

## Essay 3

### If Not Non-Cognitivism, Then What?

Charles R. Pigden

#### 1. Introduction

According to Michael Smith, the big issue in meta-ethics (what he calls ‘The Moral Problem’) is how to accept the seemingly true premises of Hume's Motivation Argument whilst fending off its non-cognitivist conclusion, a conclusion that Smith takes to be both repugnant and false (Smith, 1994, *The Moral Problem*, henceforward MP). This presupposes two claims: A) that Hume *was* arguing for non-cognitivism; and B) that the Motivation Argument (as construed by non-cognitivists) is a good one, so good indeed that it can only be evaded by some very fancy footwork. I shall argue that both claims are false. Hume was *not* arguing for non-cognitivism since he was not a non-cognitivist. For Hume, moral properties are akin to secondary qualities, a view he derived from his sometime hero Francis Hutcheson. ‘Vice and virtue, therefore, may be compar'd to sounds, colours, heat and cold, which, according to modern philosophy, are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind’ (T, 3.1.1.26/469). We don't attribute to Hume a non-cognitive theory of colors. Why then should we attribute to him a non-cognitivist theory of vice and virtue? Thus the non-cognitivist argument that has been extracted from Hume's work is not the argument that he intended. But whether he intended it or no, the non-cognitivist argument is a failure. So too is the argument he actually advanced. Hume fails to show what he intended to show, that our moral distinctions are derived from a moral sense.

Taking my cue from Michael Smith, I shall try to extract a decent argument for non-cognitivism from the text of the *Treatise*. I argue that the premises are false and that the whole thing rests on a *petitio principii*. I then re-jig the argument so as to support that conclusion that Hume actually believed (namely that an action is virtuous if it would excite the approbation of a suitably qualified spectator). This argument too rests on false premises and a begged question. Thus the Motivation Argument fails *both* as an argument for non-cognitivism *and* as an argument for Hume's favored thesis, that moral distinctions are not derived from reason. So far as the Motivation Argument is concerned, cognitivists and rationalists can both rest easy.

## 2. Hume - Grandfather of Non-Cognitivism?

Hume's posthumous reputation as the grandfather of non-cognitivism (which for me is primarily the semantic thesis that moral judgments are not full-bloodedly true or false) rests principally on three short passages in his *Treatise*: the Slavery of Reason Argument (T, 2.3.3/413-418), the Motivation Argument (T, 3.1.1.5-10/456-458), and the No-Ought-From-Is observation (T, 3.1.1.27/469-470). Having thrashed No-Ought-From-Is to death elsewhere, I shall simply remark that on my interpretation, it provides no support for non-cognitivism whatsoever (see Pigden, 1989, and Pigden, 2009b and the Introduction to this volume, §3).

Now the Slavery of Reason Thesis ('Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions') does not furnish a direct argument for non-cognitivism. Rather it supplies one of the premises for the Motivation Argument, on which non-cognitivists chiefly rely. The 'magnetism' of moral judgments, the power they possess to motivate the true believer, provides the other. According to Michael Smith, the central problem in meta-ethics is an apparently inconsistent triad of propositions, one of which is the negation of non-cognitivism (MP, p. 12). But in fact the inconsistent triad can easily be recast as an argument *for* non-cognitivism, using the other two members of the triad as premises.

### The Motivation Argument: Non-Cognitivist Version A

- 1) If someone judges that it is right that she  $\phi$ s then, *ceteris paribus*, [and without the aid of any pre-existing desire] she is motivated to  $\phi$ .
  
- 2) An agent can only be motivated to act by a belief when she has a desire for an end to which the belief points out the means, where belief and desire are, in Hume's terms, distinct existences.

Therefore:

- 3) If someone judges that it is right that she  $\phi$ s then, her [psychological] 'judgment' that it is right that she  $\phi$ s does not constitute a belief.
  
- 4) The best explanation of 3) is [insert non-cognitivist theory of choice].

Premise 1) is a variant of Hume's thesis that it is 'confirm'd by common experience', that 'men are often govern'd by their duties, and are deter'd from some actions by the opinion of injustice, and impell'd to others by that of obligation'. Premise 2) is the Slavery of Reason Thesis as it is usually understood. When it comes to motivation, reason – that is, the faculty which forms beliefs – is 'utterly impotent in this particular', since beliefs by themselves cannot motivate. Thus we have a psychological argument for a semantic conclusion. Moral 'beliefs' motivate in a way that genuine, product-of-reason beliefs do not. Hence moral 'beliefs' are not genuine beliefs and the judgments that express them are not genuine propositions. Moral judgments have a different role, which is to express emotions or prescribe conduct (yadda, yadda, yadda).

### 3. Actions, Affections and the Influence of Reason

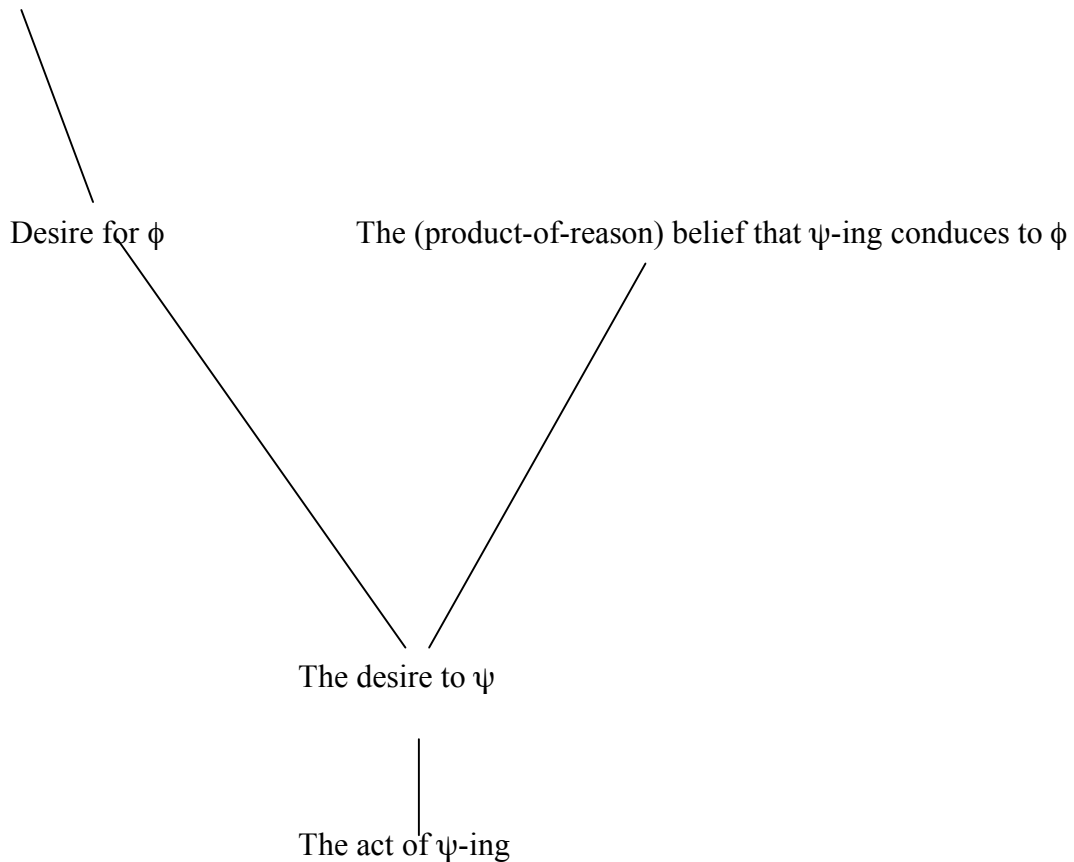
This Smithian formulation of the argument is still a little too far from Hume's text. For a start, Hume tends to talk about virtue rather than rightness and in this context is concerned with moral beliefs and moral judgments generally not just judgments that it is right to  $\phi$ . Moreover, it is clearly Hume's opinion that *unlike* the products of reason, moral 'beliefs' can *excite passions* as well as producing or preventing *actions*. (T, 3.1.1.6/457). That is, moral beliefs can induce new desires by themselves, which may or may not be the immediate causes of actions, whereas product-of-reason beliefs cannot.

This is an important point. Hume's proof would break down if product-of-reason beliefs could excite new desires by themselves, even if those desires were at one or two removes from action. Even if action-producing wants, the *immediate* causes of action, were always caused either by moral 'beliefs' or beliefs-plus-desires, reason would lose its impotence if those desires were themselves solely the products of product-of-reason beliefs. On Smith's reading, the second premise of the Motivation Argument goes something like this:

2\*) An action can only be motivated by a belief if that belief is conjoined with a desire to which the belief points out the means.

Motivating reasons – the psychological states that explain an agent's actions – are 'pairs comprising desires and means-end beliefs'. But the Smithian thesis 2\*) is quite compatible with the idea that the desire in such a pair should itself be motivated by a belief but not a desire, thus:

A (product-of-reason) belief  
 (for example, that  $\phi$  will avert my utter ruin)



Given 2\*) a (product-of-reason) belief cannot be the parthenogenetic *mother* of an action, but it can be the parthenogenetic mother of a desire, and hence the parthenogenetic *grandmother* of an action. For in the above diagram, the causal antecedents of the action are all (product-of-reason) beliefs even though one of them causes the action through the intermediary of a desire of which it is the sole psychological cause. But if this could happen, there would be no essential distinction between the moral ‘beliefs’ which *can* produce actions without the aid of pre-existing desires and the (product-of-reason) beliefs which *cannot*, except that the moral ‘beliefs’ would be able to do it directly whereas the (product-of-reason) beliefs would be condemned to doing it at one remove.

Thus Hume and (I think) Smith require something stronger than 2\*):

2\*\*) An action *or a new desire* can only be motivated by a belief if that belief is conjoined with a desire to which the belief points out the means.

One final point. What it means to say that moral beliefs motivate ‘alone’ or ‘by themselves’ is *either* that moral ‘beliefs’ *cause* new desires, (whether or not these desires result in action) *or* that they in some sense *register* new desires so that subscribing to a moral ‘belief’ involves adopting a new desire. And when we say that genuine or product-of-reason beliefs alone *cannot* motivate, what this means is that they *cannot* cause new desires, except desires for the means to ends set by pre-existing desires and that they themselves are not (even partly) *constituted* by desires.

#### 4. Hume and Reason

The non-cognitivist interpretation of Hume depends upon a particular reading of *reason* as our belief-forming faculty. By Book II of the *Treatise*, Hume has adopted relatively inclusive conception of reason which not only incorporates deduction but a substantial dollop of custom, habit and imagination, enough of the sensitive part of our natures to enable us to form beliefs about relations of objects including causal connections. But if the non-cognitivist argument is to work *we must identify reason with the belief-forming faculty*. For unless we assume that all genuine beliefs are product-of-reason beliefs, the Motivation Argument will prove, at best, that moral ‘beliefs’ are not product-of-reason beliefs, thus allowing for the possibility that they are genuine beliefs, but not the products of reason. Thus the non-cognitivist must identify reason with the belief-forming faculty and genuine beliefs with product-of-reason beliefs.

#### 5. The Non-Cognitivist Argument Restated

We are now in a position to restate the Motivation Argument:

##### **The Motivation Argument: Non-Cognitivist Version B**

1’) Moral ‘beliefs’ alone often motivate (either by causing actions or by giving rise to new desires).

[‘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.’  
‘Morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions.’]

2’) Genuine beliefs alone cannot motivate (either by causing actions or by giving rise to new desires).

[‘Reason *alone* can never be a motive to any action of the will.’ ‘Reason *of itself* is utterly *impotent* in this particular.]

Therefore

3') Moral 'beliefs' are not genuine beliefs.

4') The best explanation of 3') is [insert non-cognitivist theory of choice].

Therefore probably

5) [Insert non-cognitivist theory of choice].

This argument has to be understood in the light of Section 3 above. Thus when we say that moral beliefs alone often motivate, what this means is not just that they often move us to *act* without the aid of a pre-existing desire, but also that they often give rise to *new desires* without the aid of any pre-existing desire. When we say that no genuine belief alone can motivate, what we mean is not just that genuine beliefs by themselves cannot cause *actions* but that genuine beliefs cannot cause *new desires* except desires for the means to an end that is already desired.

Arguments for premises 1') and 2') can easily be extracted from Hume, but before we get on to that, the argument has to be amended yet again. For, as it stands, the argument does not quite work. Premise 1') says that moral 'beliefs' by themselves *often* motivate. It does not say that they always do so. And this was pretty clearly Hume's opinion. '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 [my italics].' Hume is sensibly agnostic about the more extravagant claim that moral 'beliefs' alone *always* motivate or even that they always motivate *other things being equal*.<sup>1</sup> Premise 2') says that *no* genuine belief can motivate by itself. But 1') and 2') taken together do not imply 3'). For the possibility remains that *some* moral 'beliefs' are genuine beliefs, namely those which do not motivate or those which manage to motivate but only with the aid of a pre-existing desire. The way to deal with this difficulty is not to beef up Premise 1') – that would be taking too much of a departure from Hume as well as too much of an epistemic risk – but to convert the whole argument into an inference to the best explanation. Moral 'beliefs' often do something that genuine beliefs can never do - they give rise to new desires without the aid of a pre-existing desire. And the best explanation of this is that they are fundamentally different kinds of items. This gives us:

### **The Motivation Argument: Non-Cognitivist Version C**

1') Moral 'beliefs' alone often motivate.

[That is, they often give rise to both actions and new desires without the aid of pre-existing desires.]

2') Genuine beliefs alone cannot motivate.

['Reason *alone* can never be a motive to any action of the will'.]

3a) The best explanation of 1') and 2') is that moral 'beliefs' are not genuine beliefs.

Therefore probably

3') Moral 'beliefs' are not genuine beliefs.

4') The best explanation of 3') is [insert non-cognitivist theory of choice].

Therefore probably

5) [Insert non-cognitivist theory of choice].

Thus the argument consists of two inferences to the best explanation, one mounted on top of the other. It is not a deductive argument, but it qualifies as a *cogent* argument if 1') and 2') are true and if the best explanation of this really is that moral 'beliefs' are not genuine beliefs.

## 6. The Slavery of Reason Argument

Premise 2') is the Slavery of Reason Thesis construed as a non-cognitivist must construe it. Can an argument for this claim be extracted from Hume? Indeed it can. Reason or the understanding 'exerts itself after two different ways, as it judges from demonstration or probability; as it regards the abstract relations of our ideas, or the relations of [external] objects'. Since (on the non-cognitivist reading) reason is our belief-forming faculty, this means that all genuine beliefs fall into one of two classes: beliefs about relations of ideas (or analytic beliefs) or beliefs about matters of fact or existence (or synthetic beliefs). 'I believe it scarce will be asserted, that the first species of reasoning alone is ever the cause of any action.' Analytic, or relations-of-ideas beliefs, cannot give rise to new desires, except in so far as they suggest beliefs about matters of fact. 'A merchant is desirous of knowing the sum total of his accounts with any person: Why? But that he may learn what sum will have the same effects in paying his debt, and going to market, as all the particular articles taken together. Abstract or demonstrative reasoning, therefore, never influences any of our actions, but only as it directs our judgment concerning causes and effects.' This 'leads us to the second operation of the understanding'. Beliefs about matters of fact (and more specifically causal connections) do indeed have an influence on our conduct. But it is clear that they cannot do it alone. 'It can never in the least concern us to know, that such objects are causes,

and such others effects, if both the causes and effects be indifferent to us.’ If the merchant has ceased to care about his business and is content to allow it to go to rack and ruin, then the fact that a payment of so many pounds sterling is causally necessary to appease his creditors will be a matter of indifference to him. He must *want* to pay his bills (or escape the consequences of bankruptcy) before this belief can influence his conduct or even induce a new desire. Reason, therefore, is the slave of the passions, by which we mean that genuine beliefs – the products of reason - cannot motivate by themselves, but require the assistance of a want (T, 2.3.3.2-3/413-414). More formally:

**Slavery of Reason Argument Mark 1: Non-Cognitivist Version.**

- i) All genuine beliefs are either analytic (to do with the relations of ideas) or synthetic (to do with causal relations). [‘The understanding <that is, *reason*> exerts itself after two different ways, as it judges from demonstration or probability; as it regards the abstract relations of our ideas, or those relations of objects, of which experience only gives us information’.]
- ii) Analytic beliefs cannot motivate except in so far as they lead to synthetic beliefs. [‘Abstract or demonstrative reasoning, therefore, never influences any of our actions, but only as it directs our judgment concerning causes and effects’.]
- iii) Synthetic beliefs cannot motivate if the causes and effects believed in are indifferent to us. [‘It can never in the least concern us to know, that such objects are causes, and such others effects, if both the causes and effects be indifferent to us.’]
- iv) Hence synthetic beliefs cannot motivate unless they point the way to realize some pre-existing desire (from iii). [‘Tis evident in this case that the impulse arises not from reason, but is only directed by it.’]
- v) Genuine beliefs alone cannot motivate (from i), ii) & iv)). [‘Reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will.’ ‘Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.’]

And v) is, of course, the second premise of Non-Cognitivist Argument C.



## 7. Motivation and Morals

What about Premise 1')? Does Hume have an argument? Yes. 'If morality had naturally no influence on human passions and actions', he says, 'twere in vain to take such pains to inculcate it; and nothing would be more fruitless than that multitude of rules and precepts, with which all moralists abound.' (T, 3.1.1.5/457.) In other words, our cultural practices presuppose that moral opinions have an influence on our passions and actions, a presupposition that is 'confirmed by common experience'. Unfortunately this does not prove Hume's point, namely that our moral opinions 'go beyond the calm and indolent judgments of the understanding'. If the information that *smoking kills* had naturally no influence on human passions and actions, 'twere in vain to print it on cigarette packets and if 'Danger: High Voltage!' had naturally no such influence, nothing would be more fruitless than the multitude of such signs affixed to high voltage equipment. It is, moreover, confirmed by common experience, that men are often governed by their belief that high voltage equipment can be dangerous, and are sometimes deterred from smoking by the opinion that it can kill. Yet Hume himself would have to agree that the opinions induced are nothing but the calm and indolent judgments of the understanding, and only have an influence because of our desire not to die. Take away that desire and the beliefs in question would soon become perfectly inert. It might be the same with our moral beliefs. When we bring up children, we don't just teach them the difference between right and wrong – we teach them to desire the right and abhor the wrong. What Hume needs to prove is not just the innocuous thesis that moral beliefs motivate – something that nobody is likely to disagree with – but belief-internalism, the thesis that they do it '*alone*'. We must do our duty solely because we believe it to be our duty and not because we have a *de dicto* desire to do it. And for *that* thesis Hume has no argument.

## 8. Michael Smith to the Rescue?

But where Hume fails, perhaps his latter-day disciple can come to the rescue. In my externalist opinion, the reason people do what they think it is right to do is that on the whole they want to do the right thing, where this qualifies as a *de dicto* rather than a *de re* desire. That is they want to do *whatever* the right thing is, not the particular things that they believe to be right. What has Smith got against this desire (or rather these desires, since the desire to avoid the wrong is probably more important than the desire to do right)? After all, by positing this desire the externalist can meet a desideratum that Smith regards as important. He can explain why a *change in motivation* follows reliably in the wake of *change in moral*

*judgment*, at least in the good and strong-willed person, since a strong-willed and conscientious person (conscientiousness being a component of goodness) just is someone who is dominated by his desire to do the right thing. And he can explain why it is that if I want you to give to charity there is some point in persuading you that it would be right for you to do so. Since you *want* to the right thing and I have persuaded you that the right thing to do is to give to Oxfam, there is a good chance that you will actually cough up.

Smith admits all this but at the last moment he balks. Why? His reasons seem to be these:

I) ‘Commonsense tells us’ that if good people judge it to be right to be honest or to care for their children, friends and fellows, they care *non-derivatively* for these things. That is, it is *not* the case, that they care for these things because a) it is right to do so, and b) they desire to do right. The concern is *de re* rather than *de dicto*. (MP, p. 75.)

II) The externalist supplies the good person with ‘one thought too many’. The good husband should save his wife *because she is his wife*, not because she is his wife and husbands ought to save their wives. Even if (as some benighted persons suppose) we should be motivated by an impartial concern for others, this should be a *de re* concern not a concern derived from a *de dicto* desire to do the right thing. Someone with *that* type of concern would not be really virtuous, even by the debased standards of utilitarians. (MP, pp. 75-76.)

III) Externalism enshrines a form of moral fetishism, and indeed elevates a moral fetish into the one and only virtue. (MP, p. 75.)

The first thing to notice about these arguments is that Smith has lost his grip on what it is that we are trying to explain. The question is not why *good* people do what they think they ought to do but why *people in general* tend to do so. There are many highly conscientious people who are very far from good - Nazis and Inquisitors for example. Indeed the phenomenon we are trying to explain, the phenomenon alluded to in Hume’s thesis and Smith’s own thesis 2) is not *goodness* at all but *conscientiousness*, the widespread tendency to live up (or down) to ones precepts. That said, an adequate meta-ethic must not misrepresent the motives of the virtuous either, but I don’t think the externalist has to do so.

Let us start with I). Is the externalist committed to the view that the concerns of the virtuous agent are either *de dicto* or derivative? No, and this for two reasons.

The first reason is that is that our beliefs about what is right, good etc are largely dependent on our *de re* concerns. If I wish to persuade you that you ought to give to Oxfam, I may (if you are a rationalistic philosopher) appeal to your reason, but I am much more likely to tug on your heart-strings by trying to arouse a *de re* concern for individual starving children. There may be people whose moral beliefs cut across their inclinations, but with most people this is not so - rather their inclinations, humane or otherwise, help determine the content of their moral beliefs. Thus a *de dicto* desire to do whatever you believe is the right thing is modified in its operation by the *de re* concerns that influence your beliefs.

The second reason is that a *derived* desire or concern may acquire a certain autonomy and hence cease to be derivative. I originally got into Amnesty International because in the true style of a *de dicto* moral fetishist, I wanted a good cause to which I could devote my energies. But, having internalized the Amnesty ethos, I now have an autonomous and *de re* concern for political prisoners, human rights and refugees. This means that the *good* agent (in something like Smith's sense) may be *less* conscientious than most, since when she changes her moral beliefs (by switching from the libertarians to the social democrats) she may have so many *de re* concerns dating from the days of yore that it takes her a while for her motivations to catch up. It is Smith, who seems to think otherwise, who misrepresents the motivations of the virtuous.

II) Does the externalist credit the virtuous with one thought to many? Frankly, if we are to do the right thing, we need all the thoughts we can get. Suppose as an Amnesty member, I get two Urgent Actions on successive nights. The first is for a Peruvian philosopher who has recently been arrested for her outspoken criticisms of the Fujimori regime. She is a socialist with impeccable liberal and democratic credentials and has written an article in *Analysis* which I agree with. In every way she is congenial, my heart goes out to her and I sit down to write the letter with a will. The second is for a member of a grisly Muslim sect who has been arrested on suspicion in Egypt. His group believes in clitoridectomies, cutting off the hands of thieves and thinks that democracy and women's rights are the wiles of Satan designed to tempt God's people. So far as my *de re*, non-derivative inclinations are concerned, I would be happy to let him rot. But I reflect that even scumbags like him have rights, that as an Amnesty member, I am not supposed to play favorites. Then, *out of a desire to do the right thing*, I write the letter anyway. One thought

too many? I'd say that even with the second thought, I had only just enough thoughts to get by.

But the real problem is with III). Smith is, of course, quite wrong to suppose that the externalist elevates a fetish (the desire to do the right thing) to the status of the one and only virtue. Conscientiousness is indeed a component of virtue and this requires a fetish in the form of a desire to do the right thing. But virtue requires other things as well, such as sensible views about what the right thing is, and perhaps a dollop of *de re* concerns. But what Smith really objects to is not the non-existent claim that a fetish forms the *whole* of virtue but the idea that a fetish forms *any part of virtue whatsoever*. In so far as conscientiousness is a part of virtue, and in so far as the desire to do the right thing is the basis of conscientiousness, it is indeed a consequence of externalism that a fetish forms a part of virtue. And it is this that Smith finds offensive.

Offensive? Why? Well, why does Smith call the desire to do the right thing a 'fetish' in the first place? The idea, I think, is this. When we were very young our Mummies and Daddies taught us right from wrong. (That is, they taught us that some things were right and others wrong, though if they were enlightened they usually hinted that these categories were subject to revision.) And they taught us to *desire* the right and *shun* the wrong by praising us when we were good and punishing us when we were bad. Yet this infantile compulsion, this fetish foisted upon us when we were too young to do anything about it, has dominated our lives ever since! This silly little fixation, this survival of the kindergarten, is a crucial component of the noblest human characters! The idea is absurd, degrading - in short, it does not bear thinking of!

Well, it may be that this idea is offensive and degrading, but that does not give us the slightest reason to suppose that it false.

### **9. A Question Begged**

So Premise 1') is in trouble. But there is worse to come. If we combine the two arguments together – so that the Slavery of Reason Argument provides the second premise for the Motivation Argument C – it soon becomes apparent that the argument as a whole is a flagrantly question-begging affair. The point is to prove that moral 'beliefs' are not genuine beliefs, and thence to argue for some kind of non-cognitivism. But Premise i) of the Slavery of Reason Argument implicitly assumes that moral 'beliefs' are not genuine beliefs, since it divides genuine beliefs into two categories from which moral 'beliefs' are excluded. The idea is that moral 'beliefs' are not genuine beliefs since they possess a power which genuine

beliefs do not, the ability to influence our actions and affections without the aid of a pre-existing desire. But our chief reason for supposing that genuine beliefs are utterly impotent in this particular is that moral ‘beliefs’ (which enjoy the psychological equivalent of Viagra) have been left off the list of genuine beliefs! This is undeniably sharp practice as moral ‘beliefs’ are generally regarded as *bona fide* beliefs. Hence an argument is required to prove that they are otherwise. The non-cognitivists can hardly disagree since they endeavor to supply such an argument. Unfortunately it assumes what it sets out to prove.

### 10. Desires and Dispositions

But wait – there’s more! The Slavery of Reason Argument suffers from a hitherto unregarded defect. Crucial to the argument is the transition from

iii) Synthetic beliefs cannot motivate if the causes and effects believed in are alike indifferent to us.

to

iv) Hence synthetic beliefs cannot motivate unless they point the way to realize some pre-existing desire.

Thesis iii) seems to me true, but thesis iv) does not follow. Hume and his followers implicitly assume that if the causes and effects we believe in are *not* indifferent to us, this must be because they relate to some pre-existing desire. *But this assumption is false.*

Like Michael Smith, I take desires to be propositional attitudes (of which we are not necessarily conscious) involving some representation of the desired state of affairs. They are distinguished from beliefs by their different ‘directions of fit’. Desires are characterized by their causal roles. Thus a desire for  $\phi$  is a state which grounds a range of dispositions such as the disposition to seek or promote  $\phi$  under conditions C, the disposition to desire  $\psi$  given the belief that  $\psi$  promotes  $\phi$  and the disposition to intend  $\phi$  if  $\phi$  consists in my performing an action and the performance of that action does not conflict with any of my other desires. But desires are not the only motivational states that interact with beliefs to produce new desires. Crucial to our psychology are what I call *dispositions to acquire desires* (DTADs for short).

These are like desires in some respects, but although they may be attitudes, they are not *propositional* attitudes, since they lack in propositional content. Examples of such dispositions are a taste for chocolate or an amorous disposition. If I like chocolate this does not mean that I want to keep up a certain daily intake of the stuff (since my liking for chocolate takes no account of averages). But when I see and smell chocolate I tend to acquire a desire for it. If I am of an amorous disposition, this does not mean that I have some propositional project – say to seduce as many women as possible. What it means is that I am unusually prone to sexual desire. Such dispositions are not propositional attitudes (and hence cannot be identified with desires) because it is impossible to specify the proposition to which they are the attitude. If I am of an amorous disposition, there will be states of affairs that I desire to bring about - usually states of sexual congress with this or that person - but my amorous disposition is not my desire for those states but the tendency to acquire those desires.

The stimulus that activates such dispositions can be a perception but can also be a newly acquired belief. And this brings us back to the move from iii) to iv). Suppose we are sitting on the sofa watching the Simpsons on TV. Suppose too that you inform me of a causal connection, namely that there is beer in the fridge (that is, that if I *go* to the fridge I can *get* some beer.) Now it is true that if both the cause – going to the fridge – and the effect – getting the beer - were both indifferent to me, this new belief would leave me as calm and indolent as it found me. But if I am *not* indifferent, this does *not* mean that I have to have a pre-existing desire for beer. I may simply be such – on this occasion, at any rate – that if I believe there is beer in the fridge, I will acquire a desire for that beer. That is, I may have a (perhaps temporary) disposition to acquire a desire for beer, *if informed that there is a cold beer in the offing*. Not to be indifferent is not - or need not be - to have a pre-existing desire, though it *is* to be in some motivational state or other. What underlies the move from iii) to iv) in the Slavery-of-Reason argument is the thought that it is causally possible for two people to share the same [relevant] beliefs but nevertheless to act differently. If this can happen, it must be because of some causal factor which makes the difference, specifically a difference in their motivational states. Why did Dmitri hang around after that appalling talk? Because he believed that the departmental chairman would be serving free drinks in his office. Why didn't Dunya hang around given that she too believed in the likelihood of free drinks? Because she was badly hung-over from a vodka-sodden evening the night before, and did not want any more alcohol. Since they share the same (relevant) beliefs, the difference in their behaviors must be explained by something else (in this case a desire for

free drinks which is present in one and absent in the other). But although we must posit some difference in people's motivational states to explain why shared beliefs can produce different behaviors in different people, the motivational state that *makes* the difference need not always be a desire. Sometimes a disposition to acquire a desire will do the trick.<sup>2</sup>

### **11. Russell, Hobbes and Abstract or Demonstrative Reasoning.**

According to Hume 'abstract or demonstrative reasoning never influences any of our actions, but only as it directs our judgment concerning causes and effects'. This claim is false. Consider the following: 'At the age of eleven I began Euclid, with my brother as my tutor. This was one of the great events of my life as dazzling as first love. I had not imagined anything so delicious in the world. ... From that moment, until Whitehead and I finished *Principia Mathematica*, when I was thirty-eight, mathematics was my chief interest and my chief source of happiness.' The author of course, is Bertrand Russell and the passage comes from his *Autobiography* (Russell, 2000, pp. 30-31). Ray Monk, who recounts this episode, together with some details from Frank Russell's diary, remarks that Russell's reactions to Euclid seem a little extreme. "'Dazzling' and 'delicious' are not words one would naturally associate with learning geometry", he says, but then goes on to point out that Russell's reactions have an interesting precedent (Monk, 1996, pp. 25-26). When Thomas Hobbes was forty he chanced upon a copy of Euclid's *Elements* which was lying open in a gentleman's library. It was open at the proof of the famous Pythagorean theorem. "'By God', says he, 'this is impossible!' So he reads the Demonstration of it, which referred him back to another, which he also read. *Et sic deinceps* that at last he was demonstratively convinced of its truth. This made him in love with geometry" (see Hobbes, 1994, p. lxxvii. The story comes from Aubrey's *Brief Lives*). Though Russell and Hobbes both valued the geometric information they acquired, what really entranced them was the idea of demonstration. It was clearly the logic that inspired them, the fact that this followed from that. This was abstract and demonstrative reasoning at its most abstract and demonstrative. In both cases the abstract and demonstrative beliefs led to new desires. Being in love, they both sought to know the beloved better and embarked on a course of study. Russell wanted to demonstrate not only the inferences but the axioms whilst Hobbes acquired a desire to square the circle and to establish a deductive science of politics. But these desires were not desires for the means towards things they already wanted. Their logical and geometric beliefs did not 'canalize' pre-existing wants nor did they 'influence their actions' only by directing their judgment concerning causes and effects. Thus Hume is doubly mistaken, both about the inertness of

reason and about the peculiar inertness of demonstrative reason. Of course, these abstract and demonstrative beliefs did not act quite alone. We must postulate a rather peculiar motivational state, an unusual disposition to acquire new desires, since not everybody reacts to Euclid as Russell and Hobbes did. But we do have two clear instances refuting 2') and its Smithian variant 2\*\*). This is all the more ironic, because Hobbes anticipated Hume whilst Russell explicitly agreed with him.<sup>3</sup> They both thought that (reason-derived) beliefs could not motivate without the aid of pre-existing desires though in each case their own most formative experiences proved them wrong.

## 12. Thomas Reid and the Vulcan Valediction

The Humean must suppose that we have a settled desire for long-term survival and satisfaction if he is to escape refutation. Although I do enjoy myself once I am away, I prefer to work rather than go on holiday. Yet I sometimes yield to family and friends and take a break for the sake of my mental and physical health. The belief that a holiday would be good for me prompts me to act. Indeed, it prompts me to overcome my strong preference for hanging around in my study. In order to reconcile this behavior with the theory, the Humean must postulate a 'calm desire', specifically a desire for my long-term welfare. The realization that a holiday would be good for me together with this calm but powerful passion overcomes my reluctance and prompts me to pack my bags and book the tickets. We might call this desire the Vulcan desire, since it corresponds to the Vulcan valediction 'Live long and prosper!' Thomas Reid however prefers to talk of a *desire for our good on the whole*.

Now one of Reid's great achievements was to realize that the Vulcan desire, so necessary to the slavery of reason thesis, is at the same time incompatible with it, at least it is construed as thesis that beliefs cannot give rise to new desires without the aid of a pre-existing *desire* (as opposed to a DTAD). Why? Well, to begin with it is a desire that presupposes a belief, or rather a family of beliefs. Before you can desire your long-term survival and satisfaction, you must conceive of yourself as a temporally extended being, endowed with desires and susceptible to pleasure and pain. And since the desire presupposes these beliefs, and since we are not born with these beliefs, the desire itself cannot be one we are born with.

But neither is it a desire for the means towards something we already want. With one or two exceptions, we do not want to live long and prosper for the sake of something *else*. It just seems that once we acquire the beliefs, we tend to acquire the desire. Or as Reid puts it, 'as soon as we have the conception of what is good or ill for us on the whole, we are



led by our constitution to seek the good and avoid the ill'. This desire is the product of reason since it presupposes certain beliefs but it is not arrived at via a means/end calculation. It therefore refutes the slavery of reason thesis in its no-new-desire-without-a-pre-existing-desire variant (see Reid, 1843, 3.3.2-3, pp. 208-17). And this is all the more damaging because without this desire this version of the slavery of reason thesis would be obviously bankrupt.

Whether the disposition to acquire this desire is itself a component of rationality (as Reid seems to suggest) is rather more moot. But this does not affect the point at issue. There is a family of beliefs that motivate by themselves in the relevant sense - that is, they generate a desire which is not for the means towards something we already want. Yet this desire is one of the most important we are possessed of. Hence, again, the transition from iii) to iv) is fallacious and 2') is false.

### **13. A Dead Dog?**

The Motivation Argument (in its Non-Cognitivist Variant) is a two-tiered inference to the best explanation.. But inferences to the best explanation fail if the facts to be explained are not genuine facts. Premise 1') is dubious at best. It is obvious that moral beliefs motivate, less so that they do so without the aid of pre-existing desires. Our parents take considerable pains not only to teach us right from wrong but to generate a hunger and thirst after righteousness. Sometimes they seem to succeed. But even if 1') is true that is not enough to save the inference to the best explanation. For the argument to work, there must be a *contrast* between moral 'beliefs' and genuine beliefs. And the claim that genuine beliefs cannot motivate without the aid of a pre-existing desire – the non-cognitivist variant of the Slavery of Reason thesis - has been shown to be false. The argument for the Slavery of Reason thesis has been shown to be fallacious, since the key move – from iii) that synthetic beliefs cannot motivate if the causes and effects believed in are indifferent to us, to iv) that synthetic beliefs cannot motivate unless they point the way to realize some pre-existing desire – ignores the possibility of dispositions to acquire desires. The examples of Hobbes and Russell have shown that abstract and demonstrative reasoning can influence our actions and desires even when it does *not* direct our judgment concerning causes and effects. Finally the entire argument has proved to be flagrantly question-begging, since the first premise of the Slavery of Reason Argument implicitly assumes that moral 'beliefs' are not genuine beliefs, as it divides genuine beliefs into two categories into neither of which it falls. So far

from being a mighty dragon in search of a slayer, the Motivation Argument for non-cognitivism is a dead dog in search of a decent burial. The only consolation for Humeans is that it is not a dead dog that can be laid at David's door.

#### 14. If Not Non-Cognitivism Then What?

The non-cognitivist interpretation of Hume faces a further problem. When it comes to what is nowadays known as 'meta-ethics', Hume was regarded both in his own day and for the next two hundred years (roughly 1740-1940) as a dissident disciple of Frances Hutcheson, and Hutcheson was a moral realist in the Sayre-McCord sense. He believed both that moral judgments are 'truth-apt', true-or-false, and that some such judgments are (literally) true; and true, what's more, with respect to their distinctively moral contents. He was, therefore, neither a non-cognitivist nor an error-theorist. But he was not a moral realist in the strong sense of the word since he did not believe the moral facts to be mind-independent. Moral properties for Hutcheson were akin to secondary qualities, and thus in today's jargon, 'response-dependent'. To say that an action is right or virtuous is to say (very roughly) that it tends to arouse the approbation of a suitably qualified human spectator, just as to say that a rose is red is to say that it has a tendency to trigger sensations of a certain kind in a suitably qualified human observer. Hume agreed with him on this, a point which was generally acknowledged. And since Hutcheson was not a non-cognitivist, neither was Hume. To suppose otherwise is to suppose that virtually all Hume's contemporaries, many of them quite astute, got him quite horribly wrong, leaving it to the likes of A.J. Ayer (not a man noted for his historical scholarship) to get him right (see Ayer, 1992, in Dunn, Urmson and Ayer, 1992, p. 226). Indeed, it follows on this interpretation not only that *other people* got Hume wrong, *but that Hume misunderstood himself*.

Here is Hume in a paragraph deleted from later editions of the EHU: 'A late Philosopher [note: Mr Hutcheson] has taught us, by the most convincing Arguments that Morality is nothing in the abstract Nature of things but is entirely relative to the Sentiment or mental Taste or each particular Being [that is each *kind* of being] in the same Manner as the Distinction between sweet and bitter, hot and cold, arise from the particular feeling of each Sense or Organ. Moral perception, therefore, ought not to be class'd with the Operations of the Understanding but with the Tastes or Sentiments.' (Quoted in Kemp Smith, 1941, p. 19. See also Beauchamp's critical edition of the ECU, p. 232.) Moral properties, as Hutcheson has taught us, are relative to a mental taste, they are secondary qualities like hot and cold. Though hot and cold may, be in the mind of the perceiver, 'This fire is hot', 'This hand is

cold', 'This rose is red', are not non-cognitive expressions. But if rightness is like redness, why should we suppose that truth-aptness gives out when we move from 'This rose is red' to 'This action is right'? If Hume is not a non-cognitivist about the one (as surely he is not) why should we suppose that he is a non-cognitivist about the other?

### **15. Motivation, Reason and Slavery.**

Perhaps because it is hard to construe the Motivation Argument as an argument for anything except non-cognitivism. It rests on a contrast between morals which motivate and reason which does not (or which can only motivate with the aid of a pre-existing passion). And if reason is construed as our belief-forming faculty, this strongly suggests that moral 'beliefs' – the *opinions* of injustice that deter some and the *opinions* of obligation that impel others - are not genuine beliefs. But suppose that reason is *not* our belief-forming faculty but only *one* of the mechanisms by which we acquire beliefs? Then the conclusion of the Slavery of Reason Argument is not that genuine beliefs do not motivate by themselves but that *beliefs derived from reason* do not motivate themselves. In other words what we get is this:

#### **Slavery of Reason Argument Mark 2: Sentimentalist Version.**

- i) Beliefs *derived from reason* are either analytic (to do with the relations of ideas) or synthetic (to do with causal relations).
- ii) Analytic beliefs cannot motivate except in so far as they lead to synthetic beliefs.
- iii) Synthetic beliefs cannot motivate if the causes and effects believed in are indifferent to us.
- iv) Hence synthetic beliefs cannot motivate unless they point the way to realize some pre-existing desire (from iii).
- v) Beliefs derived from reason cannot motivate by themselves (from i), ii) & iv)).

This new interpretation of the Slavery of Reason Argument demands a new interpretation of the Motivation Argument since the conclusion of the one is a premise of the other. We retain Premise 1') - that moral beliefs alone often motivate – but modify the second premise once

again. This is no longer thesis 2') – that *genuine* beliefs cannot motivate by themselves. It now becomes 2'') - that beliefs *derived from reason* cannot motivate by themselves. This leaves open the possibility that there are some beliefs *not* derived from reason which *can* motivate without the aid of a pre-existing passion.

What sort of beliefs might they be? Perhaps beliefs based on *impressions*. Hume certainly believed in such beliefs. 'To believe is in this case to feel an immediate impression of the senses, or a repetition of that impression in the memory' (T, 1.3.5.8/86). Thus my belief that there is a red book in front of me (in fact my rebound copy of the *Treatise*) is not much more than a vivid impression of a red book. A little later Hume gives a different definition: 'An opinion, therefore, or belief, may be most accurately defined [as] *a lively idea related to or associated with a present impression*' (T, 1.3.7.5/96). Here the belief is not an impression but an idea *associated* with an impression.<sup>4</sup> But if some beliefs are impressions and others are ideas associated with impressions, not all our beliefs are the products of an inferential process<sup>5</sup>. Obviously the kind of belief that consists in 'feel[ing] an immediate impression of the senses' is not the kind of thing that needs to be inferred. If my belief that there is a red book in front of me simply consists in my impression of a red book then (if there is in fact a red book in front of me) all I need to do to acquire the relevant belief is to open my eyes and see the book. And if some beliefs are '*lively ideas related to or associated with a present impressions*' then some of these beliefs can be acquired without the aid of inference. I open my eyes and form the belief that there is a computer screen in front of me. I tuck into my breakfast of toast and mussels and form the belief that it is delicious. Or I contemplate my wife Zena in her new red dress and form the belief that she is sexy. In the first case it is my visual impressions that do the trick, in the second my oral impressions and in the third case ... well, it's a complicated business, but you get the general idea. Now in all these cases inference is minimal to non-existent. I do not deduce or infer that my dinner is delicious or my wife sexy. I feel them to be so in consequence of my sensations. An alien anthropologist might infer that somebody is (humanly) sexy by consulting a checklist or a set of INUS conditions and reasoning her way to an evaluation, but that is not how human beings typically do it. Or at least, that is not how Hume *thinks* that human beings typically do it.

Now, Hume's conception of reason undergoes a metamorphosis on the course of the *Treatise*. It starts off as deduction (and perhaps the perception of analytic truths) and gradually expands to include substantial dollops of custom, habit and imagination, those 'sensitive parts of our natures' which make up for the defects in our purely cognitive

capacities. But ‘reason’ still carries connotations of *discursus*, of running around from the premises to the conclusion, though, by 3.1.1, reason runs with the aid of custom, habit and imagination. In other words Hume tends to conceive of reason as our inferential organ. Thus *part* of what Hume is denying in 3.1.1 is that the basic principles of morals can be inferred or deduced from anything else. Moral distinctions, he insists, are not *derived* from reason and are not ‘discovered ... by a *deduction* of reason’ (T, 3.1.1.7/457). They are not ‘*conclusions* of our reason’ (T, 3.1.1.7/457) and are not ‘matters of fact, whose existence we can *infer* by reason’ (T, 3.1.1.27/468). Furthermore, Hume seems to think that when reason does its running around, it runs from one idea (or set of ideas) to another. The topic of ‘our present enquiry concerning morals’, he says, is ‘whether *it is by means of our ideas or impressions we distinguish betwixt vice and virtue*’ since ‘those who affirm that virtue is nothing but a conformity to reason ... concur in the opinion, that morality, like truth, is discerned merely by ideas, and by their juxtaposition and comparison’ (T, 3.1.1.4-5/456-457). Thus Hume tends to think of reason as an inferential capacity that operates on ideas. That leaves plenty of room for beliefs *not* derived from reason, namely those based on impressions (or identical with impressions) which are not the products of inference. Moreover the idea that such beliefs are motivating has got a lot going for it. It is at least plausible to suppose that my belief that my breakfast is delicious will motivate me to go on eating, whilst Dunya’s belief that Dmitri is sexy might motivate her to give him the eye. So the conclusion of the Slavery of Reason Argument should *not* be (as is commonly assumed) that *genuine* beliefs do not motivate by themselves but that *beliefs derived from reason* do not motivate by themselves, leaving the way open for beliefs *not* derived from reason (but based on impressions) that *can* sometimes motivate by themselves or, at least, that can motivate without the aid of a pre-existing desire.

But if we modify the Slavery of Reason Argument we must modify the Motivation Argument too, since the one supplies one of the premises of the other. If we replace 2’) with 2’’) what we get is the following:

**Motivation Argument: Sentimentalist Version Mark 1.**

1’) Moral beliefs alone often motivate.

2’’) Beliefs *derived from reason* cannot motivate by themselves.

3a’) The best explanation of 1’) and 2’’) is that moral ‘beliefs’ are not derived from reason.

Therefore probably

3'') Moral beliefs are not derived from reason.

[The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason.]

3'') is precious close to the claim that Hume *says* he is arguing for in 3.1.1, namely that 'moral distinctions are not derived from reason'. It neither entails nor suggests non-cognitivism, and is quite consistent with the view that moral properties are akin to secondary qualities. Furthermore if we add a premise that Hume seems to have believed, we get the core thesis of 3.1.2. Here is the premise:

4'') All our beliefs are either based on *ideas* (reason/thinking) or on *impressions* (sensation/feeling).

According to Hume, all our perceptions, that is all our mental contents, can be divided into these two categories, impressions and ideas. Impressions are 'sensations, passions, and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul', whereas ideas are the 'faint images of these in thinking and reasoning' (T, 1.1.1.1/1). The difference between impressions and ideas is the 'difference betwixt feeling and thinking'. But if all our mental contents are ideas or impressions, then all our beliefs that are *not* based upon (or identical with) impressions must be arrived at by reason, either by intuitive perception as with an analytic truth or by some inferential process. Thus the chief question with respect to our moral beliefs is *whether it is by means of our ideas or impressions we distinguish betwixt vice and virtue, and pronounce an action blamable or praiseworthy* – that is whether our moral beliefs are derived from an inferential process or based upon feeling or sentiment. And given 3'') and 4''), the answer is clear:

5') Moral beliefs, therefore, are based on *impressions* [specifically the sentiments of approbation and disapprobation].

And this is precisely the conclusion that Hume announces at the outset of 3.1.2, 'that since vice and virtue are not discoverable merely by reason, or the comparison of ideas, it must be by means of some impression or sentiment they occasion ... Our decisions concerning moral rectitude and depravity are evidently perceptions; and as all perceptions are either impressions or ideas, the exclusion of the one is a convincing argument for the other. Morality therefore, is more properly felt than judged of' (T, 3.3.2.1/470). This suggests

(though it does not entail) that moral properties are akin to secondary qualities. For Hume, the belief that an action is right is caused in much the same way as the belief that the book is red. I contemplate the book and, if my sense of sight is not disturbed by disco-lights, blue-tinted spectacles or other distorting influences, my visual impressions enable me to see that it is red. For its redness simply consists in its tendency to produce such impressions in suitably qualified spectators, where being suitably qualified involves such things as *not* wearing blue-tinted spectacles. I contemplate an action and, if my moral sense is not distorted by partial passions or false opinions (such as ‘the delusive glosses of superstition and false religion’, EPM, 9.1.3/270), my impression of approbation enables me to feel that it is right. For its rightness simply consists in its tendency to arouse a sentiment of approbation in suitably qualified spectators, where being suitably qualified includes *not* having relevantly false opinions (such as the delusive glosses) and *not* being subject to partial passions. Thus the conclusion we have arrived at is very close to the conclusion that Hume *says* he is arguing for, namely that ‘vice and virtue ... may be compared to sounds, colours, heat, and cold,’ that is to secondary qualities. We have managed to recast the both the Slavery or Reason and the Motivation Arguments so that they support the quasi-Hutchesonian doctrine that Hume probably believed rather than the non-cognitivism that has been read into him by his Twentieth Century admirers.

## 16. An Objection

But isn’t the position I attribute to Hume rather an odd one? The thesis is that beliefs based on *impressions* sometimes motivate without the aid of a pre-existing desire or passion, but that beliefs based on *ideas or reasoning* cannot. But the Slavery of Reason arguments in 2.3.3 seem to be pretty general. The conclusion they suggest (as opposed that the conclusion that they actually support) is that *beliefs* cannot motivate without the aid of a pre-existing desire or passion, not that *beliefs derived from reason* cannot motivate without the aid of a pre-existing desire or passion. To put the point another way, when people become persuaded that beliefs derived from reason cannot motivate by themselves, the reason that they are inclined to think this is that beliefs derived from reason are *beliefs* not that beliefs derived from reason are *derived from reason*. The provenance of the beliefs does not enter into it. Indeed, it is perhaps worth pointing out that Hume’s predecessors – such as Hobbes and Hutcheson – seem to have subscribed to the *general* thesis that *beliefs* cannot motivate by themselves, not the restricted thesis that beliefs *derived from reason* cannot motivate by themselves. And so too do latter-day Humeans such as Michael Smith. Why (if I am right)

does Hume differentiate between reason-based and impression-based beliefs when his predecessors and disciples do not?

Let's get the thesis clear. I have attributed to Hume the view that *some* impression-based beliefs influence our actions and affections without the aid of a pre-existing desire. The claim is not that they always do so or that they do so necessarily. What I am going to suggest is that when impressions prompt a belief which *does* cause a new desire or passion, it is not really the belief that is doing the business, but the painful or pleasurable impressions we feel in formulating the belief. Suppose I bite into my toast and mussels and form the belief that they are delicious. This prompts the desire to take another bite. Conversely, if I bit into them and formed the belief that the mussels were off this would prompt the desire to spit them out. If Dunya contemplates Dmitri in his new tuxedo and forms the belief that he is sexy this might prompt an amorous advance. Conversely, if her impressions led her to form the belief that he had a bad case of BO, this might well 'oppose or retard the impulse of passion'. But in all four cases, it is not really the belief that is prompting the desire but *the impressions that we feel when formulating the belief*. It is the pleasant *taste* of the mussels that prompts me to eat more, not the belief that they taste pleasant. It is the unpleasant *taste* that prompts me to spit the mussels out, not the belief that they taste unpleasant. It is the sexual *feelings* that Dmitri arouses in Dunya that cause her desire to seduce him, not the *belief* that he is sexy (though this belief *might* have such an influence if conjoined with some desire such as a Merteuil-like project of seducing as many attractive men as possible). It is Dmitri's passion-killing body *odor* that causes her to back off, not the belief that he has it.

Hume's thesis, I suggest is that our moral motivations are sometimes due to the same kind of process. Morals have an influence on the actions and affections and they can exercise this influence without the aid of pre-existing desires. But it is not strictly speaking our *beliefs* that have this influence, but the sentiments we feel when we form those beliefs. It is the approval I feel when I contemplate some generous action that moves me to emulate the doer, not the approval-based belief that he was doing a good deed. The claim that we are 'governed by our duties' is correct but the thesis that we are 'deter'd from some actions by the *opinion* of injustice' is only true as a first approximation. It is not, strictly speaking, the *opinions* of injustice and obligation that deter or impel us but the sentiments we feel when we formulate those opinions. When it comes to morality, we are moved by our impressions not the *copies* of those impressions that figure in our beliefs.



### 17. The Motivation Argument Reformulated

But if this is correct the Motivation Argument needs to be modified yet again. The second premise 2'') – the conclusion of the Slavery of Reason argument – can be left as it stands, but the first premise needs to be reformulated. *Morals* may have ‘an influence on the actions and affections’, but when morality exerts its influence perhaps it is not our moral beliefs that do the motivating so much as the impressions on which they are based. But there is a difficulty here. For Hume construes *some* beliefs as impressions, since ‘to believe is [in some cases] to feel an immediate impression of the senses’ (T, 1.3.5.8/86). Perhaps he is confounding moral beliefs with immediate impressions of the moral sense in the Motivation Argument (a confusion suggested by some of his rhetoric)? It seems to me that we can get around this problem with the aid of a studied ambiguity. I define ‘moral considerations’ as the mental contents that move us when we are motivated by morality. Perhaps they are impressions (namely the sentiments of approbation and disapprobation), perhaps they are beliefs based upon such impressions or perhaps they are beliefs confounded with impressions. Never mind, we simply leave it open. Then the first premise of the Motivation Argument becomes the thesis that moral considerations by themselves sometimes motivate. This gives us:

#### **Motivation Argument: Sentimentalist Version Mark 2.**

1'') Moral considerations alone often motivate.

2'') Beliefs *derived from reason* cannot motivate by themselves.

3a'') The best explanation of 1'') and 2'') is that moral considerations are not beliefs derived from reason.

Therefore probably

3'') Moral considerations are not beliefs derived from reason.

3b) Moral beliefs either are, or are based upon, moral considerations.

3c) Moral beliefs are not beliefs derived from reason.

[Moral beliefs are not beliefs derived from reason if they are *identical* with moral considerations and they are not beliefs derived from reason if they are based upon items - namely moral considerations - that are not beliefs derived from reason.]

4'') All our beliefs are either based on *ideas* (reason/thinking) or on *impressions* (sensation/feeling).

5') Moral beliefs, therefore, are based on *impressions* [specifically the sentiments of approbation and disapprobation].

Once again this gives us the conclusion that Hume *says* he is arguing for, namely that *moral distinctions are not deriv'd from reason* (T, 3.1.1.1/455) but that vice and virtue are *discoverable by means of some impression or sentiment that they occasion* (T, 3.1.2.1/470). But the argument is no longer committed to the claim that either moral beliefs or beliefs-not-derived from reason can motivate without the aid of a pre-existing desire. When morals excite passions, or produce and prevent actions, maybe it is moral beliefs that do the motivating, maybe it is the impressions or sentiments on which they are based, or maybe it is the sentiments which Hume has oddly confounded with beliefs. The argument is agnostic between these three alternatives.

### 18. An Argument Undone

In formulating (what I take to be) Hume's argument I have reversed the historical sequence. The non-cognitivist argument was derived from Hume's via a series of misunderstandings. I have derived Hume's argument from its non-cognitivist descendant via a process of rational reconstruction. Unfortunately Hume's argument shares many of the defects of the non-cognitivist argument from which it is derived. Like the non-cognitivist argument, it is formally respectable, though not formally valid, since the move from 3a'') to 3''') is an inference to the best explanation. However an inference to the best explanation is only as good the 'facts' that the conclusion purports to explain. And premises 1'') and 2''), the supposed facts that sub-conclusion 3''') purports to explain, are not good enough to sustain the inference. Premise 1'') - that moral *considerations* alone often motivate – is a less specific variant of Premise 1') - that moral *beliefs* alone often motivate. And as we have seen (§§7-8), when moral considerations (the mental contents that move us when we are motivated by morality) motivate, they often do it with the aid of a hunger and thirst after *de dicto* righteousness. Most of us *want* to do the right thing (or at least to avoid actions that are conspicuously wrong), a desire carefully fostered by conscientious parents. But if Premise 1'') is in a bad way, Premise 2'') is worse. To begin with it is derived from the Slavery of Reason Argument, which is just as question-begging in its sentimentalist incarnation as was its non-cognitivist variant. Hume arrives at sub-conclusion v) – that beliefs derived from reason cannot motivate by themselves – by assuming, without argument, that moral considerations are not beliefs-derived-from-reason. But the whole

point of the two arguments taken together – the Slavery of Reason Argument which provides one of the premises for the Motivation Argument – was to prove precisely that! Yet the Slavery of Reason Argument only works (in so far as it works at all) by dividing beliefs-derived-from-reason into two categories, relations of ideas and matters of fact, thereby excluding moral beliefs as *not* derived from reason. Premise ii) - that abstract or demonstrative reasoning never influences any of our actions, but only as it directs our judgment concerning causes and effects – is falsified by the examples of Russell and Hobbes who were mightily motivated by abstract or demonstrative reasoning even though that reasoning had no direct causal consequences. The move from iii) - synthetic beliefs cannot motivate if the causes and effects believed in are indifferent to us – to iv) - synthetic beliefs cannot motivate unless they point the way to realize some pre-existing desire – is fallacious since it ignores the possibility of DTADs (dispositions to acquire desires). Indeed, once we recognize the reality of DTADs, it becomes apparent that Premise 2'') is simply false. Beliefs of all sorts can motivate without the aid of a pre-existing desire so long as they mesh with a DTAD, a disposition to acquire desires, such as curiosity, amorousness or a fondness for chocolate. (The Slavery of Reason *thesis* can perhaps be saved but only if it is reformulated as the claim that no belief can give rise to a new desire or action without the aid of a pre-existing desire *or DTAD*.) As we have noted, the Motivation Argument, in its sentimentalist as in its non-cognitivist variants, is best construed as an inference to the best explanation. But one of the ‘facts’ that the inference purports to explain is distinctly dubious whilst the other - Premise 2'') – is no fact at all. And there is no reason to accept the explanation of a non-fact. The Motivation Argument in its sentimentalist version is a complete write-off.

We began with Michael Smith’s thesis that Hume’s Motivation Argument mounts a powerful case for non-cognitivism. But it is not really an argument for non-cognitivism and in so far as it can be converted into one, it is not at all powerful. But if it was not an argument for non-cognitivism what was it an argument for? The thesis that moral distinctions are not derived from reason, but that vice and virtue are analogous to ‘sounds, colours, heat and cold’, and hence more properly felt than judged of. But so far from proving Hume’s point the Motivation Argument turns out to be, in his own words, ‘utterly impotent in this particular’.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Smith, unwisely in my opinion, is rather less cautious, at least about judgments about what it is right for the agent to do. See §2 and MP, p 60-91.

<sup>2</sup> For more on DTAD's and the deficiencies of Hume's argument, see Pigden, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> For Hobbes 'the thoughts are to desires as scouts and spies, to range abroad, and find the way to the things desired' which strongly suggests that reason as the thinking faculty is the servant, if not the slave, of the passions (*Leviathan*, ch. viii. 16). As Darwall puts it 'Reason [for Hobbes] can recommend no conduct or end directly or intrinsically. Its practical function is purely instrumental, to work out the means or "way to the things desired"' (Darwall, 1995, p. 59; see also p. 60). Thus Hobbes's psychology does not allow for thoughts which can generate fundamentally new desires such as his own thoughts on the subject of geometry. According to Russell, "'Reason" has a perfectly clear and precise meaning. It signifies the choice of the right means to an end that you wish to achieve. It has nothing whatever to do with the choice of ends' (Russell, 1999, p. 170). Thus for Russell, reason cannot produce beliefs which lead to desires for new ends, such as his own beliefs about the demonstrations of Euclid.

<sup>4</sup> The oddities of Hume's theory of belief – and hence the inadequacy of my analysis – were forcefully pointed out to me by Annette Baier.

<sup>5</sup> Hume's theory of belief is, of course, utterly silly and a big step backwards from that of the 'scholastic headpieces' he so arrogantly decries. For a critical discussion see Bennett, 2001, chs 32-33, though he is by no means critical enough.