

# HUME ON PRACTICAL REASON<sup>1</sup>

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There are parts of the Treatise of Human Nature<sup>2</sup> that suggest a thoroughgoing scepticism about practical reason, an outright rejection of rational requirements on action and desire. What else could lead Hume to write a passage like this?

'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the world to the scratching of my finger.  
'Tis not contrary to reason for me to choose 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, and have a more ardent affection for the former than the latter. (2.3.3.6)

One answer to this question has been particularly influential: Hume is not a sceptic about practical reason tout court; he is a sceptic about rational deliberation of ends, and thus an instrumentalist. The point of the quoted passage is that our final desires and preferences, desires for things for their own sakes, or as ends, cannot be "contrary to reason". Once we have such desires, however, practical reason dictates that we take the proper means to their satisfaction. This reading draws support from the passage that follows Hume's remarks about the destruction of the world:

Since a passion can never, in any sense, be call'd unreasonable, but when founded on a false supposition, or when it chooses means insufficient for the design'd end, 'tis impossible, that reason and passion can ever oppose each other, or dispute for the government of the will and actions. (2.3.3.7)

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of a paper that appeared in Philosophical Perspectives (18): 365-89. For help in writing it, I am grateful to Cian Dorr and Karl Schafer, to audiences at Boston University, McGill and NYU (especially to Ruth Chang, Thomas Nagel and Michael Smith), and to the participants in my Spring 2004 seminar on the British Moralists at the University of Pittsburgh.

<sup>2</sup> Hume (1739-40). I cite the Treatise in the main text by giving Book, Part, Section and paragraph numbers.

The apparent implication is that a passion can be called unreasonable when it is a desire for means "insufficient for the design'd end", or when it is based on a false belief – but not otherwise. The basic requirement of practical reason is to take the means to one's ends. This is the sense in which "Reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of passions" (2.3.3.4).

This way of reading Hume has been so dominant that "Humean" now serves as a virtual synonym for "instrumentalist". This is how the term figures in Bernard Williams' (1980) paper, "Internal and External Reasons", and how it continues to be used, despite occasional scare-quotes, in the philosophy of practical reason. Against this interpretation, some recent authors have pressed a more literal account, taking Hume's profession of scepticism, his apparent rejection of practical reason, at face value.<sup>3</sup> It has to be said that they have a point. For the passages discussed above follow an (infamous) argument that it is "impossible [...] that [a] passion can be oppos'd to, or be contradictory to truth and reason" (2.3.3.5; see also 3.1.1.9); they are separated by the observation that, when it is accompanied by false belief, "'tis not the passion, properly speaking, which is unreasonable, but the judgement" (2.3.3.6); and they are followed in Book Three by the claim that false beliefs "render [passions] unreasonable, in a figurative and improper way of speaking." (3.1.1.12, my emphasis) These remarks seem calculated precisely to withdraw Hume's apparent commitment to instrumentalism, and to propose the more radical view, not that practical reason is concerned with means rather than ends, but that there are no standards of practical reason at all. On this recently influential interpretation, Hume's view is well expressed when he says that "passions, volitions and actions [cannot] be pronounc'd [...] either contrary or conformable to reason" (3.1.1.9), except "by an abusive way of speaking, which philosophy will scarce allow" (3.1.1.11).

The task of this paper is to criticize the sceptical reading of Hume, and to propose a qualified alternative. My argument will hinge on three things. The first (section 1) is an analogy between Hume's discussion of reason as a motive, and his earlier discussion of reason and induction. In each case, Hume's conclusion appears to be sceptical – when really it is not. The second (section 2) is a close reading of

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<sup>3</sup> Here I am thinking principally of Jean Hampton (1995), Elijah Millgram (1995) and Christine Korsgaard (1997).

Hume on "the influencing motives of the will" (2.3.3), on which his point is not to dismiss the idea of practical reasoning, but to distinguish it from theoretical inference, which is the province of "reason", strictly so-called. The final crux of my argument (section 3) is the most speculative. It depends on asking a question that is presupposed by the present debate about Hume: what is it that he is supposed to be a sceptic about? Or in positive terms: what would it mean to believe in practical reason, anyway? My suggestion is that the sceptical reading of Hume turns on an optional but prevalent interpretation of practical reason, one to which he gives no room. On a more modest conception, however, Hume does believe in practical reason – even if his scruples about the language of "reason" prevent him from putting it that way. I believe – though I won't be able to argue here – that the modest conception of practical reason that emerges from these reflections on Hume is one that we should hope to defend.<sup>4</sup>

### **1. Against the Sceptical Reading**

Hume offers two main arguments for his conception of practical reason. His first argument is that the understanding "exerts itself after two different ways, as it judges from demonstration or probability" (2.3.3.2), and that neither form of reasoning bears on motivation. His second argument – the Representation Argument – is that a passion is an "original existence [...] which contains not any representative quality" and which therefore cannot be "contradictory to truth and reason" (2.3.3.5). On the sceptical reading, neither of these arguments is any good. Elijah Millgram is particularly clear about this:

[Hume's arguments] are certainly question-begging. Consider the major premise of the first argument, that all reasoning is either mathematical or empirical. This is a terrible premise to use in an argument whose conclusion is that there is no such thing as practical reasoning: anyone who needed to be persuaded of the conclusion would be extremely unlikely to concede it. (After all, why isn't practical reasoning a third kind of reasoning?) The other argument seems little better [...] Why should someone who is seriously entertaining the possibility of practical reasoning agree that "[r]eason is the discovery of truth or falsehood", thereby excluding the process of correctly arriving at new desires and intentions. Or why should he agree that "[a] passion is an

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<sup>4</sup> I do so at length in a book manuscript, Reasons without Rationalism (Setiya, forthcoming).

original existence", that is, not representing, and so not responsible to, further facts or states of affairs? (Millgram 1995: 80-1)<sup>5</sup>

Like Millgram, Derek Parfit (1997) finds the Representation Argument obviously question-begging:

Hume claimed that, since reasoning is entirely concerned with truth, and desires cannot be true or false, desires cannot be supported by or contrary to reason. [. . .] Hume's argument is not good. Hume assumed that there is only one kind of reason: reasons for believing. He said nothing to support the view that we cannot have reasons either for caring or for acting. (Parfit 1997: 128-9).

Others have been more severe: Annette Baier (1991: 160) describes the Representation Argument as a "very silly paragraph". As she interprets it, the passage relies on the claim that passions have no content at all: they cannot be about or for a given thing. But this is absurd, and Hume should have known better, as the author of an elaborate theory of the "objects and causes" of the passions in Book Two of the Treatise (Baier 1991: 161-3). On the sceptical reading, then, Hume's arguments are patently bad, and in ways that he ought to have seen. My instinct is to take this verdict as the cue for a more charitable interpretation.

Millgram (1995: 81-5) is aware of this temptation, but he argues that Hume is after all committed to the dubious assumption Baier attributes to him in the Representation Argument. The problem for Hume is that his "semantic theory" cannot accommodate the contents of passions or desires. According to Millgram, Hume explains the content of mental states in terms of "causal resemblance": a mental state represents what lies at the beginning of the causal chain that produced it. The only way to distinguish between states with the same cause-or-content is by their "force and vivacity", "but vivacity cannot be

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting here a difference between two versions of the sceptical conclusion that might be ascribed to Hume. According to Millgram (1995: 77), "[the] conclusion of [Hume's] argument [...] is evidently not that all practical reasoning is instrumental, but that there is no such thing as practical reasoning at all." In other words, Hume is sceptical about a psychological process, practical reasoning, and therefore sceptical about the standards of practical reason that purport to govern it. But Hume could be sceptical in the second sense – a normative sceptic – without being sceptical about the existence of practical reasoning, as such. That is why my defence of Hume has two parts: I argue in section 2 that he believes in practical reasoning or practical inference (except on a tendentious and anti-Humean picture of what it must be); and I argue in section 3 that he is not a sceptic about the standards of practical reason, in every sense of the phrase.

used to distinguish beliefs and imaginings from desires, [so] desires cannot be representational."

(Millgram 1995: 83) They cannot have contents at all.

This interpretation is confused. Hume does not endorse a "causal resemblance" theory that looks back to the worldly causes of mental states. Hume's "Copy Principle" traces the content of ideas to the impressions that cause and resemble them.<sup>6</sup> But he refuses to speculate about the external causes of our impressions themselves (1.1.2.1, 1.3.5.2) – even before he gives the sceptical arguments of Book One, Part 4. If he has a view about the contents of impressions of sensation, it is a pure resemblance theory. Second, whatever the inadequacies of the Book Two theory of the passions, it does purport to explain their contents, in terms of their causes and "objects" or distinctive effects. And finally, Millgram is wrong to say that "you cannot transform a belief into a desire by making it more vivid [...or] a desire into a belief by making it less vivid." (Millgram 1995: 83) On the contrary, that is precisely Hume's view: a faint copy of a passion (or impression of reflection) will be a corresponding idea, and may constitute a relevant belief. And ideas of passions may become passions themselves, when they acquire more force or vivacity; this is part of what happens in the operation of sympathy (2.1.11.1-8). There is nothing in Hume's philosophy of mind to support the claim that passions and desires are contentless, and therefore nothing that would vindicate the Representation Argument, as Millgram and Baier understand it.

There is a second reason to be wary of the sceptical reading, which turns on a broader theme in Hume's philosophy. It should make us uncomfortable, I think, that Hume is so easy to read as a sceptic about induction (in the first Book of the Treatise), and that this sceptical reading is false.<sup>7</sup> Although Hume argues that we are not "determin'd by reason" to make causal inferences, there is no suggestion in the section "Of the inference from the impression to the idea" (1.3.6) that such inferences are unwarranted, or that reason requires us to give them up. Nor should there be: Hume's remarks about the absence of a non-

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<sup>6</sup> For more on the Copy Principle, see Garrett (1997, ch. 2).

<sup>7</sup> For a convincing account of the defects of the sceptical interpretation, see Garrett (1997: 78-83).

circular argument for the uniformity of nature would support a sceptical conclusion only on the dubious assumption that a justified belief must be susceptible to non-circular proof. Hume's point is not epistemic, but psychological: he is investigating the nature of the process by which we move from the impression or idea of cause (or effect) to the idea of its effect (or cause), once we have been exposed to their constant conjunction. He calls this "causal inference" or "causal reasoning", and he is perfectly happy to employ it. He simply wants to know what it is. And his claim is that, in making causal inferences, we are not "determin'd by reason", in that we do not rely on an argument that connects our premises – "an impression present to the senses or the memory" and "our remembrance of [...] constant conjunction" – to a conclusion about the occurrence of cause or effect.

If reason determin'd us, it wou'd proceed upon that principle, that instances, of which we have had no experience, must resemble those, of which we have had experience, and that the course of nature continues always uniformly the same. (1.3.6.4)

The assumption stressed in this sentence is one that would explain the "rational connection" between the premises of our causal argument and its conclusion, where a rational connection is one that depends on the internal relations of impressions and ideas. "Reason" is the capacity to learn from arguments of this kind – what might be called explicit arguments.<sup>8</sup> Could reason, in this sense, be responsible for causal inference? Hume argues that it could not. The doctrine that causal inference depends on an explicit argument cannot explain how we come to accept the premise about the uniformity of nature. It cannot be the object of demonstration, since we can conceive it to be false (1.3.6.5); nor is it the object of innate belief (1.3.6.7); and the proponent of the explicit argument theory can hardly claim that we derive the premise from causal inference, since "the same principle cannot be both cause and effect of another"

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<sup>8</sup> There is considerable dispute among interpreters about the character of "reason" in Hume's argument about causal inference, for instance, about whether it is properly conceived as deductive (see Owen 1999: 118-131). The formulation in the main text is meant to be neutral on this question, but, for the record, I agree with Owen in finding it doubtful that Hume's picture of reason here requires the connection between steps of an argument to be "formally valid" in anything like the contemporary sense.

(1.3.6.7). It follows that, when we engage in causal inference, we need not have in mind an explicit argument for the conclusion we are disposed to draw.<sup>9</sup>

I want to focus on two aspects of this brief and somewhat dogmatic account of Hume's argument about induction. When he says that causal inference is not "determin'd by reason", Hume is not expressing scepticism, first because the object of his science of human nature is psychological rather than normative, and second, because he is using "reason" in an artificially restricted or technical sense.<sup>10</sup> The second point bears some elaboration. As Book One proceeds, "reason" shifts from being concerned solely with explicit arguments, ones that display the internal relations or rational connections of ideas (as in 1.3.6), to something broader, as when Hume writes about "the reason of animals" (1.3.16), and in the Conclusion, where the understanding is identified with "the general and more establish'd properties of the imagination" (1.4.7.7) – the ones that figure in his account of causal inference. By the time we reach Book Three, and the question whether moral distinctions are "deriv'd from reason" – a question exactly parallel to the one about causal conclusions in Book One – the "reason" in question is "the discovery of truth or falshood" in general. Hume even says that "reason, in a strict and philosophical sense [...] discovers the connexion of causes and effects" (3.1.1.12, my emphasis). It is surely crucial to ask how "reason" is being used in Hume's discussion of practical reason in Book Two.

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<sup>9</sup> This interpretation is confirmed by Hume's repeated emphasis on the immediacy of causal inference (1.3.8.10; 1.3.12.7), and by his argument that it does not even require a belief in or memory of the fact of constant conjunction: "This removes all pretext, if there yet remains any, for asserting that the mind is convinc'd by reasoning of that principle, that instances of which we have no experience, must necessarily resemble those, of which we have." (1.3.8.13) If the premise about constant conjunction is missing, there is no hope at all of construing causal inference as a matter of explicit argument.

<sup>10</sup> On both points, I agree with Owen (1999, ch. 6). Conceding that "[f]ew interpretive remarks about Hume meet with more widespread agreement than [...] that he uses the term 'reason' in several different senses", Garrett (1997: 83-95) argues against this orthodox view, in favour of a univocal reading of "reason" in Hume. According to Garrett, "reason" always means the capacity for inference, both demonstrative and probable; Hume's claim in 1.3.6 is not that causal inference is not a matter of reason, in a narrow sense, but that the capacity for causal inference is not itself acquired by inference of any kind (Garrett 1997: 94). It is a genetic claim, not a constitutive psychological one. I find this suggestion implausible. First, Hume's object seems to be the nature of particular episodes of causal inference, not the origins of our general capacity for it. Second, on Garrett's reading, Hume would have no reason to assume, at the outset, that if reason determines causal inference, it must appeal to an explicit argument. Finally, if Hume's question is about the origin of our capacity for causal inference, his answer, that it is "deriv'd from nothing but custom and habit" (1.3.10.1; see also 1.4.1.8) would be no less regressive than the appeal to "probable reasoning" he rejects (at 1.3.6.7).

The obvious proposal is this: in Book Two, and in particular, in the section "Of the influencing motives of the will", Hume is using "reason" as he does at the beginning of Book Three. He means the capacity for theoretical or truth-directed reasoning: that is, on his particular account of it, the capacity for demonstrative and causal inference. So, in arguing that passions cannot be contrary to reason, Hume does not illicitly assume "that there is only one kind of reason: reasons for believing" (Parfit 1997: 128), and therefore beg the question, any more than he begs the question in the argument about induction, when he says that "if reason determin'd us" in making causal inferences, it would have to do so by way of an explicit argument. Hume's problematic "assumptions" amount to stipulations about the sense of "reason" under discussion. The same point applies to the premises criticized by Millgram (1995), in the passage quoted above.

Even if this is right, it does nothing to explain the constructive purpose of Hume's arguments, or what those arguments are. But here we should take the first hint from Hume's account of causal inference: his topic is psychological rather than normative. He is not arguing for a sceptical conclusion about practical reason (at least not directly), any more than he argues for scepticism about induction. His primary claim is that "reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will" (2.3.3.1): his object is the theory of motivation, not the theory of normative practical reason. This fact is crucial to a proper understanding of his arguments about "the influencing motives of the will". Hume's conclusion in this section is a psychological claim about theoretical reason, but – as with induction – one that matters to philosophy. The question that remains is what this claim could be.

## **2. "Of the influencing motives of the will"**

A natural suggestion is that reason alone is not a motive because the conclusions of reasons – beliefs – cannot motivate us to act, all on their own: "a belief could not move us to action, unless it was relevant to the satisfaction of some passion, desire or need." (Harrison 1976: 6; see also Mackie 1980: 47) On this influential reading, Hume accepts what is nowadays called "the Humean theory of motivation" (Smith

1987). I said before that "Humean" serves as a synonym for "instrumentalism" in the philosophy of practical reason; in the theory of motivation, it stands for the doctrine that a belief cannot motivate action without the help of a separate unmotivated desire.

This way of stating the view (in terms of "unmotivated" desire) derives from Thomas Nagel (1970: 29-30), who distinguishes two importantly different claims: what we might call "the Humean theory of the motivation of action", according to which intentional action is always caused in part by a prior desire; and "the Humean theory of motivation" in general, according to which intentional actions and motivated desires are always caused in part by prior desires – where in each case desires are conceived as non-cognitive states, distinct from any belief.<sup>11</sup> According to the first claim, which Nagel apparently accepts, desires or passions play a role in the immediate causal history of intentional action.<sup>12</sup> According to the second claim, which he rejects, the causation of action can always be traced, in the end, to the motivating force of non-derivative, unmotivated desires. When intentional action is caused by a motivated desire – a desire that is had for a reason – the question is whether this desire might have been caused by beliefs, or other cognitive states, alone. On the Humean theory of motivation (not restricted to action), the answer is "no".

It would be a very tidy outcome if Hume's point about "the influencing motives of the will" turned out to be the Humean theory of motivation. It would attribute to him a moral-psychological, not a normative claim, as I proposed above. It would explain why it is so easy to read Hume as an

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<sup>11</sup> In other words, both views reject the possibility of "besires" (Altham 1986: 284-5): cognitive states that have the motivational profile of desires. The terminology can be tricky here. Some authors use "desire" in a way that it makes it trivial that desires are non-cognitive states, and therefore not "besires" (Smith 1987: 55-6), so that the qualification in the main text is redundant. Others use "desire" to mean something like "pro-attitude", so that it is a substantive question whether a belief (for instance, about what is good) might also be a desire. However we describe it, the latter possibility is one that both of our "Humean" theories will reject.

<sup>12</sup> I say that Nagel only "apparently" accepts this view, because it is not clear that he thinks of motivated desires as causally effective, or even as psychologically real. At times he writes as though such desires are "logical shadows" of the fact that some belief is motivating: "That I have the appropriate desire simply follows from the fact that [certain] considerations motivate me. [...] It is a necessary condition of their efficacy, but only a logically necessary condition. It is not necessary either as a contributing influence, or as a causal condition." (Nagel 1970: 29) At other times, the desire seems real enough, and the fact that it is motivated is merely a fact about its causal history. On the latter reading, Nagel accepts what I have called the Humean theory of the motivation of action.

instrumentalist: the Humean theory is the analogue for motivation of instrumentalism about practical reason; it claims that motives (instead of normative reasons) always depend on unmotivated desires. And it would vindicate one common use of the epithet "Humean" in contemporary moral philosophy.

Unfortunately, it is fairly clear that Hume did not accept the whole of the Humean view. There are several points to be made here,<sup>13</sup> but the central issue turns on Hume's discussion of beliefs about pleasure and pain in the section of Book One, "Of the influence of belief" (1.3.10). Here Hume defends a hedonist account of the basic elements of human motivation, on which perceptions of pleasure and pain serve "as the chief spring and moving principle of all [the] actions [of the human mind]." Such perceptions may be impressions or ideas, and "the influence of these upon our actions is far from being equal." Impressions of pain and pleasure "always actuate the soul", but if only impressions were able to influence the will, practical foresight would be impossible. On the other hand, if every idea of pleasure or pain were able to influence the will – any "image [...] wandering in the mind" (1.3.10.2) – our motives would be haphazard and confused.

Nature has, therefore, chosen a medium, and has neither bestow'd on every idea of good and evil the power of actuating the will, nor yet has entirely excluded them from this influence. Tho' an idle fiction has no efficacy, yet we find by experience, that the ideas of those objects, which we believe either are or will be existent, produce in a lesser degree the same effect with those impressions, which are immediately present to the senses and perception. The effect, then, of belief, is to raise up a simple idea to an equality with our impressions, and bestow on it a like influence on the passions. (1.3.10.3)

On a natural interpretation, Hume's argument here is flatly inconsistent with the Humean theory of motivation: some passions are motivated simply by beliefs about pleasure and pain.<sup>14</sup> Such motivation is no less immediate, and no more dependent on prior desires, than motivation by feelings of pleasure and pain, which is, for Hume, the simplest and most basic kind.

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<sup>13</sup> For a systematic argument that Hume is not a "Humean" about motivation, see Persson (1997).

<sup>14</sup> For this claim, see also: Kydd (1946: 103-7), Baier (1991: 159-61), Korsgaard (1997: 224) and Persson (1997: 194).

It might be replied, on behalf of the Humean reading of Hume, that the transition is effected by desire nonetheless. And in the section "Of the influencing motives of the will", Hume does speak of "the general appetite to good, and aversion to evil" (2.3.3.8), describing it as a "calm passion". But his point in doing so is not to explain the transition described in the passage just above, from the vivid idea of some particular pleasure, to a passion – he continues to attribute the passion simply to the "prospect" of pleasure from an object (2.3.3.3) – but to account for the motivating force of less vivid beliefs, ones that merely depict the balance of unspecified pleasure and pains. For Hume, calm passions are simply ones that "produce little emotion in the mind" (2.3.3.8), not ones invoked – without apparent argument – to save the Humean theory of motivation.<sup>15</sup>

It is in any case clear that Hume appeals to motivating principles other than desire. So, for instance, he thinks of love and hatred, like pride and humility, as "pure emotions in the soul, unattended with any desire, and not immediately exciting us to action" (2.2.6.3); they differ in that love and hatred, but not pride and humility, produce the motivating passions of benevolence and anger by "the original constitution of the mind." (2.2.6.6) This "constitution" is not a desire, but something that determines the transition from non-desiderative passion to desire. In much the same way, Hume explains that the calm or violent passions will prevail "according to the general character and present disposition of the person." (2.3.3.10) Standing over the motivating passions, this disposition is not itself a passion or desire.<sup>16</sup>

If these arguments are right, Hume does not accept the Humean theory of motivation.<sup>17</sup> Nor can it be said that his point about the motivational impotence of reason amounts to the Humean theory of the motivation of action, in particular. Hume does appear to accept this less ambitious view: the motivational

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<sup>15</sup> Here I disagree with Stroud (1977: 163-5).

<sup>16</sup> At least, not unless we drain the content of the Humean theory by stipulating that dispositions-to-desire count as desires. On this point, see Parfit (1997: 105).

<sup>17</sup> I have ignored a broader strategic reason for attributing the Humean theory to Hume, namely that he needs it as a premise of his argument for non-cognitivism about moral attitudes in Book Three. I think it is clear on independent grounds that this interpretation of Hume's argument is flawed (see Garrett 1997, ch. 9). I hope to discuss that argument (and its connection with Hume's claim about the motivational impotence of reason) elsewhere.

role of hedonic beliefs is always mediated by the passions they produce (see Baier 1991: 159). But that cannot be what he means to argue for in the section "Of the influencing motives of the will", for at least two reasons. First, it would hardly amount to an interesting limit on the motivational authority of reason that its conclusions cannot motivate except by producing passions – any more than it counts as a limit on the authority of a master that he can make his servant act only by telling him what to do. Second, it is quite unclear how the Representation Argument, on which Hume seems to place some weight, could be an argument for the Humean theory of the motivation of action. How would it follow from the premise that passions cannot be "oppos'd by, or be contradictory to truth or reason" (2.3.3.5) that they are essential to the motivation of action?<sup>18</sup>

The solution to these puzzles about the content of Hume's theory of motivation lies in the second moral I drew from the treatment of reason and induction in Book One: reason is a "faculty" (2.3.3.4) or a psychological capacity. When Hume says that "reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will" (2.3.3.1), he means that the faculty of reason (and theoretical reason in particular) cannot be responsible for motivation. His point is about the motivational power of "reasoning" (2.3.3.2-3) not of conclusions of reason, or beliefs.

Hume's initial arguments depend on his conception of reason as the capacity for demonstration and causal inference. His claim is that the process of determining causes and effects (to which demonstrative reasoning may contribute) has no influence on the will.<sup>19</sup> "It can never in the least concern us to know, that such objects are causes, and such others effects, if both causes and effects be indifferent to us." (2.3.3.3) Hume gives an example (familiar from 1.3.10) in which "the prospect of pain or pleasure" causes an "emotion of aversion or propensity". This emotion is what prompts us to engage in causal

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<sup>18</sup> For a similar objection to the Representation Argument, as an attempt to defend the Humean theory of motivation, see Harrison (1976: 7-8).

<sup>19</sup> I pass over the argument in 2.3.3.2 that demonstrative inference is relevant to motivation "only as it directs our judgement concerning causes and effects".

reasoning, and "making us cast our view on every side, comprehends whatever objects are connected with its original one by the relation of cause and effect." (2.3.3.3)

Here then reasoning takes place to discover this relation; and according as our reasoning varies, our actions receive a subsequent variation. But 'tis evident in this case, that the impulse arises not from reason, but is only directed by it. 'Tis from the prospect of pain or pleasure that the aversion or propensity arises towards any object: And these emotions extend themselves to the causes and effects of that object, as they are pointed out to us by reason and experience. (2.3.3.3)

The question is why Hume denies that reason motivates, in this case, since the emotion or propensity that figures in the causal story is the effect of a conclusion of reason, "the prospect of pain or pleasure". The answer is that the transition to the emotion or propensity, and the further transition from this emotion to the desire for the means to its object, are not themselves examples of causal inference. They are causal transactions, but not ones in which we infer a cause from an effect, or a causal regularity from past experience. If we are to call the production of desire in Hume's example a kind of "inference", it is not causal inference to belief, but inference of a different kind.

It is a nice irony that, in the arguments in which he is sometimes accused of missing or ignoring the possibility of practical as opposed to theoretical reasoning (see the quotes from Millgram and Parfit in section 1), Hume is actually defending that very idea. Though he would not put it this way himself, Hume's point is that we must distinguish practical inference – whose outcome is a passion, or an action – from the operations of theoretical reason.

In the Representation Argument, he tries to establish this in a completely general way, lifting the initial argument's restriction to hedonic-instrumental inference, and dropping the assumption that theoretical reasoning must be causal or demonstrative. What he assumes is the more abstract claim that "Reason is the discovery of truth or falshood" (3.1.1.9).

A passion is an original existence, or, if you will, modification of existence, and contains not any representative quality, which renders it a copy of any other existence or modification. [...] 'Tis impossible, therefore, that this passion can be oppos'd by, or be contradictory to truth and reason; since this contradiction consists in the disagreement of ideas, consider'd as copies, with those objects, which they represent. (2.3.3.5)

We need not take Hume to be saying here that passions do not represent the world, so long as we are careful to read his remark about copying as a restrictive clause.<sup>20</sup> My desire to finish this paper has my finishing the paper as its content, what it represents, but it is not a copy of that event, something that is correct just in case the event occurs, and wrong or defective otherwise. In contrast, an idea is to be considered as a copy: it is correct just in case the world is as it represents. To use a contemporary idiom, there is a sense in which, for Hume, ideas "aim at the truth", while desires or passions do not. That is why desires simply cannot be among the conclusions of theoretical reasoning, as "the discovery of truth or falshood": theoretical inference can only produce ideas. Thus, even when a "prospect of pain or pleasure" immediately causes an "emotion of aversion or propensity", the transition to the passion is not a theoretical inference, because it is not an inference to the truth of what the passion represents; it is not an inference to an idea, which can be "consider'd as a copy" of its object.

If this is right, Hume's Treatise should be seen as a thematic predecessor of Anscombe's Intention. Anscombe (1963: 56-7) contrasts belief with practical attitudes like intention by appeal to their conditions of correctness: it counts as a mistake in belief, but not intention or desire, if it fails to fit the facts. Corresponding to this, she finds a "difference of form between reasoning leading to action and reasoning for the truth of a conclusion." (Anscombe 1963: 60) Hume's point is similar to this, except that he is not equipped to make a categorical distinction between beliefs and other ideas. He thinks of belief as nothing more than a "strong and steady conception of any idea [...which] approaches in some measure to an immediate perception" (1.3.7.6 n.). So, for Hume, it is not belief, specifically, but ideas in general that are to be considered as copies of their objects. Unlike some recent philosophers,<sup>21</sup> Hume does not distinguish belief from other cognitive states, like imagination and supposition, by the fact that it aims at the truth, but rather by its force or vivacity. The Representation Argument is concerned with cognitive states in general, and thus with theoretical inference in a broad sense that includes "hypothetical reasoning" on

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<sup>20</sup> The convention against using a comma before a restrictive clause was not in place when Hume was writing, nor was the convention in favour of using "that" rather than "which".

<sup>21</sup> I am thinking, in particular, of David Velleman (2000).

mere ideas.<sup>22</sup> Still, he can and does endorse Anscombe's conclusion, that there is a sharp distinction between theoretical inference (to the truth of an idea) and the motivation of passion or action that constitutes practical inference. This is the content of Hume's claim that "reason" – by which he means theoretical reason – "can never be a motive to any action of the will".<sup>23</sup>

In effect, then, I take Hume's theory of motivation to be a theory of practical inference by another name. It is worth examining two objections to the theory, understood in this way. As an account of practical reasoning or practical inference, Hume's theory of motivation may seem to be, on the one hand, too restrictive, and on the other hand, not restrictive enough. It will seem too restrictive if Hume's focus on being motivated by the prospect of pleasure or pain leads us to conclude that this is the only form that Humean practical inference takes. This suspicion of psychological hedonism may be corrected in two ways. First, we should make the now-standard distinction between the causes of a passion, and its target or end. Even if desires are always produced by associations with pleasure and pain, it does not follow, and Hume does not for a moment suggest, that they are always aimed at the pleasure (or absence of pain) of the agent who has them.<sup>24</sup> Second, while Hume says that "the passions, both direct and indirect, are founded on pain and pleasure" (2.3.9.1), he qualifies this claim in a crucial passage:

Beside good and evil, or in other words, pain and pleasure, the direct passions frequently arise from a natural impulse or instinct, which is perfectly unaccountable. Of this kind is the desire of punishment to our enemies, and of happiness to our friends; hunger, lust and a few other bodily

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<sup>22</sup> Presumably, for Hume, non-hypothetical reasoning will be the kind that produces conviction: the vivid or forceful idea that constitutes belief. It is a further task to distinguish theoretical reasoning from other sources of conviction (for instance, the operation of sympathy). Thus Hume describes two kinds of reasoning, demonstrative and causal-or-probable, and incorporates them in his science of human nature. I doubt, however, that he has a clear conception of what they have in common, an intrinsic feature that marks them out, among the sources of conviction, as ones that count as reasoning. His classification is basically disjunctive.

<sup>23</sup> Is the distinction between practical and theoretical inference too obvious to be the point of Hume's argument in 2.3.3? I think not. This distinction is described by Anscombe as "one of Aristotle's best discoveries" (Anscombe 1963: 58). And it was not well understood by Hume's contemporaries; according to Beiser, "[none] of the rationalists conceived of reason as a practical faculty, whose main task is to direct action" (Beiser 1996: 321; see also 268, 298). (See the notes, below, on Wollaston and Clarke.)

<sup>24</sup> For a good discussion of this point, see Árdal (1989: 69-79).

appetites. These passions, properly speaking, produce good and evil, and proceed not from them, like the other passions. (2.3.9.8)

Here Hume alludes to his earlier remarks about love and hatred, which produce benevolence and anger – desire for the happiness of those we love and the misery of those we hate – "by the original constitution of the mind." (2.2.6.6) The desires of benevolence and anger do not depend in any direct way on associations with pleasure and pain; but they are products of practical inference, at least in that they are products of a psychological process that is to be distinguished from inference to the truth.

What I am calling "Hume's account of practical inference" will seem insufficiently restrictive if, like Christine Korsgaard (1997: 221-2), we are convinced that anything that deserves to be called "inference" or "reasoning" must involve guidance by a normative judgement on the agent's part. According to Korsgaard, "a rational agent [...] is guided by reason, and in particular, guided by what reason presents as necessary." (Korsgaard 1997: 221) What Hume describes, the objection runs, is merely a causal process, not one of responding to reason by recognizing its "objectively authoritative norms"; this isn't reasoning at all.<sup>25</sup> But it is simply tendentious to assume that genuine practical reasoning or practical inference must involve a normative judgement. That is not Hume's view, and for the sake of understanding what he meant, we should set it aside. Hume has a characteristically modest conception of practical inference as the motivation of passion or action.<sup>26</sup>

Nor is this something Hume simply takes for granted. At the beginning of his discussion of the artificial virtues, Hume argues that, far from being essential to practical inference, judgements of virtue are redundant in the fully virtuous person. They play a remedial role in practical thought (3.2.1.8). His argument is that "virtuous actions derive their merit only from virtuous motives", so that "the first virtuous motive, which bestows a merit on any action, can never be regard to the virtue of that action" (3.2.1.4). For an action to be virtuous just is for its motive to be virtuous; and facts about the virtue of

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<sup>25</sup> This way of putting things is inspired by Hampton (1995).

<sup>26</sup> Compare the modest conception of theoretical reason in Hume's discussion "Of the reason of animals" (1.3.16), and his modestly about causal inference in general.

actions can be derived from prior facts about the virtue of motives. But now suppose that the only virtuous motive is the desire to act virtuously. Presumably – this is a qualification Hume needs, but does not explicitly make – this motive counts as virtuous only if the agent in question has true beliefs about virtuous action. (Otherwise, it would be impossible, on Hume's principles, for someone who wants to act virtuously to fail to do so; for he would always be acting on a virtuous motive.) But now we face a problem of emptiness: from the fact that it is virtuous to be motivated by true beliefs about virtue, and that an action is virtuous if its motive is virtuous, nothing follows about which actions are virtuous. Morality has no content.<sup>27</sup> If its content is to be derived from the virtue of motives, as Hume believes, there must be virtuous motives other than the desire to act virtuously (on the basis of true beliefs); and the content of morality must derive entirely from them. In having these motives, and acting on them, one does not rely on judgements of virtue at all.

This point about the modesty of practical inference in the virtuous person is part of Hume's response to a final objection. In arguing for the distinction between practical and theoretical reasoning in the Representation Argument, Hume fails to consider an obvious reply: that practical reasoning can be reduced to the discovery of truth and falsehood because it is "ordinary reasoning leading to such a conclusion as: 'I ought to do such-and-such.'" (Anscombe 1963: 58) Something like this point is pressed by John Mackie (1980: 47-8) on behalf of Samuel Clarke (1706). But the objection is mistaken, in two ways. To begin with, it is a consequence of the argument above that, if "virtuous actions derive their merit only from virtuous motives", normative judgements are not involved in the practical reasoning of the virtuous person, in the basic case. But, even if we waive this point, and grant that normative judgement is involved in motivation, the Representation Argument will still apply. After all, there is the transition from normative judgement to volition, and volitions are not copies of what they represent. Perhaps this will be

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<sup>27</sup> My discussion of Hume's argument is much indebted to Korsgaard (1989: 47-8). As I understand it, Korsgaard's Kant responds to Hume's argument by rejecting its major premise, that the property of being virtuous, applied to actions, is simply the property of having a virtuous motive. The idea of acting in accordance with the moral law contains a further concept – the "universalizability" of one's maxim – from which its content is meant to derive.

denied: volition represents what is fitting, and so it can be true or false.<sup>28</sup> But there is still the transition to action, as Hume observes when he repeats the Representation Argument in Book Three. The motivation of action cannot be a matter of theoretical inference since, like passions and desires, actions are "original facts and realities, compleat in themselves", not copies of the world, and therefore "incapable of being true or false" (3.1.1.9). It follows that "reason can never immediately prevent or produce any action by contradicting or approving of it" (3.1.1.10). Unless we are prepared to follow Wollaston (1724), in claiming that action is always assertoric, or to say that motivation or practical inference ends with one's intention and cannot extend to action itself, we will be forced to admit a difference between practical inference and reasoning towards the truth.<sup>29</sup>

### 3. What is Practical Reason?

This essay began with the famous lines from Hume's Treatise about the destruction of the world and the scratching of one's finger, lines that suggest a kind of scepticism about practical reason. I have argued that such scepticism is not the conclusion of Hume's discussion "Of the influencing motives of the will" (2.3.3), and that he is not a sceptic about (but insists on the distinctive possibility of) practical reasoning or practical inference. None of this answers the question with which I began. Is Hume a sceptic about the standards of practical reason?

The answer is: it depends. What it depends on is how we think about practical reason – a concept that, despite its prevalence in moral philosophy, has been too little explored. What is this thing, "practical

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<sup>28</sup> For suggestions of a "normative theory of the will", see Clarke (1706, §§230-2). His view is not that, in willing an action, one implicitly believes that it is fitting, but that one wills that it be fitting, so that agents who act in conflict with the moral law "will things to be what they are not and cannot be" (Clarke 1706, §230). Since moral truths are self-evident, for Clarke, such an agent is in the position of willing something to be true, while knowing that it is false, and therefore contradicts himself. This idea depends on the possibility of contradiction or inconsistency between belief and the will – a kind of rationalism to which I return in section 3.

<sup>29</sup> Wollaston held not only that a "true proposition may be denied, or things may be denied to be what they are, by deeds, as well as by express words or another proposition" (Wollaston 1724, §275), but that an action is wrong just in case it asserts something false (Wollaston 1724, §280). Hume responds to Wollaston's view in a famously derisive footnote in Book Three (3.1.1.15n.).

reason", in which Hume might or might not believe? My view is that, while Hume rejects the language of "practical reason", he stills believes in practical reason in a suitably modest sense: the sense in which it is simply a matter of practical justification, or of standards for practical inference to be good or bad, as such. Hume looks like a sceptic only because he concedes the terms of the debate to his opponents, tying the word "reason" inextricably to rationalism.

Let me begin with the negative point: that Hume rejects the language of "practical reason". Is this really true? After all, he is happy to write about "what is vulgarly call'd [...] reason" (2.3.4.1) in the course of explaining the mistaken view that, strictly and philosophically speaking, reason "can oppose passion in the direction of the will" (2.3.3.1). The explanation is that, because it "exerts itself without producing any sensible emotion" (2.3.3.8), we confuse reason, in the strict sense, with the operation of the calm passions, which can oppose our violent passions in the direction of the will. Towards the end of Book Two, he offers the following summary of his view:

What we commonly understand by passion is a violent and sensible emotion of mind, when any good or evil is presented, or any object, which, by the original formation of our faculties, is fitted to excite an appetite. By reason we mean affections of the very same kind with the former; but such as operate more calmly, and cause no disorder in the temper. (2.3.8.13)

The point I want to stress is that these remarks form part of a Humean concession to ordinary language, not the beginning of his constructive practical philosophy. To begin with, Hume does not offer a systematic theory of "reason" in the vulgar sense. It is sometimes applied to practical foresight, or the tendency to pursue one's greater good, in spite of the distortions of proximity (3.2.7.5); at other times, it means the detachment or objectivity involved in moral judgement, "a general calm determination of the passions, founded on some distant view or reflection." (3.3.1.18) In remarks like these, Hume is tracing loose patterns of similarity in ordinary talk, not suggesting that it carves human nature at the joints.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> For the opposite claim about these passages, see Kydd (1946: 129-50) – though she seems pretty well aware that her reading is revisionist.

It is in any case clear that appeal to the calm passions, as such, cannot do anything to explain the distinctive standards of practical reason. They have no special authority or privilege just in being calm. Nor do calm passions have any special connection with practical inference. The motivation of passion and action may depend on such things as "the sense of beauty and deformity in action" (2.1.1.3) or "the general appetite to good and aversion to evil" (2.3.3.8). But it depends just as much on violent passions like grief and joy, on the "original constitution of the mind" (2.2.6.6) by which love and hatred produce benevolence and anger, and on the "general character and present disposition" (2.3.3.10) that determines whether the calm or violent passions will prevail. There is no suggestion anywhere in the Treatise that Hume regards these other forms of motivation as defective, or that being motivated only by the calm passions figures as an ethical ideal.<sup>31</sup>

If Hume has a theory of practical reason, then, it is not to be found in the vulgar use of the term – and that means it is not to be found in the language of the Treatise, at all. It does not follow, however, that Hume is a sceptic about practical reason. This is the delicate point. I will argue that there is a way of conceiving of practical reason on which he does not believe in any such thing – and a weaker, alternative conception, on which he does.

To a first approximation, Hume doubts that it is useful to speak of "practical reason" because, in a strict and philosophical sense, reason is the discovery of truth and falsehood (see 3.1.1.9-12). In fact, however, his point is more subtle than this. Hume's restriction is not merely terminological, but turns on the nature, or foundations, of theoretical reason, and on the absence of anything similar in the practical case. It is not just that practical reason cannot be reduced to or identified with theoretical reason, but that it cannot have a basis of the same kind.

This complexity comes out in the details of the Representation Argument, as it is presented for the second time in Book Three. The passage is worth quoting in full:

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<sup>31</sup> This is one respect in which he differs from Hutcheson, for whom "the most perfect virtue consists in [...] calm, unpassionate benevolence" (Hutcheson 1728, §369).

Reason is the discovery of truth or falshood. Truth or falshood consists in an agreement or disagreement either to the real relations of ideas, or to real existence and matter of fact. Whatever, therefore, is not susceptible of this agreement or disagreement, is incapable of being true or false, and can never be an object of our reason. Now 'tis evident our passions, volitions and actions, are not susceptible of any such agreement and disagreement; being original facts and realities, compleat in themselves, and implying no reference to other passions, volitions and actions. 'Tis impossible, therefore, they can be pronounc'd either true or false, and be either contrary to or conformable to reason. (3.1.1.9)

Three things are striking about this presentation of the argument: first, it is concerned with volitions and actions, as well as passions (cf. 2.3.3.5); second, it explicitly distinguishes what Hume elsewhere calls "two kinds" of truth, "the discovery of the proportions of ideas, consider'd as such" and "the conformity of our ideas of objects to their real existence" (2.3.10.2); and third, it claims that our "passions, volitions and actions" are not merely "compleat in themselves" (the "original existence[s]" of Book Two) but "impl[y] no reference" to one another. I discussed the first point towards the end of section 2. What are we to make of the others?

I suspect that they are connected. Hume is anticipating a response to the first Representation Argument that appeals to notions of "practical consistency" and "practical contradiction".<sup>32</sup> Suppose we grant, with Hume, that passions, volitions and actions cannot be true or false in the empirical sense, because they lack the sort of representational content that would "render [them copies] of any other existence or modification" (2.3.3.5). If Hume is right to think that there are two kinds of truth, empirical and a priori, it does not follow from this alone that our actions and desires cannot be "true" or "false", and thus "either contrary or conformable to reason". For, like beliefs, they may be capable of "agreement or disagreement [...] to the real relations of ideas" (3.1.1.9). "Practical truth" and "practical reason" may consist in the conformity of one's "passions, volitions and actions" to a canon of consistency; and defects of practical reason may be a matter of contradiction. If our practical attitudes can conflict with and cohere with one another – as beliefs can – their relations might provide them with standards of failure and

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<sup>32</sup> Kydd (1946: 7-8, 27-36, 60) finds this approach throughout the British tradition of moral rationalism in the eighteenth century – for instance, in Wollaston (1724) and Clarke (1706).

success. (For Hume, such standards would be at least nominally independent of the fact that actions and desires can never be "empirically true".) This is why Hume insists, in the second Representation Argument, not just that "passions, volitions and actions" are not copies of reality, but that they have "no reference to other passions, volitions and actions". There are no relations of practical entailment or practical consistency through which our actions and desires might be objects of a priori reason.

Hume does not say much to argue for this premise, but it is nonetheless revealing. What Hume rejects, in the Representation Argument, is the claim that there could be standards of practical reason whose foundations are like those of theoretical reason. Theoretical reason depends upon the internal relations of ideas and their character as copies of their objects, which generate the standards for two kinds of truth. It is not that the standards of theoretical reason simply are the standards of truth (though Hume is not always careful to distinguish them), but that there could be no standards of theoretical reason without standards of truth. Thus theoretical reason exhibits a distinctive foundational structure: it depends upon more basic standards set by the very nature of our ideas. Hume is arguing that there can be no similar structure for practical reason. No standards are set by the nature of passions, volitions and actions, considered in themselves, since they are not copies of anything but "original facts and realities, [...] implying no reference to other passions, volitions and actions." (3.1.1.9) It follows that, if there is such a thing as practical reason, it is not merely distinct from theoretical reason, but radically different; it must have a basis of some other kind. It is this contrast that Hume records in refusing to adopt the language of "practical reason", altogether.<sup>33</sup>

It may be helpful to relate the question of "ethical rationalism" addressed by the Representation Argument – whether practical reason can be modeled on theoretical reason – to a contemporary debate. It is increasingly common to hear the suggestion in epistemology that belief aims at the truth and that this explains why there is such a thing as theoretical reason. This thought is pursued, in different ways, by

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<sup>33</sup> This is the answer to Korsgaard's (1997: 233) question, "why it should matter whether we use the words 'reason' and 'rational' to signify [...] normativity or whether use 'virtue' and 'virtuous' or some other words". Hume is rejecting a substantive conception of practical normativity, not "engaging in what he supposedly despises, a verbal dispute."

Christine Korsgaard (1997: 249), Peter Railton (1997) and David Velleman (2000: 15-20), among others. As Velleman contends, "Indicators of truth count as reasons for belief because truth is the aim of belief" (Velleman 2000: 18, my emphasis). One form of rationalism in the philosophy of practical reason is the attempt to exploit the same approach, now applied to intentional action or the will. The standards of practical reason are thus held to depend upon, and derive from, the "constitutive aim" of action, intention, or desire. Crudely speaking, the standards of correctness for belief are fixed by the essential nature of belief, and the standards of right action are fixed by the nature of agency. So, at any rate, the likes of Korsgaard (1996, 1997) and Velleman (2000) propose. Nor is this kind of rationalism confined to neo-Kantians. It is shared by neo-instrumentalists like Bernard Williams (1980) and James Dreier (1997), who think (roughly) that desire-satisfaction is the standard of practical reason because the Humean theory of motivation is true. They, too, would find a foundation for practical reason in the nature of agency, as such.

The view that Hume rejects in the Representation Argument is an ancestor of this contemporary rationalism about practical reason. Hume agrees that theoretical reason depends upon something like the "constitutive aim" of the psychological states to which its standards apply: in his case, ideas in general, rather than beliefs. The dual standard of truth derives from the essential nature of ideas, and without it, there would be no such thing as theoretical reason. What Hume emphatically denies is that there are standards of practical reason in the corresponding sense. The standards of right action do not derive from the nature of agency, or its "constitutive aim": it is a mistake to model practical on theoretical reason. To this extent, Hume finds it both unhelpful and misleading to speak of "practical reason" as we speak of "reason" in the theoretical case. This language is apt to cause confusion, and so we should give it up.

In the rest of this essay, I will disregard Hume's advice, and examine a way of thinking about practical reason that does not rely on the "constitutive aim" of passion, volition or action; that does not aspire to derive its standards from the nature of agency; and that forgoes the proposed analogy with theoretical reason. On this conception, the standards of practical reason are merely standards for practical reasoning

or practical inference to be good or bad, as such, standards according to which one is reasoning well or badly.

To reject even this would be truly radical: a view on which no inference to passion or action is better than any other. That is not what Hume believes. He argues that it is not "contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the world to the scratching of my finger [...or] choose my total ruin, to prevent the least uneasiness of an Indian or person wholly unknown to me." (2.3.3.6) But "reason" is used here in a specially narrow sense. It does not follow that, if one were to prefer the destruction of the world, or to choose total ruin, one's practical thought would be in perfect order. Hume can still say that practical inference of this kind is bad as practical inference.

This formulation relies on the "attributive" use of "good": on the idea of something's being good or bad as an F. It has been argued that "good" is always attributive, in this sense, that it always expresses the evaluation of something as an instance of a certain kind.<sup>34</sup> I am doubtful about that. But this much is true: so long as we can make sense of the attributive "good", applied to practical inference, we have in view a modest conception of practical reason. (This conception is not inconsistent with rationalism. Instead, we should think of the rationalist as adding to it, in claiming – roughly – that the standards of good practical inference can be derived from the nature of practical inference.)

My view is that the idea of good practical inference can be found alive and well in Hume's Treatise. I do not imply that Hume would put it this way himself (he would not), or that he instructs us to conceive of "practical reason" in modest terms (on the contrary, as I have argued, he opts for a highly restricted use of "reason"). But he has a conception of something we can regard as practical reason, if we are willing to insist that the concept of practical reason is not the exclusive property of the ethical rationalist.

To put my claim as starkly as possible: for Hume, the standards of practical reason are the standards of ethical virtue. It is essential to stress, here, that I am not making the innocuous (but sensible)

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<sup>34</sup> For instance, by Geach (1956). I investigate the attributive "good", and its connection with practical reason, in Part Two of Reasons without Rationalism.

point that Hume talks about ethical virtue, and that, since it bears on the evaluation of practice, it can do the work of practical reason. This is true, but not especially interesting. The deeper argument is this: as I argued in section 2, Hume draws no distinction between practical inference and the motivation of passion or action, in general. It follows that a disposition of practice inference just is a motive or motivational disposition. And it follows in turn that being good as a disposition of practical inference just is being good as a motive or motivational disposition – in effect, a virtue.<sup>35</sup> This is the subject of Hume's theory of moral judgement.

Three features of that theory are significant here. First, although I have called it a theory of moral judgement, Hume's account is not confined to morality in a narrow sense. It is a theory of the virtues of character in general, not only the "social virtues" of "meekness, beneficence, charity, generosity, clemency, moderation [and] equity" (3.3.1.11), and the artificial virtues of justice and fidelity, but traits like "prudence, temperance, frugality, industry, assiduity, enterprise [and] dexterity" (3.3.1.24), that mostly benefit the agent who has them. Second, Hume insists that the fundamental object of ethical evaluation is not action, in itself, but "durable principles of the mind, which extend over the whole conduct, and enter into the personal character." (3.3.1.4; see also 3.2.1.2-4) These qualities of character must be ones that bear on action – or on the passions – and thus on motivation or practical inference (in the Humean sense), if they are to have the effects through which our moral sentiments are engaged. Finally, whatever else it may do, Hume's account of the correction of the sentiments in accurate moral judgement makes it clear that it is the evaluation of motives as such: we are supposed to forget whose motive it is (3.3.1.14-17), and what effects it actually has (3.3.1.19-22), judging it instead by its

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<sup>35</sup> Here I rely on the following argument-form: if being an F just is being a G, being good as an F is the same as being good as a G. A more rigorous statement of the point would mark the distinction between particular episodes of practical inference and agents as practical reasoners. On the modest conception, practical reason consists in the standards for practical inference to be good or bad, as such. But we can move from claims about the activity of practical inference to claims about agents' dispositions by way of the platitude that an instance of practical inference is good, as such, just in case it is the exercise of a good disposition of practical inference.

"influence [...] upon those who have an intercourse with any person" (3.3.1.17) and by the ends that it is "fitted to attain" (3.3.1.20).<sup>36</sup>

Thus, Humean virtue consists in having motives or motivational dispositions that are good, as such. And, as I have argued, motivation is Humean practical inference. If the standards of practical reason are standards for (dispositions of) practical inference to be good, as such, then for Hume, they are the standards of ethical virtue.

This way of thinking about practical reason has some striking consequences. To begin with, it supports a radical anti-instrumentalism that many will find it hard to associate with Hume. This comes out in his brief consideration of the "executive virtues":

Courage and ambition, when not regulated by benevolence, are fit only to make a tyrant and public robber. 'Tis the same case with judgement and capacity, and all the qualities of that kind. They are indifferent in themselves to the interests of society, and have a tendency to the good or ill of mankind, according as they are directed by these other passions. (3.3.3.3)

In other words, such traits as courage and efficiency in the pursuit of one's ends count as ethically virtuous only if the ends themselves are good. If not, they will have a "tendency to [...] the ill of mankind", and will count as vicious, on Hume's account. If this is right, and if good practical inference is that which is characteristic of ethical virtue, the practical reasoning by which the vicious but efficient person determines how to achieve his ends will count as bad practical reasoning, no matter how effective it is.

This may seem odd. It is tempting to object that there is nothing wrong with the reasoning of the vicious but efficient person, as reasoning, only with its content. But this depends on thinking that one can tell whether a practical inference is good or bad by looking at its form, or structure, and that is not at all in

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<sup>36</sup> Note, however, that traits count as virtues not only because of their typical consequences, but also because they are immediately agreeable to the agent, or to others around him (see 3.3.1.27-30). This aspect of Hume's view – which bears especially on the evaluation of practical inference to passions or desires – is explained more fully in the second Enquiry.

the spirit of Hume's view. If we deny that there are standards of practical consistency and contradiction, which turn on the internal relations of our practical attitudes as the standards of a priori truth turn on the internal relations of ideas, we will have little reason to suppose that practical inference can be evaluated without regard to what it is about. Nor is there anything particularly implausible about the anti-instrumentalism I find implicit in Hume; the point is that there is no reason to take the means to vicious ends.<sup>37</sup>

A second and related consequence of the present account is that deliberation or practical reasoning need not begin with the contents of an agent's "subjective motivational set"; reasons are not "internal", in the sense made popular by Williams (1980). For Williams, an agent has reason to do something, roughly speaking, only if she could be motivated to do it, on the basis of informed reflection. That is not so, on the Humean view. One's reasons are fixed by what counts as good practical inference, in one's circumstance, and, for Hume, that is fixed in turn by standards of ethical virtue that are not tied to, or limited by, one's motivational capacities. It is not part of the Humean conception of "sound deliberation" that one must have a prior motivation to deliberate from (cf. Williams 1980: 109). In this sense, it is a theory of "external reasons". Good practical inference has no "motivational authority", even though it sets the bar for how one should act, and feel.<sup>38</sup>

It would be a mistake, I think, to say that in rejecting the doctrine of "internal reasons", one rejects the idea of practical reason altogether (despite Korsgaard 1997: 215, n.1). It is not obvious that reasons must be "internal", or that practical reasoning must begin with an agent's "subjective motivational set". Such claims have been denied, for instance by John McDowell (1995). The picture I find in Hume is different from his, in placing little weight on the role of normative judgements in practical inference or

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<sup>37</sup> A similar view was held by Hutcheson (1728, §363): "it is plain, 'a truth showing an action to be fit to attain an end,' does not justify it [...] for the worst actions may be conducive to their ends [...] The justifying reasons then must be about the ends themselves, especially the ultimate ends." More recently, Broome (1997, sec. II) and Korsgaard (1997: 250-1) have argued that there is no reason to take the means unless there is a reason to pursue the end.

<sup>38</sup> Compare Hutcheson, who makes a sharp distinction between "election" and "approbation" (Hutcheson 1724, §358), and a corresponding distinction between "exciting" and "justifying" reasons (Hutcheson 1724, §361).

practical thought (cf. McDowell 1995: 95, 97, 100). But it shares the view that practical reason is not indifferent to the content of one's ends (McDowell 1995: 108), and that the norms of practical reason are not accessible to everyone. Practical reason depends on ethical virtue, and that depends on being properly brought up (McDowell 1995: 100-2).<sup>39</sup>

A final consequence of this account is that, since virtue of character is not confined to prudence or enlightened self-interest, let alone to the taking of means to ends, practical reason cannot be set up against morality, in a narrow sense, so as to make a puzzle about the "rational authority" of justice and the "social virtues" (3.3.1.11). If "reason" is used in the strict and philosophical sense, there is no such thing as practical reason, and none of our motives have rational authority. If "reason" is used in the modest sense, practical reason is a matter of good practical inference, and for Hume, it consists in ethical virtue: not only "strength of mind" or "the prevalence of the calm passions above the violent" (2.3.3.10), but benevolence and charity, justice and moderation. Hume would thus agree with contemporary Aristotelians, like Philippa Foot (2001) and Warren Quinn (1992), in "questioning whether it is right to think that moral action has to be brought under a pre-established concept of practical rationality" (Foot 2001: 10).

It must strike the contemporary reader of Hume's Treatise that he is so little concerned with – barely aware of – one of the guiding questions of recent moral philosophy, "Why should I be moral?" It is true that he makes some brief remarks in the "Conclusion of this book" (3.3.6) about the self-approval of the moral sense, and about the "the happiness, as well as the dignity of virtue" (3.3.6.6), and some have

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<sup>39</sup> McDowell is close to Hume in a further respect: like Hume he wants to concede one of the key terms to his opponents. In Hume, the term is "reason", and he decides to use it in a restrictive way that disqualifies his account of good motivation as an account of practical reason. This is why it is so easy to read him as a sceptic. In McDowell, the concession comes out in his willingness to say that, "[in] order to urge that there is more substance to practical reason than the internal reasons conception allows, one need not seek to supplement the internal reasons picture of practical reasoning" (McDowell 1995: 111). This remark makes sense if we are willing to give the term "reasoning" to the internal reasons theorist, to concede that practical reasoning must be tied to an agent's "subjective motivational set", and to sever the connection between reasons and good practical reasoning. But we need not do any of these things. If there is sufficient "external" reason to do something, there is a compelling practical argument for doing it (cf. McDowell 1995: 107 on "irrationality"), and the practical reasoning that would support it is good, as practical reasoning, regardless of whether it appeals to one's existing motives.

tried to work this into a theory of "normativity" as reflective endorsement.<sup>40</sup> But his remarks are no more than afterthoughts. Hume has no answer to the question "Why should I be moral?" because he has no conception of a standard of what one should do, or of what there is good reason to do, apart from the one described in his theory of ethical virtue, a theory that includes the narrowly moral virtues, like any others. No wonder that he feels so little need to respond to the "sensible knave" except by noting that virtuous people do not want to take advantage of the occasional benefits of "iniquity or infidelity" (Hume 1751, Section 9, Part II).

Hume's investigation of reason as a motive begins by setting out the view he means to oppose:

Nothing is more usual in philosophy, and even in common life, than to talk of the combat of passion and reason, to give the preference to reason, and assert that men are only so far virtuous as they conform themselves to its dictates. (2.3.3.1)

Against this, Hume argues that virtue cannot be explained in terms of reason, since on the strict conception reason is theoretical and so "can never be a motive to any action of the will" (2.3.3.1).

Although he does not explicitly take it up, I am suggesting that his arguments point to the opposite explanation, of practical reason – as good practical inference – in terms of ethical virtue. If this is right, thinking about Hume may help to restore a non-rationalist conception of practical reason, which is more obviously hospitable to moral reasons, and less vulnerable to sceptical doubts.

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<sup>40</sup> See, in particular, Baier (1991, ch. 12) and Korsgaard (1996: 51-66).

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