

HUME, MOTIVATION AND “THE MORAL PROBLEM”

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1. Hume: the Grandfather of Emotivism?

Hume is widely regarded as the grandfather of emotivism and indeed of non-cognitivism in general. For the chief *argument* for emotivism – the Argument from Motivation – is derived from him. In my opinion Hume was not an emotivist or proto-emotivist but a moral realist in the modern “response-dependent” style. His famous argument has thus been misconstrued. But my interest in this paper is not the historical Hume but the Hume of legend since the legendary Hume is one of the most influential philosophers of the present age. According to Michael Smith the “the Moral Problem” – the central issue in meta-ethics – is that the premises of Hume’s argument appear to be true though the non-cognitivist conclusion appears to be false. Since the argument seems to be valid, something has got to give¹. Smith struggles to solve the problem by holding on to something like the premises of the argument whilst trying to fend off the conclusion. In my view this is a wasted effort. Hume was not arguing for non-cognitivism in the first place, and the arguments for non-cognitivism that can be extracted from his writings are no good. Either the premises are false or the inferences are invalid. And this is despite the fact that Hume was substantially right about reason and the passions. Thus “the Moral Problem” is not a problem, and the legendary Hume does not deserve his influence. Nevertheless it is the legendary Hume and his fallacious arguments that I discuss in this paper. I reserve the real Hume for another occasion.

1. To be more precise, Smith conceives of the “the moral problem” as an inconsistent triad of propositions consisting of what he takes to be the premises of Hume’s argument, together with the negation of its conclusion. The problem is how to resolve the inconsistency without too much tinkering with the three propositions which Smith takes to be true or nearly true. See Smith (1994) *The Moral Problem*, especially chapter 1.

2. The Argument from Motivation

Hume propounds (or seems to propound) the following argument:

Moral judgements motivate. They have “an influence on the actions and affections” (THN, III.1.i, 457/294)². Someone who accepts a moral judgement is necessarily, always or usually moved to act – at least in the relevant circumstances. However, genuine beliefs do not, cannot, or cannot be relied on, to move us. (“Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular”. THN, III.1.i, 457/294.) Hence moral judgements are not the objects of genuine beliefs. They are not propositions at all (or at least, their primary import is not descriptive). They are [...] [and here follows some non-cognitivist theory].

This is not so much an argument as a rather messy construction site where a number of arguments for non-cognitivism can be put together. But before I try to put together something more precise, there is a certain amount of scene-setting to be done. Action theory, philosophical psychology and meta-ethics intersect in this argument and if I am going to criticize it I need to make my psychological assumptions clear.

3. Motives

Let us start with motives. A motive, for me, is a belief, desire or other propositional attitude which can help to generate an action. And (lest I be accused of being coy) by *generate* I mean *cause*. I am a fully paid up member of the steam intellect society, happy to deploy mechanical and quasi-hydraulic models of mind. Beliefs and desires push and pull and eventually crank out actions. However, some beliefs and desires exist but are never acted on, either because the relevant circumstances do not arise, or because they are over-ridden by other beliefs and desires. I may have a motive for murder but this does not mean that it was I that did the deed. I may not have acted on my motive because of a strong aversion to bloodshed or the belief that I would get caught. That is why I say that motives are propositional attitudes which *can* help to generate an action. Their action-generating potential may remain unfulfilled.

Note that both beliefs *and* desires can be motives in this sense. “What was the murderer’s motive?” “She believed that the victim would expose her activities as an inside-trader”. Or “What was her motive?” “She did not want her activities as an inside trader to be exposed”. Both motives together go to make up *the* motive, though we would have to add in other factors such as the absence of ordinary inhibitions. Typically, at least, both beliefs and desires are needed to generate an act. Without either one of them, my imaginary mur-

2. References to Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature* are by book, part and section, followed by page references to the Selby-Bigge/Nidditch and Norton and Norton editions.

der would not have taken place. If the murderer did not care about being exposed, she would not have struck. Similarly, if she did not believe that the victim would expose her, he could have lived out his days in peace.

4. Beliefs

What are beliefs? A belief is the mental state one is in when one believes a proposition or a representation that can be expressed *as* a proposition³. A proposition for me is a truth-apt sentence, not the Fregean "thought" that such sentences are alleged to express. *Believing* is a primitive notion, but if you want a gloss, to believe a proposition is to suppose it to be so.

5. Desires and Dispositions to Acquire Desires

What about desires? Here I follow the lead of Michael Smith (1987). A desire is a propositional attitude involving some representation of the desired state of affairs. What distinguishes desires from beliefs is their different "directions of fit". Roughly, if you believe something, your belief will tend to extinguish if the world does not correspond with the content of your belief. If you desire something, your desire will tend to extinguish if the world *does* correspond to the content of your desire (that is, if you get your way). You don't keep on wanting when you get what you want. The function of beliefs is to fit reality, the function of desires is to get reality to fit them. Michael Smith tries to make something rather less metaphorical of this: A desire to ϕ is the state of a subject that grounds a wide range of dispositions, like the disposition to ϕ under conditions C, the disposition to ϕ under conditions C' etc. But many desires are desires *for* states of affairs rather than desires *to do* anything, and even desires *to* can be reconstrued as desires *for*. (My desire to ϕ is the same as my desire for the state in which I am ϕ -ing.) Thus we had better say that a desire for ϕ is a state which grounds a range of dispositions such as the disposition to seek or promote ϕ under conditions C, etc. Note that a desire cannot simply be analyzed as the holding true of a set of conditionals. To say that Flynn desires the victory of the Alliance (a Left-wing Party in New Zealand) is *not* just to say that Flynn will do this, that or the other thing under this that or the other sets of circumstances. For Flynn's desire for an Alliance victory grounds an indefinitely large collection of conditionals.

3. I speak of representations as well as sentences because I do not want to exclude animal beliefs. It is perhaps implausible to suppose that animals believe *sentences* even if human beings typically do. Nevertheless, when we attribute beliefs to animals the contents of those beliefs are expressed as sentences. Hence when animals believe, (or at least when we believe them to believe) they believe in representations that can be expressed as sentences.

There is no end to the things Flynn's desire for victory might get him to do, depending on what he believes and what other desires or inhibitions he may happen to have. Furthermore, the set of counterfactuals is not just indefinitely large but fuzzy. As things stand, Flynn's desire won't lead him to commit murder though it may cause him to hold forth on the hustings. But if his moral convictions evaporated and he came to believe that murder would further the cause, what then? Since Flynn is intensely moral and his support for the Alliance is partly due to his moral convictions it is not clear what the answer is, or indeed whether there *is* an answer. Now it seems to me a mistake to identify something as definite as Flynn's desire for an Alliance victory with something as indefinite as the holding true of the corresponding bundle of conditionals. So for me a desire is a state which *grounds* a range of conditionals. It is in this sense that a desire is a disposition.

Now, if a desire is a disposition in this sense, there are two points to note. The first is that desires can be effects as well as causes. And what causes a desire is an empirical matter, a topic for inquiry rather than a priori legislation. The second is that a good many motivational states are not so much desires as *dispositions to acquire desires* ("DTADs" for short). Suppose (as used to be the case) that I like chocolate. This is a motivational state (though not in my sense a motive) since from time to time my liking gets me to buy and eat this pernicious stuff. Is my liking for chocolate a desire? If desire is a propositional attitude, then we must be able to specify the relevant proposition, to describe what would count as fulfilling the desire. What is it? Is it that I eat as much chocolate as possible? Surely not. Even the most depraved chocoholic does not want that. Is it that I keep up a certain daily intake of chocolate? Again no. My liking for chocolate takes no account of averages. The reason why it is so hard to specify the relevant proposition is that my liking for chocolate is not a propositional attitude at all, and hence not a desire. I like chocolate not because I want it all the time but because I tend to want it when I see it. I have a disposition to acquire desires for chocolate when confronted with certain stimuli – gaily wrapped chocolate bars, luscious boxes of smooth dark chocolate, wafer-thin after-dinner mints etc. Even the smell of a chocolate factory can arouse the beast within. Similarly an amorous person – someone who is keen on sex – is not, or need not be, in the grip of a Valmont⁴-like ambition to have as much sex with as many people as possible. It is just that they are unusually prone to sexual desire. They are, as we say, of an amorous disposition. These dispositions to acquire desires need not be of a carnal nature. They can be quite cerebral affairs. Curiosity is not, or need not be, the desire of a quiz-show ace to approximate omniscience. Usually a curious person is someone who wants to know more

4. Actually the content of Valmont's ambition is rather more complex. He does not just desire sexual conquests but *difficult* sexual conquests. See Laclos, (1995) *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, Letter 4, p. 14.

when confronted with certain kinds of information or with certain kinds of questions. The curious are prone to bouts of knowledge-seeking or, at least, prone to the desires that can inspire such bouts. We say that someone’s curiosity has been *aroused* when the general tendency gives rise to a desire for specific information. For example, I am reading *The Amberly Papers*⁵ and chance upon a reference to Bertrand Russell’s uncle, Lyulph, Lord Sheffield. Was he the formidable and eccentric peer that Dora Russell remembers dining with in her autobiography? I want to know. The desire is due to my curious disposition but is in itself quite specific. And it causes me to act. I wander over to the bookshelf, reach down Dora’s autobiography, *The Tamarisk Tree* and start to leaf through it.

To say that I have a liking for chocolate is not simply to say that I would acquire a desire for a Mars bar under circumstances C1, or for an after-dinner mint under circumstances C2. “Charles likes chocolate”, is not simply shorthand for a bundle of counterfactuals about Charles. This disposition, like other likings, tastes and aversions, is a state which *grounds* such counterfactuals. It is *because* I like chocolate that I want a Mars bar under circumstances C1. This means that we can say with a clear intellectual conscience that the dispositions *cause* the relevant desires. Thus my liking for chocolate plus the relevant stimuli *cause* the desire for a Mars bar, and Don Giovanni’s lust for Zerlina is the *effect* of his amorous disposition (plus the sight of Zerlina). Causal explanations couched in terms of such dispositions may not seem very informative. The Don’s amorous disposition does not look much better than his opium’s dormative virtue. Citing the one as the cause of his lust seems just as empty as citing the other as the cause of his drowsiness. But just as science can specify in some detail just what it is about opium that sends people to sleep, so one day we may be able to specify just what it is about the Don that makes him so highly sexed. Science has discovered what the opium’s dormative virtue is – it has not discovered that there is no such thing. Moreover, explanations in terms of tendencies to acquire desires are not as empty as may at first appear. For they exclude other possible causes. If my desire for the Mars bar is due to my liking for chocolate, it is *not* due to the desire to live forever and the belief that the Mars bar is laced with the elixir of life: If the Don’s lust for Zerlina is due to his amorous disposition, it is not due to a particular propensity for redheads, peasant girls or blushing brides. The Don, as Leporello points out, does not have such discriminating tastes⁶.

5. A two-volume selection of the papers and correspondence of Bertrand Russell’s parents, Lord and Lady Amberly.

6. “Peasant girls, maidservants, city girls, countesses, baronesses, marchionesses, princesses, women of every rank, every shape, every age [...] if she wears a petticoat, you know what he does”. Leporello’s *Madamina* aria in Mozart/da Ponte, *Don Giovanni*, Act 1, Scene 2.

6. Reason and Reasons for Action

Having dealt with DTADs, I now turn to reasons for action. A motive qualifies as a *reason for action* a) if it helps (or might help) to generate an action and b) if the process measures up (or would measure up) up to some norm of rationality. Thus rational actions are actions that are caused in the right way, though what the right way is will depend on your norm of rationality. Hume's norm in THN is notoriously undemanding. An action is rational if it is generated by a means/end calculation, where the relevant beliefs are such as reason would approve. The ends can be odd, self-destructive, wicked or insane without prejudice to the rationality of the action. "It is not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger. It is not contrary to reason for me to choose my total ruin to prevent the least uneasiness to an Indian or a person wholly unknown to me". (THN, II.3.iii, 416/267.) Must the relevant beliefs be *true* and the means/end calculations *correct*? It seems so. "A person may also take false measures for the attaining his end, and may retard, by his foolish conduct [...] the execution of any project. These false judgements may be thought to affect the passions and actions, which are connected with them, and may be said to render them unreasonable in a figurative and improper way of speaking". (THN, III.1.i, 459/295.) Which seems to imply that where there are no "false judgements" and hence no "false measures", actions are reasonable albeit in a "figurative and improper" sense. However, there are norms of rationality which are both more and less demanding than Hume's. Hume himself could probably be got to agree that an action can be rational even if based on false beliefs so long as those beliefs were acquired in a rational manner. "It was perfectly rational of Walter Model as an Army Group Commander to demand reinforcements on the Southern sector in 1944, since all the evidence available to him suggested that this was where the Russians were going to attack"⁷. Not all norms of rationality are as forgiving as this. Some condemn actions which are self-destructive or which cut across the agent's long-term self-interest. The Common Law was long dominated by a norm which condemned suicide as irrational. Economists, at least when they are on duty, tend to subscribe to a self-interested norm of rationality which would condemn the choice of "my total ruin" for the sake of "an Indian or a person wholly unknown to me" as, at best, non-rational or a-rational, if not positively *irrational*. On the other hand, we sometimes condemn as irrational actions which don't take other people into account. "He is too dumb [that is, too irrational] to realize that the Party is more important than his big ego". One reason why debates about

7. In fact, the Russians, who had successfully hoodwinked the German high command, mounted their main offensive against Army Group Centre. See Weinberg (1994), pp. 675-676 & 704-705.

practical reasoning are so interminable is that we subscribe to different norms of rationality. Indeed a single person will sometimes deploy different norms in different contexts. Thus Nozick’s book title *The Nature of Rationality* strikes me as naive. There is not a thing, rationality, with a nature waiting to be investigated. Rationality is a norm-relative affair.

7. Reasons for Desires

Just as actions can be rational if they are caused in the right way, so desires can be rational if they are caused in the right way. This is important because although Hume’s argument is often understood in terms of reasons for action, the crucial point is that moral “beliefs” motivate, i.e. that they give rise to desires, and therefore – sometimes – actions. (This may be because they *cause* desires or it may be because moral “beliefs” somehow encapsulate desires so that subscribing to a moral judgement involves adopting some desire or attitude). Does the fact that moral judgements motivate imply that moral “beliefs” are not genuine beliefs? That is what the debate is all about.

8. Causality, Mind and Motivation

What I have proposed is a resolutely causal reconstruction of folk-psychology. To some this will seem intellectually primitive, the psychological equivalent of alchemy. Really there are no beliefs or desires and hence no motives or reasons as I define them⁸. Be it so. Then as Snare points out, the Humean argument for non-cognitivism collapses since it is couched in the vocabulary of folk-psychology⁹.

To some my psychology is not so much primitive as philistine, the concoction of a scientific clod. Belief and desire are not causal concepts at all. Intentional explanations occupy a different explanatory “space”¹⁰.

But Hume himself was a philistine, even a clod. Despite his scepticism about causality Hume had a causal conception of the mind. Moral beliefs “*excite passions and produce or prevent actions*” (THN, III.1.i, 457/294), the *impulse* of passion has an original *influence* on the will (THN, II.3.iii, 415/266), and even factual judgements can *obliquely cause* actions so long as they *concur* with passions (THN, III.1.i, 459/295). These are all causal idioms. And in attributing causal powers to our beliefs and desires, Hume spoke with the vulgar (whatever Wittgenstein may say). *That is the way we*

8. See, for instance, Churchland, Paul (1988), *Matter and Consciousness*, Revised edition.

9. Snare (1991), pp. 94-95.

10. See for instance McDowell (1978) p. 126.

usually think. Some philosophers have tried to evade Hume's alleged conclusions by inventing philosophical psychologies in which the creatures of folk-psychology are deprived of their causal powers¹¹. That is not my project in this paper. If I can refute Hume (or rather the Humean argument) in the context of clod psychology, this will be a major victory for cognitivism. We can remain psychological conservatives and retain our faith in the cognitivism of morals. Cognitivism is an option for philistines as well as sophisticates.

9. Hume and Stevenson on Moral Magnetism

According to Stevenson, moral judgements are "magnetic"¹². If a man (let's call him Nick) admits that what he did was wrong but declares that for that very reason he is all the more in favour of doing it again, he is guilty of something close to self-contradiction¹³. It is difficult to make sense of Nick's remarks except on the assumption that this is a paradoxical way of abusing what he considers to be outworn moral conventions. But there are other possibilities. Perhaps the man is not a man at all, but the Devil in disguise (Old Nick) who is setting forth his fiendish program. "I'm a man of wealth and taste", he explains, giving the game away¹⁴. Or perhaps the man is Niccolo Machiavelli explaining that "a truly wicked deed [such as treacherously murdering the Pope together with a large collection of cardinals] has its own grandeur [and] a certain nobility of conception", and that "most men are consequently not up to it"¹⁵. There are, besides, some resolutely wicked characters in fiction who seem quite understandable, like Richard III with his "I am determined to prove a villain", and Mr. William Nostrum, the rather bourgeois leader of the witches in Diana Wynne Jones' *A Charmed Life*, who demands "Why shouldn't we go out and conquer other worlds? Why shouldn't we use dragons' blood? Why shouldn't we be as wicked as we want"¹⁶? None of them seems to be abusing outworn conventions. Rather they are rejecting the claims of morality altogether. But in Stevenson's opinion, to accept a favourable moral judgement is to be *ipso facto* "magnetized", favourably disposed towards its object. This is easily explained by emotivism. Since moral judgements express attitudes, to sincerely accept a moral judgement is to adopt an attitude. And attitudes involve desires.

11. Notably Nagel (1970), pp. 28-30.

12. Stevenson (1963), p. 13.

13. Stevenson (1944), pp. 16-17.

14. Vide *The Rolling Stones*, "Sympathy for the Devil", Jagger/Richards

15. Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, ch. 27, excerpted in Wootton ed. (1994) *Machiavelli: Selected Political Writings*, p. 132.

16. Wynne Jones (1977) *A Charmed Life*, p. 223 of the (2000) Collins edition.

Hume takes a more moderate line. He too thinks moral judgements tend to magnetize but he does not seem to hold that they do so necessarily nor that they do so in every case. “Morals [that is moral beliefs or opinions] excite passions and produce or prevent actions”. (THN, III.1.i, 457/294.) The claim is not that moral beliefs *must* excite passions or produce or prevent actions but that as a matter of fact they do so. Nor does Hume think that our moral opinions are *always* efficacious. “And this is confirmed by common experience, which informs us that men are *often* governed by their duties and are deterred from *some* actions by the opinion of injustice and impelled to others by that of obligation” (THN, III.1.i, 457/294, my italics.). Conscientious action is quite common in Hume’s opinion but by no means universal. We sometimes neglect what we believe to be our duties and do what we believe to be wrong.

I have defined a belief as the state you are in when you believe a proposition. Nevertheless, we can define a moral “belief” (note the scare quotes) as the state you are in when you “believe” accept or otherwise subscribe to a moral judgement. Whether moral “beliefs” are genuine beliefs – that is whether their contents are really propositions – is now the point at issue. The terminology is, I hope, properly neutral. We talk of moral “beliefs” because their contents certainly *look* like propositions. But we use scare quotes to indicate that they might be otherwise.

What about motivation? A moral judgment “motivates” if “believing” it or coming to “believe” it either leads to desires or prompts us to act. But there are at least two ways this could occur. The “belief” could simply *cause* the desires, whether by itself or in conjunction with some other motive or disposition. Or the “belief” could somehow *encapsulate* desires, as non-cognitivists tend to suppose. We simply leave the matter open until argument decides the issue.

We can now return to the question of magnetism. Is it analytic and therefore necessary that moral “beliefs” motivate (as Stevenson seems to think)? Or is it merely a matter of empirical fact that moral “beliefs” *often* motivate (which is what Hume seems to believe)? Of the two I prefer Hume’s thesis. To begin with Hume’s thesis is clearly true, whereas Stevenson’s is not. It is indeed confirmed by common experience that men are often governed by their duties. But it is a moot point whether it is analytic that they are governed or at least motivated by their conception of duty, let alone that they are so governed in the absence of dutiful desires. Better to base the argument on a plain matter of fact than a highly dubious conceptual claim.

Besides there is another reason for preferring Hume to Stevenson. Stevenson’s thesis rather begs the question. What the Humean non-cognitivist is trying to prove is that moral “beliefs” are not genuine beliefs but mental states which somehow encapsulate desire. The reason is that what the moral believer “believes” is designed to express a desire or an attitude. Hence if

non-cognitivism is correct, it is impossible to “believe” a moral judgement without being motivated, that is acquiring the corresponding desires¹⁷. In other words, Stevenson’s thesis (that it is analytic and hence necessary that moral “beliefs” motivate) is a *consequence* of non-cognitivism. To propose it as a premise is to argue in a circle. Better then to start with Hume’s thesis which does not beg the question and has the additional merit of being uncontroversially true. If we make it clear, as Hume does, that besides producing or preventing actions, moral beliefs “excite passions” or induce desires, then we have an empirical premise that can be formulated thus:

1. Moral “beliefs” often motivate (where it is understood that the motivated desires need not always result in action).

10. Hume’s Version of the Argument

So much work for one little premise! But this is only half an argument! How do we carry on from here? Hume is the only one who spells it out. He is trying to prove that moral distinctions are not derived from reason. If reason is construed as “the discovery of truth and falsehood”, that is, our belief-forming faculty, then what he suggests is an argument for non-cognitivism. In fact, the argument is susceptible to a different reading which allows for non-rational mechanisms for the formation of belief. But it is the Hume of legend that we are discussing in this paper. What does he actually say?

Since morals [that is moral beliefs] have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows that they cannot be derived from reason; and that because reason alone, as we have already proved, can never have any such influence. Morals excite passions and produce or prevent actions. Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular. The rules of morality therefore are not the conclusions of our reason [and hence, presumably, neither true nor false, since reason is our belief-forming faculty] (THN, III.1.i, 457/294).

Taking reason to be the belief-forming faculty, the Hume of legend is claiming that *beliefs* (that is, genuine or non-moral beliefs) do not have an influence on the actions and affections. Plainly this is what the non-cognitivists need to complete their argument. We have a distinction between the moral “beliefs” which are magnetic, action-guiding or whatnot and common-or-garden beliefs which are none of the above. We can formulate the thesis thus:

2. Genuine beliefs do not motivate.

17. These desires can be highly hypothetical. I “believe” that it is wrong to induce supernovae near inhabited planets. So presumably I desire not to induce such supernovae myself and to prevent other people from doing so. But such desires have little influence on my daily conduct.

11. Five Versions of the Motivation Argument

This yields the following argument:

- A. 1. Moral “beliefs” often motivate (where it is understood that the motivated desires do not always result in action).
2. Genuine beliefs do not motivate.
Therefore
3. Moral “beliefs” are not genuine beliefs.

Moral “beliefs” are not genuine beliefs because they are not propositional attitudes, i.e. attitudes towards propositions. The objects of these attitudes are semantic entities of some other kind – exclamations, imperatives or whatnot. Note that this is a *psychological* argument for a *semantic* thesis (as are the variations that I go on to discuss below). The alleged behaviour of certain psychological entities is used to justify conclusions about their semantic objects. The conclusion of Hume’s argument – that moral “beliefs” are not genuine beliefs – is best understood as the premise for an inference to the best explanation. That moral “beliefs” are not genuine beliefs is taken to be a fact. The best explanation for this alleged fact is supposed to be some kind of non-cognitivism. Hare would claim, that moral judgements prescribe as well as describe and that there is more to accepting a moral judgement than subscribing to a proposition. Stevenson would say that since the function of moral judgements is to express attitudes, to “believe” a moral judgement is to subscribe to the attitude expressed. On both theories it follows that moral “beliefs” are not genuine beliefs (at least not *just* genuine beliefs) since they are possessed of a motivating power. Which of these explanations is in fact the best, I do not undertake to say.

Now, for either of these inferences to the best explanation to get off the ground, the fact to be explained must be a genuine fact. And here we have a problem. The Humean argument A is not valid as it stands. Hence the fact to be explained (namely conclusion 3) has not been established as a genuine fact. It is possible that some moral beliefs are genuine beliefs, namely those which do not motivate. To fix this up we have to do some careful tinkering with quantifiers and modal operators. Perhaps Premise 1. should be rewritten as follows:

- 1'. All moral “beliefs” can motivate.

This is quite compatible with the thesis that moral beliefs often do, but need not always, motivate. And it captures the underlying idea that moral beliefs are the sort of thing that motivates, items with a motivating potential which may or may not be realized. Premise 2. becomes:

- 2'. No genuine beliefs can motivate.

This captures the idea of impotence contained in Hume's remarks. It is not just that genuine beliefs exert no influence. They are incapable of doing so, "utterly impotent in this particular".

Combining 1' and 2' we get the following argument:

- B. 1'. All moral "beliefs" can motivate.
2'. No genuine beliefs can motivate.
Therefore
3. Moral "beliefs" are not genuine beliefs.

There is just one problem. Premise 2'. Like premise 2 is clearly false. Consider "Your fly is undone", and "Dinner is ready". These utterances have a fairly reliable influence on conduct. And the corresponding beliefs tend to generate desires, to do up ones fly and to go into dinner respectively. The reason is that most people like to have their flies done up and prefer a hot dinner. If (like Freddie the Flasher and Cold Dinner Casie) they do not care for sartorial proprieties or for hot dinners these beliefs will have no effect. But given these desires, these beliefs certainly have an influence over our actions and affections. Hence Premises 2 and 2' are false.

But perhaps they can be patched up. The beliefs that ones fly is undone or that dinner is ready depend for their influence on accompanying desires. *By themselves* they are impotent. Now it is the legendary Hume's opinion that *all* beliefs (or all non-moral beliefs) are like this. That is what he means when he says that reason *alone*, "as we have already proved", can never have an influence on our actions and affections¹⁸. Let us reformulate premises 2 and 2' so as to take account of this doctrine. Hume seems to waver between two variants, one modal and the other not. They can be stated thus:

2''. Genuine beliefs alone do not motivate

and

2'''. Genuine beliefs alone cannot motivate.

In both cases "alone" means something like "in the absence of preexisting desires to whose realization they are relevant". Of these 2''' is to be preferred since it is an improvement on 2' which was needed to restore the original argument to validity. The argument can now be restated.

- C. 1'. All moral "beliefs" can motivate.
2'''. Genuine beliefs alone cannot motivate. (No genuine belief alone can motivate.)
Therefore:
3. Moral "beliefs" are not genuine beliefs.

18. The real Hume only thought that product-of-reason beliefs were impotent without the aid of desires, leaving open the possibility that there were other beliefs, *not* the products-of-reason, which were rather more potent when it came to influencing action.

But here we hit another snag. The argument as restated is clearly invalid. It may be that all moral "beliefs" *can* motivate. But can they do it *by themselves*? Unless they can, they may be no different from other beliefs.

What the non-cognitivist needs is the following.

- D. 1'' All moral "beliefs" alone can motivate.
- 2'' No genuine belief alone can motivate.
- Therefore
- 3. Moral "beliefs" are not genuine beliefs.

Here indeed we have a valid argument. The problem is that premise 1'' is a very extravagant claim. It amounts to the thesis that all human minds are such that any moral belief can motivate without the aid of preexisting desires. It is, so to speak, written into the operating system of the human intellect that the addition of a moral "belief" can result in new desires whatever the prior motivations of the "believer". Now it seems to me that we have no reason whatsoever to believe this. It is certainly a far cry from Hume's modest and uncontroversial premise that moral beliefs often motivate. A non-cognitivist might claim that 1'' is analytic on the grounds that we don't *call* something a moral "belief" unless it possesses the power to motivate without the aid of preexisting desires. But this would be to cross the line between conceptual analysis and *making things up*. Besides it would beg the question. For 1'' would only be analytic if some form of non-cognitivism were true.

Perhaps we should go for something a little less adventurous. Hume's original premise that moral beliefs often motivate was perhaps a trifle too modest. But what if we specify that moral beliefs often motivate *by themselves* or in the terminology we have adopted that :

- 1''' Moral beliefs alone often motivate.

Hume, Hare and Stevenson would all, I think agree to this, and if it is not obviously true, it is not obviously false either. It does not commit us to speculative generalizations about the workings of all human minds, actual and possible, or to reckless claims about what every moral "belief" can do. Empirical confirmation is clearly on the cards. That some moral beliefs motivate without the aid of preexisting desires is the sort of thing that we might have evidence for. 1''' may not be such a safe bet as 1 (which simply says that moral "beliefs" often motivate), but neither is it such an epistemic long shot as 1''. Put 1''' together with the revised second premise and we get:

- E. 1''' Moral beliefs alone often motivate.
- 2'' No genuine belief alone can motivate.
- Therefore
- 3. Moral "beliefs" are not genuine beliefs.

Again we have a problem. This argument is not valid either. For it might be that the moral “beliefs” which *don’t* motivate *are* genuine beliefs, even though those which do are not. Thus the conclusion ought to be

3’ Moral “beliefs” which motivate are not genuine beliefs

But 3’ is not a satisfactory conclusion since it breaks up the category of moral “beliefs” into two subcategories (those which motivate and those which do not). Furthermore it jeopardizes the non-cognitivist inference to the best explanation. The non-cognitivist wants to argue that the reason why a moral “belief” is not the same kind of propositional attitude as a genuine belief is that it is (in part) an attitude to a non-proposition. But if some moral “beliefs” are genuine beliefs and some are not, the explanation that suggests itself is not that the alone-motivating “beliefs” are attitudes towards non-propositions but that they are attitudes of a peculiarly motivating kind. Thus 3 not 3’ is what the non-cognitivist needs. Yet it seems we cannot get it without the aid of controversial and question-begging premises.

12. Hume, Motivation and an Inference to the Best Explanation

But that is not the end of the matter. True, we can’t establish 3 by means of a deductive argument. But perhaps an ampliative argument will do the trick. E seems ripe for reconstruction. The idea is that moral “beliefs” *often* do something that *no* genuine beliefs can do – they give rise to fundamentally new desires. This suggests – though it does not prove – that moral “beliefs” are not really beliefs at all. Why so? Because the *best explanation* of the unique motivating power displayed by (many) moral “beliefs” is that they are fundamentally different from non-moral beliefs. In which case E should be reformulated as an inference to the best explanation:

- F 1’’ Moral “beliefs” alone often motivate.
2’’ No genuine belief alone can motivate.
3’’. The best explanation of 1’’ and 2’’ is that moral “beliefs” are not genuine beliefs.
Therefore (probably)
3. Moral “beliefs” are not genuine beliefs

Thus the Humean argument for non-cognitivism consists of two inferences to the best explanation, one mounted on top of the other. By F the best explanation of 1’’ and 2’’ is 3. And the best explanation of 3 is supposed to be some kind of non-cognitivism.

There are four ways that an inference to the best explanation can go wrong: A) The premises can be true and the conclusion false (which is what you would expect of a non-deductive inference). B) The facts to be explained may not be genuine facts. However good an explanation may be, the infer-

ence won't be justified if what it explains is not the case. C) The explanation may not be the best. An inference to the best explanation won't work if there is a better explanation waiting in the wings. D) The available explanations may all be so bad that even the best is not up to epistemic snuff. It may be better to adopt the nul-hypothesis and keep on searching than to sign up for the best of really bad bunch. Explanations must meet a certain threshold of respectability if even the best is to be believed¹⁹.

Now it may be that F fails at the first fence (namely A) but absent independent evidence it is hard to be sure. Whether 3 is the best available explanation of 1''' and 2''' is a moot point, but I can't think of a better one, so I am prepared to let it go. And 3 is not such a bad explanation of these alleged facts that it would be better to believe nothing at all. So F bids fair to being a respectable argument. Unfortunately the facts to be explained are not genuine facts. Premise 1''' is distinctly dubious whilst 2''' is definitely false.

13. “I Want to Do the Right Thing” or “Externalism Defended”

“Premise 1'''” dubious? But surely it is a minor variation on its predecessor, premise 1 – that moral judgements often motivate! And so far from being controversial this was boring to the point of being soporific. “Men are often governed by their duties and are deterred from some actions by the opinion of injustice and impelled to others by that of obligation” – who could disagree with that? Who indeed? But premise 1''' is not a minor variation on premise 1. The little word “alone” makes all the difference. The claim is no longer that moral “beliefs” motivate but that they do it *by themselves – that without the aid of any preexisting desires*, our moral “beliefs” exert an “influence on our actions and affections”. And though the presence of this influence may be obvious, the absence of the preexisting desires is not. Indeed most of us are possessed of a desire or a family of desires which, at least on occasion, cooperate with our moral “beliefs” to produce action. We desire to do the right and avoid the wrong, to do good and avoid evil and to be either a good person or at least someone who is not too spectacularly bad. Or we desire to live up to some ideal which includes a substantial moral component – to be perfect gentlemen, good socialists, true feminists or model employees. If the right thing for a gentleman to do, under the circumstances, is to pay his gambling debts, and I aspire to be a gentleman, then I will acquire a desire to pay those debts, painful as the process might otherwise be.

I don't suppose that most people are driven by a desire for moral perfection. The desire to do the right thing, though common, is seldom as strong as

19. Which is why inference to the best explanation would be better described as inference to the best of the *acceptable* explanations.

the desire to avoid the wrong. The Sermon on the Mount singles out those who hunger and thirst after righteousness for a special reward²⁰ – which seems to suggest that there are not that many of them. Queen Victoria thought that her own dominating desire to do her duty was unusual to the point of uniqueness. “I am sure that very few have more *real* good will and more *real* desire to do what is fit and right than I have”, she confided to her diary – and in this she was probably correct²¹. More common (or at least more significant) is the desire not to do things that are seriously wrong, like the Scottish nobleman whose Presbyterian principles did not deter him from fornication (wrong though it undoubtedly was) but who drew the line at accepting the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. “If I have lain with never so many whores, I’ll never lie with the whore of Babylon”²². However, for convenience’s sake, I shall concentrate on the desire to do the right thing, with the proviso that this is not the only moral desire, nor even the most important.

Now once we posit such a desire moral motivation loses its mystery. I want to do the right thing and believe that X is the right thing to do (under the circumstances). This combination generates a desire to do X. This is as pat an example of means-ends, “constitutive” or servile (reason-as-the-slave-of-the-passions) rationality as you could wish to meet. The new desires that are generated (to do this or that right thing, to do this or that good deed, to avoid this or that instance of wrongdoing) are desires for the means to meet some pre-existing desire – to do the right, to avoid the wrong or whatever. The general project is to do the right thing and this is an instance of doing it. That these desires exist, and that they sometimes motivate us is obvious. What is not so obvious whether they are pervasive.

A moral education consists in two main components. We are taught “the difference between right and wrong” (i.e. that some things are right and others wrong, some things good other things bad etc.). And we are taught to desire certain things – to do the right and avoid the wrong, to promote good and prevent evil etc. Perhaps “taught” is not quite the right word here since it suggests that the thing taught is cognitive. Nevertheless, every effort is made to instill these desires and on the whole the process is a success. Some desires are *de re*, to do a particular range of things considered right or to promote a particular set of things considered good. But some are *de dicto*, desires to do *whatever* is right or to promote *whatever* is good. It is because some are *de dicto* that a reliable connection between moral belief and motivation can survive a shift in one’s moral opinions. If I want to do whatever is right, I will want to do Y, which I now believe to be right, even if I used to believe that Y was wrong and have a *de re* aversion to the practice. Weakness of the will is

20. “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled”. *Matthew*, ch. 5. verse 6.

21. Lytton Strachey, (1928) *Queen Victoria*, pp. 43-44

22. See Wedgewood (1956) *The King’s Peace*, p. 118.

likewise readily explained. On a given occasion the desire to do the right, avoid the wrong or whatever, is overborne by a (perhaps temporary) desire for some current temptation.

The hypothesis that the desires to the right and avoid the wrong etc are pervasive and that they explain moral motivation is a variant of externalism. It is consonant with the facts of moral education and can explain why there is a fairly reliable connection between moral belief and motivation. It can also explain why that connection sometimes fails. Weakness of the will falls out as a quite unproblematic phenomenon – which is just as well, since it indubitably occurs. Thus we have good reasons – though not perhaps conclusive ones – to suppose that the hypothesis is true. But if externalism is correct, premise 1'' is false. Moral judgements seldom or never motivate without the aid of preexisting desires. There is always, or almost always, a desire to do the right or avoid the wrong lurking in the background to provide the necessary oomph.

14. On Wiggling Ones Ears or Doubts About Externalism

But I am still not sure that *all* cases of moral motivation can be accounted for in this way. Consider the following example (derived via John Bishop from Fred Dretske). Jimmy, who is thirteen, has just been offered \$5 to wiggle his ears by an adult named Rod. ("It will be our little secret", he says.) At first Jimmy is eager to comply since he possesses the art of wiggling his ears (which according to C.S. Lewis²³ anyone can learn to do, if they take the trouble). "Easy money!" he thinks. But then the thought strikes Jimmy that this is a case of mild prostitution. ("You start off wiggling your ears for money, and who knows what you will be wiggling five years down the track?") And with that the proposition begins to lose its attractions.

Now what exactly is going on here? Does Jimmy have a desire not to be a mild prostitute which is activated when he sees Rod's proposal for what it is? No. Until that moment the possibility of prostitution, mild or otherwise, had not entered his head. Is it that Jimmy has a desire to avoid wrong-doing, "believes" prostitution to be wrong, and so acquires an aversion to ear-wiggling? This does not seem right either. To begin with Jimmy often does things he believes to be wrong and is rather more interested in being cool than being even minimally righteous. Moreover he has no very strong opinions on the wrongness of prostitution. In so far as he is aware of it, it is just part of life's rich tapestry.

What is really going on, I suggest, is something like this. As a result of his moral education (patchy though it may have been), Jimmy has acquired a dis-

23. C.S. Lewis, *The Horse and His Boy*, p. 170.

position to acquire desires – desires *not* to do things that fall under certain descriptions. Being an act of mild prostitution is one such description, and Jimmy finds, perhaps to his surprise, that he is averse to such acts.

Notice though, that this is not a general disposition, like rationality or a propensity to feel hungry if you have not eaten. It is a culturally specific affair (Jose, who has been dragged up in the backstreets of Guatemala City regards the prospect of wiggling his ears for cash as positively refreshing, even though he too recognizes it as a case of mild prostitution).

Now the upshot of this is the following thesis. In at least some cases moral “beliefs” *do* motivate by themselves – that is, without the aid of a preexisting desire – though *not* without the aid of a disposition to acquire desires.

This might just be enough to save the Humean argument. We replace 1^{'''} with

1^{''''} Moral “beliefs” alone *sometimes* motivate.

This gives us:

G 1^{''''} Moral “beliefs” alone *sometimes* motivate.

2^{'''} No genuine belief alone can motivate.

3^{'''}. The best explanation of 1^{''''} and 2^{'''} is that moral “beliefs” are not genuine beliefs.

Therefore (probably)

3. Moral “beliefs” are not genuine beliefs

If genuine beliefs cannot motivate, this might suffice to establish a difference between the contents of moral “beliefs” and the contents of genuine beliefs. But the matter is academic anyway. For the other alleged fact to be explained is not really a fact. Genuine beliefs often *do* motivate without the aid of preexisting desires. Hence 2^{'''} is false. Which means that arguments C through G are all of them failures.

15. Motivation, Desire and the Slavery of Reason

What reasons does Hume give (or what reason can he be construed as giving) for accepting thesis 2^{'''}? Hume famously believed that “reason is the slave of the passions and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them” (THN, II.3.iii, 415/266). In less metaphorical language this seems to mean that beliefs cannot give rise to any fundamentally new wants – they can only, as Mackie puts it, “canalize” the desires we have already. Reason, the faculty that finds things out and formulates beliefs, can only show us the means to realize the ends set by passion – it cannot generate fundamentally new desires, or indeed, any desires at all, unless there is already another desire in the offing.

Hume’s argument runs as follows. Beliefs fall into two classes, beliefs about relations of ideas (analyticities, as we would call them nowadays) and empirical beliefs, or beliefs about “matters of fact or experience”. Analyticities cannot, in themselves, lead to action or create new desires. A merchant may be moved by arithmetical truths when casting up his accounts, but only in so far as they result in empirical truths, such as how much money he must pay out to satisfy his creditors. And it is only because these truths connect up with his desires that they can move him to action. (If he did not care about paying his creditors, he would not care about the size of his debts.) “Abstract or demonstrative reasoning never influences any of our actions but only as it directs our judgements concerning causes and effects” (THN, II.3.iii, 414/266). Empirical beliefs are concerned with causality, or more generally, with what things there are, or could be. But if we are indifferent to both causes and effects, or do not care about the objects in question, such beliefs cannot stir us into action. Unless we are already *interested* in the causes or effects, or in objects of that kind, unless, that is, the beliefs connect up with preexisting wants (by showing us the means to realize the ends which passion dictates) we will remain unmoved. Beliefs without wants are perfectly inert. So too is reason, the faculty that finds them out. It is because reason cannot generate action-producing wants *by itself* that it is the slave of the passions.

Hume (or the Hume of legend) purports to prove his point by means of examples. He sorts through the kinds of beliefs we can have, and endeavours to demonstrate that none of them can move us into action, or even incline us to action, unless in harness with a want. But even if we accept his demonstrations his proof is defective. For he leaves out a brand of beliefs which, on his own showing, *do* motivate without the aid of preexisting desires – namely moral “beliefs”. His proof that genuine beliefs can’t motivate only works (in so far as it works at all) because he arbitrarily excludes an important class of what appear to be beliefs. In other words, his argument for conclusion 3 – that moral “beliefs” are not genuine beliefs – relies upon premise 2''' – that no genuine belief alone can motivate. But his argument for 2''' *implicitly assumes what according to the non-cognitivist he is setting out to prove* – that moral “beliefs” are not genuine beliefs²⁴.

If Hume were putting forward a deductive argument this criticism would be decisive. The argument might be valid and maybe even sound but it would be polemically impotent. Premise 2''' is required to establish conclusion 3. But the argument for 2''' implicitly relies on 3. Hence anyone in doubt about

24. The argument of the *real* Hume is vulnerable to a similar criticism. He is trying to prove in THN II.1.i, that moral beliefs are not derived from reason. But his argument implicitly assumes what he sets out to prove, since it relies on the slavery of reason thesis and that was only established in THN II.3.ii, by surreptitiously excluding moral beliefs as *not* derived from reason.

the conclusion (namely 3) would have no reason to accept the premise (namely 2''). Thus the argument would be reduced to rational impotence.

But if Hume is putting forward an inference to the best explanation the argument admits of a rational reconstruction. In THN II.3.iii, Hume demonstrates one fact – that ordinary or non-moral beliefs cannot motivate without the aid of preexisting desires. In THN III.1.i he calls attention to another – that some moral beliefs can and do. The *best explanation* of this unique motivating power (and hence of these two facts) is that moral “beliefs” are not genuine beliefs. This yields the following argument:

- H 1''''Moral “beliefs” alone *sometimes* motivate.
2''''No ordinary or non-moral belief alone can motivate.
3'''. The best explanation of 1'''' and 2'''' is that moral “beliefs” are not genuine beliefs.
Therefore (probably)
3. Moral “beliefs” are not genuine beliefs.

The appearance of circularity is removed. The argument is that there is something that moral “beliefs” can do and that non-moral beliefs can't. The best explanation of this is that, appearances to the contrary, moral “beliefs” are not really beliefs. And there is nothing question-begging or circular about that. By treating (the legendary) Hume's argument as an inference to the best explanation we have rescued it yet again²⁵.

But that is not to say that the argument succeeds. The question remains – is 2'' – or rather 2'''' – true or false? Can ordinary or non-moral beliefs motivate without the aid of preexisting desires? The answer is that they can and do. In which case, one of the facts to be explained is not a fact at all and the inference to the best explanation collapses.

16. Dispositions, Argument and Ambiguity

Hume argues, in effect, that there *must* be a desire in the background if an ordinary belief is to motivate. But his argument trades on an ambiguity or family of ambiguities that pervades the language of motivation. Words like “like”, “curious” and “amorous” are susceptible to two interpretations. If I like something, am curious or amorous, this may mean that I *want* something, *desire* knowledge or *want* to have sex. Or it may mean that I am *disposed* to want something, am *disposed* to desire knowledge or am of an amorous *disposition*. Where a belief motivates, it may be that we must postulate some

25. The argument of the real Hume can be rescued in much the same way. In THN II.3.iii, he can be construed as arguing that *most* reason-derived beliefs cannot motivate without preexisting desires and in THN II.1.i that moral beliefs *can* so motivate. The best explanation of these two alleged facts is that moral beliefs are not derived from reason.

other psychological factor since the same belief may remain perfectly inert in another person. This extra something will tend to be a “passion” of some sort, a motivational state like liking, curiosity or amorousness. And the ambiguity leads us to conclude that this passion is a desire *when it may just be a disposition to acquire desires*.

Hume manages to bamboozle himself with the word “indifferent”. To be indifferent to something can mean that we are not disposed to take an interest in it. Or it can mean that, at the moment, we neither want it nor are averse to it. Having shown (to his own satisfaction at any rate) that “abstract or demonstrative reasoning never influences any of our actions, but only as it directs our judgement concerning causes and effects” Hume sums up his argument in the following sentence. “It can never be of the least concern to us to know that such objects are causes and such others are effects if both the causes and effects are indifferent to us”. (THN. II.3.ii, 414/266.) True enough. If we are not disposed to take an interest in either causes or effects, the information that this causes that, will not generate new desires. But this does not mean that we must actually *want* the effect (or an effect of the effect) or that we are currently averse to it. Suppose I discover that using a certain potion will dramatically enhance my intellectual powers, converting me into a mega-Kripke (i.e. I discover that *this* object – the drink – is a cause and *that* other – enhanced intelligence – is an effect). I thereby acquire a desire to imbibe the potion. Does this mean that I *wanted* enormously enhanced intellectual powers all along? No. Thus in one sense of the word I am (or was) *indifferent* to this effect, since it was not the object of a preexisting desire. But in another sense of the word I am not, since I am *strongly disposed* to desire the enhancement of my intellectual powers once this is presented as a real possibility. The ambiguity in “indifferent” tempts us to conclude that because I am not indifferent to the enhancement of my intelligence in the second sense I cannot have been indifferent to it in the first. Hence there must have been a desire lurking in the background all along. But this temptation should be resisted.

Why does Hume’s slavery of reason thesis seem so compelling? Because it relies on a plausible principle of causal reasoning. Two people can share the same belief but the one can be motivated and the other not. Thus there must be some difference between them, some other causal factor to explain the different effects. Suppose that you and I both learn that there is beer in the fridge. This leaves me cold but motivates you to get up and get one. So there must be some difference between us, some motivational factor, which you have and I lack, and which gets you to act. The obvious explanation is that you would like a beer and that I would not. And that is the correct answer. But the trouble is that it is fatally ambiguous. Does it mean that you *wanted* a beer and that you had been wondering whether it was worthwhile to drive down to the off-license? Or does it mean that you were *disposed* to want a beer if someone had informed you that beer was available? Ordinary causal reason-

ing inclines us to postulate a motivational state, a liking, an interest or what-not, to explain differences in behaviour when beliefs are much the same. The ambiguity of our psychological vocabulary leads us to conclude that this must be a desire when it might just be a disposition to acquire desires.

But once we recognize DTADs as well as desires we can see that this inference is fallacious. Theses 2''' and 2'''' are both false. Ordinary or genuine beliefs *can* motivate alone (that is without the aid of preexisting desires). And what is more what it seems that they sometimes *do*.

Thus moral and non-moral beliefs would appear to be on all fours. Non-moral beliefs mostly motivate with the aid of preexisting desires. So too do moral "beliefs". Moral "beliefs" can sometimes make do with dispositions to acquire desires. So too can non-moral beliefs. No need to suppose that moral "beliefs" are not genuine beliefs and no call, therefore, for non-cognitivism. The Argument from Motivation relies on a contrast between the motivating powers of the two types of belief and without that contrast it collapses. When it comes to proving non-cognitivism, the Hume of legend is "utterly impotent in this particular". As for Smith's "Moral Problem", it does not exist to be solved.

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