ Hume's strategy, when it comes to the proposal that moral distinctions might be derived from reason because they are constituted by relations, is to argue that the distinction between virtue and vice does not line up with whether or not any particular relation holds. He actually goes further and argues that unless there is some heretofore unidentified relation that holds only between the passions, beliefs, volitions, and actions of sentient agents, on the one hand, and the agent's circumstances on the other, there is no hope for founding moral distinctions on relations.

¹⁴ Hume does, of course, famously argue that we cannot infer moral conclusions from a set of exclusively non-moral premises. So reason's role in discovering the truth of moral judgments is limited by the need for moral input that it cannot itself provide. See T. 469.

true cannot be a matter of the actions judged conforming (or not) to reason.

Hume does not stop the argument there, however. Suppose that there is a way around these worries and one or another of the proposals were to work. In that case, the morality of an action would have been found to coincide with the truth or falsehood of an action, or its causes, or its effects, or with the presence or absence of a relation discoverable by reason alone.

Even then, Hume argues, the discovered coincidence of some truths and falsehoods with what is moral and immoral would leave us without an account of what makes the particular falsehoods immoral. What is still required, Hume maintains, is a "plausible reason, why such a falsehood is immoral. If you consider rightly of the matter you will find yourself in the same difficulty as at the beginning" (T. 462 n.). We would still require an account of why some falsehoods are immoral, while others are not (which means we would effectively be in the same situation we were in when asking why some actions are immoral, while others are not).

But suppose in addition some such account was given. In that case, moral distinctions might, Hume grants, be derived from reason. Yet would reason's right to rule the passions then have been established as well? Only if, Hume holds, the relevant truths, when discovered, could successfully govern behavior. And this is because, in practical matters, part of the proof is in the performance. If reason's distinction between the moral and the immoral were of no concern, and no further operations of reason could work to make them so, then they would have no dominion over the passions.¹⁵

Might reason alone, though, without the aid and cooperation of the passions, somehow secure its right to rule? Hume is skeptical, to say the least. But why? In this context, his claim that reason cannot contradict or approve of action and so cannot cause action by contradicting or approving of it, is not relevant. We are granting, for the sake of the discussion, that actions can be contradicted or approved of by reason thanks to their causes or their effects being true or false, or thanks to their standing in certain relations that are discoverable by reason. The question is whether somehow reason alone might, under these circumstances, work to govern and sometimes control action in opposition to the passions.

Hume pretty clearly thinks not. While he is prepared to allow that, in the circumstances, reason might influence the will by contradicting and approving of actions, its effectiveness will depend upon, and not be wholly

¹⁵ See esp. T. 465.

in opposition to, the passions. But why does Hume think reason is even here powerless in the absence of passion?

Although Hume does not offer this argument, one might defend his position in the following way: However alike two people might be in what they believe and how they came to believe as they do, they might respond differently to the situation they take themselves to be in. The differences in response cannot, by hypothesis, be explained by differences in the operation of reason. But they can and indeed should be explained by appealing to differences in their aversions and propensities, that is, in their passions. What one is led to do by one's beliefs thus depends upon one's passions. If one were altogether passionless, one would not be led to do anything. Something along these lines seems to be behind Hume's willingness to postulate passions so calm their presence is imperceptible.¹⁶

Alternatively, one might defend Hume's position by distinguishing between, on the one hand, actions and the considerations that motivate them, and, on the other hand, mere behavior and the things that might cause them. Hume neither articulates nor defends this distinction. Nonetheless, the distinction is consistent with Hume's views, I think, and can be used to defend the idea that in every case where something serves as a motive to action (rather than merely as a cause of behavior) a passion is in play.

What the distinction does is mark a difference between something being an influencing motive of the will and it being a mere cause of behavior. While all cases of motivated action are cases in which something causes behavior, not all instances of the latter are instances of motivated action. Saying what exactly makes the difference is, of course, a terribly tricky business. But for our purposes the key point is that, when actions (and not mere behavior) are at issue, the considerations that cause the behavior, and serve as the agent's motives, must be related so as to render her behavior intelligible as a case of the agent pursuing her aims or goals or, more loosely, as her behaving as she is concerned to do.

¹⁶ There is an issue here, though, about how seriously to take Hume's claim that the passions are themselves *perceptions* in the mind and not, say, *dispositions* of the person. The argument goes much more smoothly on the latter view than on the former. The mere fact that there must be a difference that explains the difference (between those moved by the beliefs and those not), might well show more or less trivially that there is a difference in dispositions to respond to the beliefs. But it wouldn't show that those dispositions are themselves perceptions in the mind as opposed to tendencies to respond to perceptions. Fortunately, by and large, Hume's characterizations of passions, in the context of explaining actions, seem to suggest the dispositional rather than the mental entity view. Thus, he notes that certain desires and tendencies "are more known by their effects than by the immediate feeling or sensation" (T. 417).

With the distinction in mind, we can say that any consideration that causes behavior, but is of no concern to the agent, is not a motive of hers, and the behavior it causes will not count as an action performed by the agent. We can also say that if a consideration does motivate an agent to perform an action, then it was not a matter of indifference to her. "It can never in the least concern us to know, that such objects are causes, and such others effects," Hume thinks, "if both the causes and the effect be indifferent to us" (T. 414) and such knowledge, whatever its effects might be, will not serve as a motive of the will. Exactly the same line of thought applies where the knowledge is of eternal relations rather than causal connections: it can never in the least concern us to know a relation obtains if both the relation and the things that stand in the relation are indifferent to us. Thus, whether the knowledge is of a matter of fact or of a relation among ideas, it will be a motive for the agent only if it is of concern to her, and for it to be of concern is for it to be the object of a passion.

While Hume does not himself press this distinction between a mere cause of behavior and a motive for action, he seems careful to respect it in his discussion of the influencing motives of the will. Most notable there is Hume's focus on the relevant influences on the will being passions that have objects, and that motivate action, by influencing the will, only in light of discoveries about those objects. The particular discoveries in turn motivate as well, it must be said, but only as the discoveries relate to objects that are of concern to the agent. So a full articulation of the influencing motives of the will has to appeal both to the agent's beliefs and to her concerns.

The underlying idea is that an agent's beliefs work as they do *to direct action* only as the beliefs are related to what is of concern to the agent. And for something to be of concern to an agent—for her not to be indifferent to it—is for it to be the object of one of her passions. To imagine an agent utterly indifferent to the world is just to imagine an agent with no concerns, that is, with no passions. Whatever such an agent might discover, she will remain unmoved unless and until she loses her indifference and acquires a relevant concern.

For something to be of concern to us involves our having an aversion or propensity of some sort with regard to it, so that we are disposed to act one way or another in light of discoveries concerning it. Propensities and aversions of this sort simply are (as Hume uses the term) passions. Sometimes they are calm, so calm as to go unnoticed, at other times they are violent and impossible to miss. But at all times, if an agent is motivated to act, they are present.

While this claim may sound like a substantial empirical hypothesis, the reasoning that leads to the conclusion is utterly insubstantial and treats

as perfectly trivial an inference from the fact that an agent performed an *action* to her having had, in the sense Hume requires, a relevant propensity or aversion (i.e. passion). In effect, the necessity of passion, when it comes to identifying an agent's motives for action, is treated as an analytic truth. It leaves open discovering in particular cases that no relevant passion was present, in which case the behavior won't count as an action, and it leaves open discovering that what motivates some people is radically different from that what motivates others. What it closes off is the thought that a consideration might motivate action in the absence of a passion, since that would be for the consideration to motivate in the absence of motivation.

This means that, even if moral distinctions were, in some way, discoverable by reason, knowledge of them would still serve as a motive of someone's actions only in light of her passions, whether these are "certain instincts originally implanted in our natures, such as benevolence and resentment, the love of life, and kindness to children; or the general appetite to good, and aversion to evil, consider'd merely as such" or still some other propensity or aversion (T. 417). The required passions may be, he acknowledges, so calm as to be indistinguishable from reason in their operation, and they may be "more known by their effects than by the immediate sensation," yet if the effects (on action) are there, so too must be they.¹⁷

DOES MORALITY ALONE MOTIVATE?

But if, as Hume seems to hold, there is no action without (at least calm) passion, how is it that morality *alone* might be an influencing motive of the will? Won't morality's impact on action depend on the presence of an independent (albeit, perhaps calm) passion?

One answer would involve holding that morality has an impact because our moral opinions themselves are, or at least involve having, certain concerns. On this view, such opinions are not (or not merely) beliefs that might be true or false, but are instead (or in addition) motivating states of the agent who holds them. This suggestion fits reasonably well with one natural reading of Hume's famous claim that if you examine any vicious act,

¹⁷ This argument, if it works, establishes that in every case where a person performs an action, she must have had a relevant passion. It does not establish that every consideration that works to motivate action does so by answering to a *pre-existing* passion. Hume does believe there are some dispositions implanted by nature, but his argument for thinking there is no action absent passion is not an argument for such dispositions. For all the argument shows, the required passions might come new on the scene with the recognition of the conditions in which one finds oneself.

you find only certain passions, motives, volitions, and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action.

While there are complications in treating this passage as a defense of the idea that opinions of injustice and obligations are feelings, not beliefs, none of the complications seem insuperable.

Nonetheless, this non-cognitivist answer fits poorly, as I mentioned above, with a number of things in the *Treatise*. For instance, it is hard to reconcile with Hume's recognition that people can intelligibly acknowledge what morality requires and yet remain unmoved, either because of weakness of will or because of doubts about morality's authority. And it is also hard to reconcile with Hume's careful and detailed account of a standard of moral judgment that is so directly modeled on the account he offers for other judgments that he clearly thinks express beliefs.

If, as I am inclined to think, Hume thought that moral judgments expressed genuine beliefs (albeit beliefs the having of which depended upon the capacity to feel approbation and disapprobation), then it seems they, like all other beliefs, will succeed in motivating an agent only if the agent has certain propensities or aversions. In what sense, then, could morality count, any more than reason, as able alone to influence action? Will not its effect always depend on the presence of an independent passion?

I think not, but to explain why it is necessary to shift attention for a moment to Hume's account of the operations of reason. Reason alone doesn't influence the will, but it does influence beliefs. Yet when *reasoning*, alone, influences belief, it is not *belief* alone that has that effect—a belief's effect depends on the operation of certain dispositions—certain habits of mind—the having of which is partially constitutive of reason. Thus while Hume sees reason alone as unable to serve as an influencing motive of the will, he sees the activity of reasoning—from cause to effect or concerning the relations of ideas—as wholly a matter of reason's operations, even as he also recognizes that these inferences are explained necessarily by appeal to dispositions of the mind that are not themselves inferences or conclusions of reason.¹⁸

Reason can contradict or approve certain conclusions given certain ideas or present impressions and it can, by contradicting or approving those conclusions, sometimes influence belief. But, Hume is clear, even in these cases reason's influence on belief depends upon the mind being,

¹⁸ See Book I, Part III, Section VIII, "Of the causes of belief."

in the relevant way, "well-disposed." What allows this requirement to be compatible with thinking that reason *alone* can influence belief is that the dispositions upon which the inferences depend are the dispositions the having of which constitute one as having a rational mind. In noting that they are required we are not thereby appealing to something that is not a part of reason.

In the same way, I think, Hume considers certain propensities and aversions (specifically, certain passions) that combine with beliefs to motivate behavior, as dispositions the having of which constitute one as a moral agent. These passions are, in the relevant sense, not independent of morality, even as they are not moral beliefs. To count as having a well-disposed mind, from the point of view of morality, one must be concerned with, and so moved by, certain kinds of considerations. Thus, for instance, to be benevolent is to be moved by a recognition that others are in need, and to be just is to be restrained by the thought that something belongs to another. Many of these dispositions (all the dispositions that constitute the natural virtues) are available prior to convention. However, some (those that constitute the artificial virtues) require the existence of conventions. And some of these last—for instance the disposition to be moved by the thought that so acting is one's duty—require specifically the conventions that make possible the thought that something is one's duty. Hume's acknowledgment of the essential role of the passions is compatible with thinking that morality *alone* can influence action precisely because the dispositions upon which the actions depend are dispositions the having of which constitute one as being a moral person. In noting that these are required we are not thereby appealing to something that is not a part of morality.¹⁹

The contrast with reason is therefore still in place. The dispositions that are required by, and partially constitutive of, reason are dispositions to reach various conclusions in light of experience or reflection on ideas. They are not dispositions to act in light of the conclusions one reaches. Whereas, the dispositions that are required by, and partially constitutive of, morality are dispositions to act in various ways in light of certain considerations. The former cannot explain action (as such) without appealing to passions that are not required by reason, whereas the latter can, sometimes, explain action by appealing only to dispositions required by morality.

¹⁹ It is worth emphasizing that, on this account, in saying that morality alone motivates one is not saying that moral beliefs (or judgments) alone motivate. The capacity of moral beliefs (or judgments) to motivate still depends upon the presence of a relevant passion. The important point is that at least sometimes the requisite passion is itself properly regarded as something the having of which is a part of what it is to be moral.

THE WORRIES PROMPTED BY THE STANDARD READING RECONSIDERED

Early on in the paper I mentioned a number of complaints people (rightly) have against Hume's core argument, as it is standardly understood. I want now to go through those complaints, with the alternative understanding on the table. I will go back through them in reverse order, starting with the concerns that focused on apparent inconsistencies in Hume's own view.

Illegitimate A Priorism

The first such concern focused on Hume's explicit commitment to thinking causal connections are discoverable only a posteriori. As he writes, "there is no connexion of cause and effect ... which is discoverable otherwise than by experience, and of which we can pretend to have any security by the simple consideration of the objects" (T. 466). Yet, on the standard understanding of Hume's argument he seems to be declaring a priori both that reason can never alone cause action and, thanks to his apparent internalism, that morality alone always does.

If, as I maintain, Hume's only a priori claim here is the *negative* causal claim that reason cannot cause actions by contradicting or approving of them, he is on safe ground. Hume's support for this is, on the one hand, that reason can approve or contradict something only by finding it either true or false, and on the other hand, that actions are not the sort of thing that can be true or false. This is an argument that turns not on the evidence provided by experience, but instead solely on the comparison of our ideas of 'reason', 'truth and falsehood', and 'action', and they are such that we can pretend to have some security concerning them. Hume may of course be wrong about our idea of 'reason', or of 'truth' and 'falsehood', or of 'action'. But if he is not, reason's inability to cause an action by contradicting or approving of it is secure and consistent with his claims about what is required to establish positive causal claims.

The distinction between negative and positive causal claims is no help, though, in defending Hume against an inconsistent *a prioriism* if he is embracing internalism a priori. Even here, the inconsistency is not inevitable. Hume could in effect simply stipulate that a judgment does not count as a moral judgment unless the person making it has some motive to act accordingly. And he might defend this on the grounds that, given the distinction between the speculative and the practical, "morality

is always comprehended under the latter division." But what is agreed to on all sides, when morality is counted as practical, is clearly not that moral judgments always provide some motivation. So in embracing internalism stipulatively, Hume would almost certainly be relegating his argument to the sidelines or begging the central question. Alternatively, Hume might be seen as holding his internalism as an empirical thesis. But then the evidence he has would be woefully weak, especially in light of his own recognition that in a lot of cases no motive seems apparent (and if it is present it is only because the passions can be so calm as to be imperceptible).

Fortunately, if I am right, no part of Hume's argument requires internalism, a priori or otherwise. Hume does think—and this is granted on all sides—that moral distinctions can and commonly do make a difference to how people act. And he recognizes (in a way not everyone does) that this imposes an important constraint on accounts of those distinctions: the accounts must be able to make sense of how and why the distinctions make the difference they do to how people act. What any account of morality needs to do is explain how it is that the connection between morality and the will "is so necessary, that in *every well-disposed mind*, it must take place and have its influence" (T. 465, my italics).

Hume's Apparently Cognitivist Account of Moral Judgment

The second concern was that Hume offers a positive account of moral judgment that puts it on all fours with what are indisputably beliefs. Moral judgments, are, he clearly argues, bound up with our sentimental constitution and our capacity to feel approbation and disapprobation, in much the way that our judgments of color are bound up with our capacity to have color experiences. In both cases, though, Hume is at pains to distinguish the sentiments and experiences that are required from the beliefs we might make in light of them.

But if, as the standard reading of the core argument would have it, Hume thought that moral judgments necessarily motivate, while beliefs only contingently motivate, he would be committed to saying moral judgments are not, after all, beliefs.

If I am right, though, his argument does not depend on holding that moral judgments necessarily motivate. So while he is committed to thinking beliefs motivate only contingently, he can hold the same view of moral judgments, without undermining his argument for thinking moral distinctions are not derived from reason.

Begging the Question against Externalists

Once the idea that Hume is committed to internalism is put to one side, accusations that he begs the question against externalists simply lose their grip. Hume does hold that the connection between morality and the will must be explained, but he does not think that explanation requires that our moral opinions are intrinsically motivating, nor does he think that the explanation will do without an appeal to the aversions and propensities of those who count as having a "well-disposed mind." It is worth emphasizing, though, that Hume does think an acceptable theory of moral judgment will need to account for the intimate connection there is between those judgments and our motivations. While that connection is not so tight as to guarantee the presence of a motivation whenever someone forms a moral opinion, it is nonetheless tight. Specifically, Hume thinks in the normal case people are motivated to act as their judgments would endorse and that fact is not, Hume thinks, a mere coincidence. Indeed, if no such connection existed, the judgments could not, he believes, make out their claim to allegiance. While this is not the place to go into Hume's positive theory of moral judgment, it is worth mentioning that he thinks the capacity to feel moral sentiments (which are not themselves judgments) is as crucial to moral judgment as the capacity to have visual experiences is crucial to visual judgments. Morality's ability to motivate action is bound up with the role the moral sentiments have both in making moral judgments and in constituting the standard by which those judgments are to be counted as correct.²⁰ The judgments might, in particular cases, be made without consulting, or even having, moral sentiments. But if there were no such sentiments at all, Hume holds, the judgments would not be possible. And while the standard for the judgments is not set by the sentiments people actually feel, it is a standard set by the sentiments they would feel were they to correct their view in appropriate ways.

Begging the Questions against Cognitivist Internalism

What about those who hold that moral judgments do necessarily motivate and that, precisely because they are beliefs, they serve as counter-examples

²⁰ To say that morality's ability to motivate is bound up with the role of moral sentiments is not to say that those sentiments themselves necessarily motivate. There is at least some reason to think that Hume sees the moral sentiments of approbation and disapprobation, which are particular kinds of pleasure (on his view), as having no specific motivational implications. Certainly he thought we might approve of certain characters without having any particular motivation. At the same time, though, the prospect of acting in ways that we ourselves would approve or disapprove of would have the kind of implications for action that Hume thinks the prospect of pleasure or pain regularly has in humans.

to Hume's claim that reason alone can never motivate? This seems directly to undercut Hume's claim that reason and its products, alone, cannot cause action in the absence of a passion.

It is worth noting that the claim that beliefs, in the absence of a relevant passion, are inert, is compatible with holding that some genuine beliefs actually always motivate thanks to the inevitable presence of a relevant passion. This is Hume's explicit view concerning beliefs one has about the prospect of pleasure or pain for oneself. "Tis obvious," he says, "that when we have the prospect of pain or pleasure from any object, we feel a consequent emotion of aversion or propensity, and are carry'd to avoid or embrace what will give us this uneasiness or satisfaction" (T, 414). According to Hume, the prospects of pleasure and pain do always motivate. But this is because, and only because, we have a propensity to pleasure and an aversion to pain.²¹ In a parallel way, Hume could acknowledge that, as a matter of fact, moral judgments always motivate. Of course this falls short of holding that moral judgments necessarily motivate regardless of one's concerns. But, if I am right, Hume has a fairly compelling a priori argument against that view.²² What that argument leaves open is a view according to which the conditions for making moral judgments guaranteed the presence of a relevant passion. According to such a view, moral judgments would necessarily motivate, but they would not do so regardless of one's concerns.

In any case, while Hume neither defends nor assumes internalism about moral judgment, were there good arguments for it, nothing would preclude his accepting it and accepting as well the idea that the judgments were themselves beliefs that are the product of reasons. He could and would still hold, though, that the impact of those beliefs depend on the presence of a relevant passion.

Artificially Restricting the Reach of Reason

There is no denying that Hume draws a fairly sharp and clear line around what he will count as reason. He does, I've suggested, include within its scope not only the faculty of reason and its operations (inferences) and its products (beliefs, doubts, conclusions ...) but also the habits and dispositions that make it possible for reason to work as it does. Nonetheless, from the start he seems to have excluded out of hand just what many have wanted to defend: the idea of a truly practical reason that moves one from various premises to action.

²¹ As Hume notes, "there is implanted in the human mind a perception of pain and pleasure, as the chief spring and moving principle of all its actions" (T, 118).

²² The argument is only fairly compelling, not decisive, since one might insist that two people with the same moral beliefs must equally have the same motivations.

But that may not be fair to Hume. Hume is perfectly willing to talk of standards of morality that countenance or condemn acting on the basis of certain considerations. And, though he says little about it, Hume seems equally willing to talk of a standard of prudence that countenances or condemns acting on the basis of certain considerations. In both cases, Hume evidently has no difficulty with the idea that such standards might exist and be properly influential in our thinking and acting. What he would reject, with respect to these standards, or any others that might be advanced, is that their credentials might be established independently of their authority, or that their authority might be established without showing how they might successfully govern. To do this last, one must show that the truths on offer are such that adopting them as a standard for action will solve well the practical problems that give rise to the need for a standard in the first place. Doing this is inevitably a matter of showing how those standards might actually have a grip on all who are "well-disposed."²³

With that in mind, consider the common suggestion that it is irrational to will an end and not will the necessary means to achieving that end, or irrational not to will what one believes to be the necessary means, or irrational not to will the most efficient means (or what one takes to be the most efficient means), or irrational not to will the best means (or what one takes to be the best means) to one's ends.²⁴

Whichever of these one might accept, it could be offered (as Kant offers his version) as an analytic truth or merely as the correct substantive standard of practical rationality. Either way, actions will count as rational or not (in *this* sense) not in virtue of being true or false but rather in virtue of being appropriately related to some such standard. What is relevantly true or false are claims concerning what the correct substantive standard is. There are two points Hume would make about any such standard, however it is defended. One is that an agent could satisfy the standard (i.e. take the appropriate course of action in light of her ends) only thanks to having the appropriate aversions and propensities. Knowing the relevant truths would not be enough.²⁵ The other is that one can reasonably ask, of any such standard, whether it matters whether one is rational in *that* sense. No

²³ The thought here is that Hume's account of the authority of practical standards will, like his account of political legitimacy, make actual effectiveness a necessary condition. Just as a ruler's claim to legitimacy depends on his capacity to govern effectively, so too will a standard's claim to authority.

²⁴ Alternatively, one could consider the less often defended but often acted upon "That'll teach 'em" principle, according to which the appropriate response to frustration is to lash out.

²⁵ Kant clearly appeals to reverence for the law to account for how it is that real agents are moved by recognition of the categorical imperative. Does he recognize the need for something similar to account for the effectiveness of the hypothetical imperative? If the

answer that stops short of engaging the concerns of agents will work, and thus an answer that works does so by engaging not merely the intellect but the heart.

CONCLUSION

If I am right, the arguments Hume offered against rationalism do not depend on motivational internalism nor do they entail non-cognitivism. And while they do depend on some analytic truths (e.g. "what cannot disapprove or approve of actions cannot cause actions by disapproving or approving of them"), this is not a matter of Hume mobilizing a *priori* constraints on causation of a sort that he could not countenance. Moreover, they are fully compatible with Hume taking seriously the possibility that some people might be unmoved by moral considerations even as they recognize them and compatible too with Hume developing a substantive standard of morality in light of which some moral opinions are true.

What the arguments preclude is thinking that the truth of such opinions is independent of what might motivate those who are subject to moral demands. As a result, the arguments imply that not everyone who fails to be moral is properly criticized as having been irrational (as opposed to immoral) in Hume's sense. One might, of course, expand the notion of rationality so as to be able to decry all immorality as irrationality. But then one would have expanded the notion of rationality to the point where it makes sense to wonder whether people have reason to be rational. That this would make sense is, though, no objection in itself. The problems would come only if it turned out that, by the very standard of rationality on offer, there was no reason to be rational. In that case, we would have discovered reason to be concerned not with what is rational (in this extended sense) but with something else.

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