



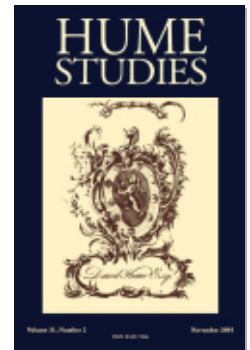
PROJECT MUSE®

Hume and Humeans on Practical Reason

Michelle Mason

Hume Studies, Volume 31, Number 2, November 2005, pp. 347-378 (Article)

Published by Hume Society



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/383291/summary>

Hume and Humeans on Practical Reason

MICHELLE MASON

Abstract: Hume and contemporary “Humeans” have had prominent roles in reinvigorating the study of practical reason as a topic in its own right. I introduce a distinction between two divergent trends in the literature on Hume and practical reason. One trend, action-theoretic Humeanism, primarily concerns itself with defending a general account of reasons for acting, often one supposed to establish that moral reasons lack the categorical status the moral rationalist requires them to possess. The other trend, virtue-theoretic Humeanism, concentrates on defending the case for being an agent of a particular practical character, one whose enduring dispositions of practical thought are virtuous. I discuss work exemplifying these two trends and warn against decoupling thought about Hume’s and a Humean theory of practical reason from Hume’s and a Humean ethics. I conclude that the virtue-theoretic approach is a fruitful one for pursuing future work on Hume and Humeanism about practical reason.

Some of the most interesting work that philosophers are pursuing today is on practical reason. In retrospect, burgeoning interest in the field should come as no surprise. For one, once moral philosophers threw off the blinders that focused their view almost exclusively on the analysis of moral language, it was only a matter of time before the study of moral *agency*—and so, one might suppose, of practical reason—was destined to enjoy renewed interest.

Hume and those who go by the contemporary title of “Humean” have had prominent roles to play in this development. This is so despite the fact that philosophers use the “Humean” title to refer variously to some quite distinct views of practical reason. To be sure, this is in part a reflection of debate over the interpretation of Hume’s own views. Even if we put questions of historical interpretation to one side, however, other forces complicate the task of isolating a standard bearer of the Humean banner in the contemporary theory of practical reason. Philosophers of practical reason who seek a philosophical foil are one such force.¹ Self-described Humeans about practical reason, who find much to disagree about among themselves, are another.² Finally, the reinvigoration of the study of practical reason as a topic in its own right encourages decoupling thought about practical reason from thought about ethics. The latter threatens to, in turn, decouple scholarship on Hume’s and a Humean theory of practical reason from Hume’s and a Humean ethics. The associated risk is an interpretation of Hume as some form of skeptic in the practical domain or a Humean account of moral evaluation bought at the expense of an appreciation of Hume’s contribution toward understanding the practical thought that informs morally virtuous agents’ deeds.³ One thus distinguishes two divergent trends in what I will continue to call, without endorsing any suggestion of unity, Humean Theories of Practical Reason. One trend, which I dub *action-theoretic* Humeanism, primarily concerns itself with defending a general account of reasons for acting, often one supposed to establish that moral reasons lack the categorical status the moral rationalist requires them to possess. The other trend, which I dub *virtue-theoretic* Humeanism, concentrates on defending the case for being an agent of a particular practical character, one whose enduring dispositions of practical thought are virtuous.⁴ I introduce this distinction with the aim of providing, in conclusion, a novel schema in which to frame future work on Hume and Humeanism about practical reason. Attending to it in even the rudimentary form in which I present it here promises to advance current debate, I argue, by highlighting points of comparison and contrast between positions that go missing on more commonplace divisions of the field.⁵

In section I, I attend to some matters of philosophical terminology. In section II, I attend to some noteworthy interpretations of Hume’s own position with respect to a theory of practical reason. I proceed, in Section III, to consider some contemporary philosophical writing taken to represent a distinctively Humean position in the theory of practical reason. I consider such “Humeanism” against the background of an evolution in the way one central debate about practical reason is framed: an evolution from framing the debate primarily in terms of the so-called internalism constraint on practical reasons to framing it as debate over the content of practical reason itself. In section IV, I urge attention to a distinction between action-theoretic and virtue-theoretic tendencies in the literature in

order to contribute to the debate's further evolution in what I suggest is a fruitful direction. I conclude by considering how recasting the debate in the way I suggest reveals new directions that work on Hume's and Humean theories of practical reason might profitably pursue.⁶

I. What is a Theory of Practical Reason?

"Practical reason" is a philosopher's term of art. Contemporary philosophical debate on the topic thus risks importing from the beginning contentious philosophical assumptions. I begin, then, by enumerating the philosophical assumptions—deliberately minimalist—I shall suppose. First, I take it that a philosophical theory of *practical reason* is a theory that concerns the capacity to reflect on how one should direct one's intentions, actions, plans and other judgment-sensitive attitudes (if any) and to guide these attitudes in light of such reflection.⁷ By "reflection" I mean nothing fancier than the ability to take as an object of thought whatever it is that bears on how we should vet the relevant considerations and to arrive, via such thought, at conclusions to which one is practically committed. The capacity in question is a distinctively *practical* capacity in both its content and its issue. That is, insofar as the capacity is a capacity to reflect about the direction of one's actions and judgment-sensitive attitudes, it has a practical subject matter; insofar as its point is to direct one's actions and judgment-sensitive attitudes, it has a practical upshot.

On this inclusive understanding of the capacity of practical reason, one coherently denies human beings' possession of the capacity only if ready to deny that human beings are self-directing agents at all. The inclusive reading yields a similarly inclusive, hopefully uncontroversial, understanding of the practical reasons with which the capacity of practical reason is concerned. We can understand a practical reason to be an item (a consideration or a fact, for example) that can be the content of (a) mental state(s) and thereby play a particular contributing role in the exercise of the capacity of practical reason: the contributing role of, on reflection, counting or weighing in favor of regulating one's intentions (and other judgment-sensitive attitudes) in a certain manner. How must a practical reason count or weigh with one? Well, we might say, from the perspective of practical reason—as opposed, say, to the perspective of theoretical reason, or aesthetic reason, or what have you. The possibility of such various perspectives on the assessment of action, of course, introduces thorny problems. It does so, that is, so long as the possibility remains open that such perspectives might diverge in their assessments.

One begins to court real controversy once one turns to the sense in which our practical capacity is a capacity *of reason* or *for reasoning*. For example, one might intelligibly hold that human beings have the capacity I describe yet deny that our intentional actions are guided by processes properly described as *reasoning* or

ratiocination strictly so called, such as canonical, formal inferential processes that yield conclusions of unmistakable practical significance (e.g., decisions, intentions, or plans). To be sure, the proponent of such a position owes an explanation of the restrictive conception of reason or reasoning that supports the view but it is an intelligible one nonetheless.

As for “practical rationality,” the term standardly functions as one of approbation. To say of an agent, action or end that it is practically rational is to attribute to it a form of excellence as an agent, action, or end. Here, again, it is only after we attempt to further specify the nature of the excellence in question that philosophers are likely to retreat to competing camps. Is the excellence best regarded generally as one of reflecting well on how one should act and guiding oneself accordingly? Or is it an excellence of ratiocination somehow more narrowly understood?

In its most common form, we shall see, the central debate about practical reason in which Hume and contemporary Humeans find themselves engaged concerns the existence and content of standards (or “principles” or “norms”) for distinctively practical *reasoning* that are normative or authoritative for all rational agents as such, so that in running afoul of them an agent warrants censure as being practically *irrational*. The anti-Humeans in this debate, typically Kantian rationalists and constructivists,⁸ hold that there exist formal standards of reason that are in virtue of their rational authority sufficient in themselves to guide agents to act in accordance with them (again, barring irrationality.)⁹ Moreover, Kantians argue, these principles deliver morally substantive conclusions. Anti-rationalist Humeans, in contrast, either deny that there exist such standards of reasoning as they apply to action or allow their existence but deny that they are sufficient to motivate agents to moral action in the absence of some further condition, itself not a rational requirement.

Finally, it is both tempting and common for contemporary philosophers to try to hone a theory of practical reason against a favored theory of theoretical reason. The risk here is that practical reason is more likely to appear poorer for the contrast. In the theoretical case, there arguably are standards of reason (that is, of reasons and reasoning) that apply to all believers as such. In the theoretical domain, one prominent philosopher suggests, “one of the most crucial and problematic notions in practical reason—the notion of *non-hypothetical* reasons or requirements (reasons or requirements not dependent upon contingent ends of the agent)—appears to be well domesticated.”¹⁰ Deductive logic, for one, underwrites requirements on rational believers as such. The implication relations between sentences that are the domain of deductive logic, that is, provide universal standards against which to evaluate an individual thinker’s reasoning about what to believe. One need not assume here that there is any simple route from the rules of deductive logic to normative claims about precisely how one should reason about their beliefs. It

suffices that differences in the contingent practical ends of believers in the same epistemic context do not give those believers epistemic reasons to believe different propositions.

Intuitively, the case of practical reasoning is disanalogous. Here, one finds any number of uncontroversial examples where differences in the contingent practical ends of agents suffice to provide them practical reasons to act differently. Your goal of finishing the scarf quickly provides you a reason to choose a wide-gauged yarn. My intention to make a gift of the blanket to a friend's baby provides me a reason to choose a finer pima cotton. Even were we to regard any reasons or requirements grounded in necessary ends of agents as non-hypothetical, we still would face the notoriously difficult task of settling on just what this end is that has the convenient (for our purposes) features of being necessary to rational agents as such and specific enough in content to underwrite the practical requirements that we on reflection wish it to support. In short, the philosopher determined to hone a theory of practical reason against a background theory of theoretical reason risks unearthing disanalogies that fuel suspicions that theoretical reason enjoys rational credentials that practical reason lacks.

I propose that we instead pursue a different strategy: one that proceeds with the minimalist, ecumenical, understanding of practical reason and the criteria for reasons and reasoning it suggests:

*Criterion*_{practical reason}: A practical reason is a consideration that counts or weighs in favor of regulating one's intentions (and other judgment-sensitive attitudes) in a certain manner.

*Criterion*_{practical reasoning}: An exercise of practical thought is an exercise of practical reasoning just in case it is susceptible to a specifically practical form of defect.

My reasons for opting for the minimalist approach and, with it, the minimalist criterion, should become more apparent as we proceed.

II. Does Hume Have a Theory of Practical Reason?

Any attempt to understand the position of the historical Hume on the topic of practical reason must proceed from an understanding of the debate that he inherits from his predecessors, particularly the eighteenth-century British moral rationalists Samuel Clarke and William Wollaston. Especially relevant are, first, Clarke's defense of reason as a faculty for apprehending an independent, immutable realm of moral facts about what is fit and right in conduct and, second, Wollaston's assimilation of actions to assertions in his attempt to establish that actions may

be contrary to laws of reason. On Clarke's view, not only does reason provide us our knowledge of moral good and evil, it also directly provides the source of our moral obligations: denying truths grounded in moral facts violates a requirement of reason no less than does asserting an obvious contradiction.¹¹ On Wollaston's view, the internal aim of action is a similarly representational one. On his view, actions serve to assert truths or falsehoods. In the former case, the truth of the action's assertion accounts for its morality and, in the latter case, the falsity of the action's assertion accounts for its immorality.¹²

When Hume speaks of reason and reasoning as it pertains to action, then, we do best to understand him as doing so in the context of this moral rationalist background. Once located there, moreover, Hume's arguments against his moral rationalist opponents stand a chance of hitting their mark only if we take seriously his pronouncements about the limits of reason *thus understood* in action.¹³ Keeping Hume's historical context in view, then, what is the proper characterization of Hume's position about practical reason?

Ascribing Skepticism about Practical Reason to Hume

Some prominent contemporary philosophers argue that Hume is not merely an anti-rationalist but a skeptic about practical reason.¹⁴ Christine Korsgaard attributes to Hume the "classical formulation" of skepticism about practical reason ("Skepticism," 312). Jean Hampton concludes that Hume's naturalism ultimately leads to "his eschewal of the idea that there is such a thing as practical reason."¹⁵ John McDowell finds that "Hume himself does not officially recognize a practical employment of reason" (176). Elijah Millgram concurs with the interpretation of Hume as practical skeptic, attributing Hume's position to an impoverished semantic theory.¹⁶

Even philosophers more sympathetic to Hume support reading him as a skeptic about practical reason. John Broome asserts baldly: "David Hume argued that there is no such thing as practical reasoning. His argument has a flaw. It is based on the assumption that 'reason is the discovery of truth or falsehood.'"¹⁷ Donald Hubin, the lone self-described Humean in this group, announces, "Humean theories of practical rationality are not *Hume's* theory—he seems not to have anything that could be called a theory of *practical* rationality."¹⁸

Were one operating with the ecumenical sense of "practical reason," interpreting Hume as a skeptic about practical reason would amount to ascribing to him the radical view that human beings are altogether incapable of directing their plans, intentions, actions, and other judgment-sensitive attitudes in better or worse ways. Is this what proponents of the skeptical reading mean to ascribe to Hume?

Korsgaard offers arguably the most influential reading of Hume as a skeptic about practical reason.¹⁹ In advancing that reading, Korsgaard famously distin-

guishes between two forms that skepticism about practical reason may take: content skepticism and motivational skepticism. The content skeptic, on Korsgaard's view, is a skeptic about the ability of formal principles of reason, such as the formulations of Kant's categorical imperative, to alone "give substantive guidance to choice and action" ("Skepticism," 311). The content skeptic holds, in short, that we can draw no conclusions about how we should choose or act from formal considerations alone. In contrast, the motivational skeptic doubts "the scope of reason as a motive" (ibid.). The motivational skeptic, that is, is skeptical that practical reason, on however substantive an account of practical reason one likes, alone suffices to motivate action. For the motivational skeptic, some desire or passion is necessary to serve as a source of motivation.

It is the motivational form of skepticism, Korsgaard suggests, that finds its classical formulation in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, "Of the influencing motives of the will"—a discussion that culminates in Hume's conclusion that "[r]eason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them" (T 2.3.3.4; SBN 415). As Korsgaard interprets Hume's so-called motivation argument, it proceeds:

1. "All reasoning is concerned either with abstract relations of ideas or with relations of objects, especially causal relations, which we learn about from experience."
2. "Abstract relations of ideas are the subject of logic and mathematics, and no one supposes that those [i.e., rational judgments concerning logical and mathematical relations] by themselves give rise to any motives."
3. "They [i.e., rational judgments concerning logical and mathematical relations] yield no conclusions about action."
4. "We are sometimes moved by the perception of causal relations, but only when there is a pre-existing motive in the case . . ."
5. Therefore, motivational skepticism is true: reason alone can never provide a motive to any action. ("Skepticism," 313; parenthetical remarks mine)

It follows from the conclusion of Hume's motivation argument that his rationalist predecessors are mistaken in taking moral judgments—which undeniably can motivate action—to be rational judgments.

Responding to the argument, Korsgaard interprets it as an expression of Hume's skepticism about the content of practical reasoning. Rather than defending the limits he places on the content of practical reason, Korsgaard objects, Hume simply presupposes an unjustified restriction on its content. Hume's argument thus fails to provide an argument for skepticism about practical reason that is independent of an argument for content skepticism. Moreover, no argument for content skepticism appears forthcoming. In this way, Korsgaard challenges the view that Hume has established that motivational considerations

demonstrate the impotence of formal principles of practical reason to alone guide action. She concludes that neither Hume himself, nor her contemporary Humean target, Bernard Williams, offers such an argument.²⁰ The contemporary significance of Korsgaard's interpretation of Hume, then, is that philosophers who would follow Hume cannot embrace his motivational skepticism without providing some independent support for skepticism about the content of practical reason.²¹

Korsgaard has since argued, on different grounds, that Hume's skepticism about practical reason must be, as one might put it, thoroughgoing. Hume does not, and the contemporary Humean cannot, avail himself of a piecemeal, instrumental conception of practical reason. On an instrumental conception, there is a single principle of practical reason, one typically formulated as the principle that one who wills an end must will the necessary means to the end. Korsgaard now supports her conclusion by arguing that practical reason must effect its influence on action and choice by rationally guiding an agent to perform the actions it prescribes ("Normativity," 221). How does Korsgaard's proposal of a rational guidance requirement further her interpretation of Hume as a thoroughgoing skeptic?

Korsgaard offers two arguments in support of reading Hume as rejecting the thought that the instrumental principle of practical reason is a rational requirement on action.²² Let us call Korsgaard's first argument her *causation is not rational guidance argument* against interpreting Hume as an instrumentalist. The argument proceeds, in outline, as follows:

1. A rational agent is guided in the determination of her action by the rational necessity of doing the action (the rational guidance requirement on practical reason) (Korsgaard, "Normativity," 222).
2. On Hume's view, "all necessity is causal necessity . . . the necessity with which observers draw the conclusion that the effect will follow from the cause" (ibid., following Hume, T 1.3.14.32; SBN 171 and T 2.3.1.4; SBN 400)
3. Therefore, on Hume's view there can be no question of the rational necessity of action.
4. Therefore, "Hume's view is that there is no such thing as practical reason at all" (Korsgaard, "Normativity," 222).

The objection that Korsgaard's first argument presents to reading Hume as an instrumentalist is, in short, that Hume can at best represent how agents are caused to pursue the means necessary to their ends. The resulting action is not thereby shown to be a result of the agent's own mental activity but, rather, of psychological processes operating in or on her. Considered from the perspective of the agent herself, Korsgaard suggests, agents on Hume's view would at best be in a position

to reliably predict how circumstances are likely to influence their conduct but not to act from considerations they regard as reasons in so acting.²⁴ This would indeed be an odd picture of agency.

Korsgaard's second argument against interpreting Hume as an instrumentalist does not turn on Hume's view of causality. Call this second argument the *incoherence of the instrumental principle without normative foundation argument*. Noting that "[i]f you hold that the instrumental principle is the *only* principle of practical rationality, you cannot also hold that desiring something is a *reason* for pursuing it" ("Normativity," 223), Korsgaard argues as follows:

1. If one denies that desiring something is a reason for pursuing it, one must understand the instrumental principle to be: "If you are *going* to pursue an end, you then have a reason to take the means to that end" (*ibid.*)
2. Hume denies that desiring something is a reason for pursuing it.
3. The instrumental principle as stated in (2) attempts to derive a normative principle from a fact.
4. Hume argues you cannot derive normative conclusions from facts.
5. Therefore, Hume himself was not an instrumentalist about practical reason.

Korsgaard's argument here addresses both those who would ascribe an instrumental theory of practical reason to Hume and those who wish to promote contemporary instrumentalist theories of practical reason under the Humean banner. Understanding the second premise of her *incoherence of the instrumental principle without normative foundation argument* is key to grasping the nature of the objection it presents to such attempts.

Behind the second premise of Korsgaard's argument here is the thought that the instrumental principle cannot function as a rational requirement on action, one yielding reasons for performing a certain action as means, absent some non-instrumental rational principle that secures the normative status of the ends to whose realization the means is necessary. In the absence of an appeal to such a noninstrumental rational principle—an appeal barred the instrumentalist—the instrumentalist cannot mark a distinction between what an agent has a reason to do and what an agent is going to do. Why not? Korsgaard writes: "Hume identifies a person's end with what he wants most, and the criterion of what a person wants most appears to be what he actually does" ("Normativity," 230). Now, as we shall see, Hume arguably has the resources within his philosophical system to treat some ends as warranting greater practical significance not in virtue of their strength as unregulated desires but, perhaps, in virtue of some other normative feature they enjoy. Waiving that complication for now, suppose Korsgaard is correct in claiming that Hume cannot deny that we act on our strongest desires, then an agent's strongest desires are revealed in what she proceeds to do. In short, for

Korsgaard's Hume, our strongest desires both set our ends and determine what we do. As Korsgaard writes in defense of her second premise,

If the instrumental principle is the only principle of practical reason, then to say that something is your end is not to say that you have a reason to pursue it, but at most to say that you are *going* to pursue it (perhaps inspired by desire). ("Normativity," 230)

But now note that the instrumental principle as Korsgaard argues Hume must understand it is not a principle that it is possible for an agent to violate. It is not, then, a principle whose violation Hume can characterize as an irreducibly practical violation of reason. Korsgaard treats this as an explanation for why Hume nowhere recognizes a case of genuine instrumental irrationality, that is, a case where "without miscalculating or making a mistake, people fail or decline to take the means to their own acknowledged ends" ("Normativity," 228). Hume instead recognizes at most two cases where we might call an action irrational but only in a sense derivative on a mistaken belief—for example, that some object exists—or a mistaken judgment of causality.²⁴ In this way, Korsgaard derives a requirement of the possibility of genuine, or irreducibly, practical error as a requirement on a principle of distinctively practical—as opposed to theoretical—reason.²⁵

Ascribing Instrumentalism about Practical Reason to Hume

How do Korsgaard's arguments fare against historically sensitive readings that defend interpreting Hume as an instrumentalist about practical reason? Such readings aimed against skeptical interpretations are rare. Elizabeth Radcliffe's defense of the ascription of a form of instrumentalism about practical reason is a noteworthy exception. Radcliffe is happy to concede from the start that practical reason is undeniably impotent in one sense for Hume: practical reason alone "does not give rise to actions and volitions."²⁶ Nonetheless, Radcliffe contends, "this particular impotence of reason . . . does not mean that reason in conjunction with something else cannot yield *conclusions* that have *practical* import" (254). Radcliffe thus proceeds to argue that Hume has a theory of practical reasoning by attempting to establish that his motivational psychology can accommodate patterns of reasoning to a conclusion "that precedes and can be causally connected to [an agent's] actions" (255).

Radcliffe proceeds to locate such a theory in Hume's *Treatise* by demonstrating how on his view moral sentiments non-inferentially yield beliefs with moral content—such as beliefs of the form "X is virtuous (or vicious)." In doing so, she offers the following as a candidate piece of Humean practical reasoning:

1. "Cruelty is vicious, or I ought to avoid being cruel [derived from a feeling of moral displeasure]";

2. "Not talking about my success in front of my friend is necessary to avoiding cruelty in this case [derived from reason]";
3. "Not talking about my success in front of my friend is virtuous, or I ought not to talk about my success in front of my friend [derived from feeling and reason]" (258).²⁷

Each step in this example expresses a belief of the reasoner. Although Radcliffe refers to the beliefs as being "derived" from (she alternately says they are "based" on) feeling, reason, or both feeling and reason, the precise relation between the sentiment and the belief is a casual one. The picture of practical reasoning that Radcliffe ascribes to Hume, then, is this (using the example of cruelty): My experience(s) of displeasure, felt when I attend to the "general point of view" from which I assess whether cruelty is useful and/or agreeable to myself or certain others, cause(s) me to believe that cruelty is vicious.²⁸ By exercising reason strictly so-called (for example, to ascertain the causal connection between talk of one's success and eliciting jealousy in others), I come to believe that avoiding talk of my success in front of my friend is (causally) necessary if I am to avoid cruelty. To deny that such reasoning warrants the title practical reasoning, Radcliffe argues, is to beg the question against the Humean by importing into the conception of practical reason controversial rationalist assumptions, namely the assumption that practical reasoning must issue in imperatives whose violation convicts the agent of irrationality in a sense not derivative from (merely) theoretical irrationality in the pursuit of ends otherwise normatively grounded.²⁹

Radcliffe does well in drawing attention to the complexity in Hume's view of the role of moral sentiment and reason in evaluating virtues and vices of character. Moreover, the claim that we often *feel* that a character is virtuous or vicious rings true. Such affective evaluation may prove just as trustworthy as—perhaps more trustworthy than—an inference from evidence. I see no reason to regard such affective evaluation as less epistemically significant than judgments purportedly independent of such affect. Radcliffe's talk, then, of deriving the belief that cruelty is vicious from a feeling does not strike me as especially problematic—so far, at least, as epistemic warrant is one's concern.

Keeping the first premise in view, it is important to be clear about the propriety of glossing the (non-inferential) belief that cruelty is vicious in terms of a belief that "I ought to avoid being cruel." To be sure, that gloss accords with Hume's stipulation that all judgments concerning what he calls "moral distinction"—judgments of virtue, vice, right, wrong, moral good, moral evil, duty, and obligation—count as "ought-statements" for the purposes of his infamous argument against deriving an "ought" statement from an "is" statement (T 3.1.1.18–27; SBN 463–70 *passim*). Nonetheless, glossing the belief in this way requires a defense of the special status Hume affords the sentiments upon which beliefs such as those expressed in the first premise are based. More is needed here because it is precisely in forging the

connection between the belief that cruelty is vicious and the belief that I ought to avoid being cruel that Radcliffe's Hume secures a connection between (moral) belief and (moral) action.

Hume offers such a defense, of course, in the account he provides in the *Treatise* of the special status of the sentiments one experiences upon taking the general point of view. Hume argues that from this point of view we take pleasure in certain traits of character (traits constituted by enduring motivational dispositions), those useful or agreeable to oneself or others. We are susceptible to such sentiments in virtue of our natural sympathy; in taking up the general point of view, however, we correct for common errors of natural sympathy, which is variable and subjective. Sympathy as corrected or regulated by the general point of view yields what Hume regards as the distinctly moral sentiments: varieties of pleasure and pain we feel in response to those traits that render one useful or agreeable in community with one's fellows. In this way, we come to approve of the moral virtues of others and to ourselves to be motivated by an ideal of moral virtue. If we accept Hume's case for privileging sentiments experienced when we place ourselves in the general point of view, the first step in Radcliffe's example of Humean practical reasoning is secured.

The second step in Radcliffe's schema is simply a judgment expressing the means necessary to the relevant end (of being a kind person rather than a cruel person). The exercise of reasoning from which this judgment is "derived" is a straightforward piece of theoretical reasoning: having evidence that talk of one's success elicits jealousy in others, I infer that there is a causal connection between the two. I infer this, that is, insofar as I am not fully virtuous; Radcliffe ascribes to Hume the view that no inferences need be in question in excellent exercises of practical reason. In cases where one is virtuous, Radcliffe notes, actually reasoning to a conclusion about what one ought to do may be unnecessary. Committed as she is to the general point of view and knowledgeable as she is of matters of fact about her sentiments in that point of view, the virtuous person possesses what Sturgeon refers to as non-inferential causal knowledge.³⁰ In this case, she possesses non-inferential causal knowledge of what is necessary to express kindness of character.³¹

What, then, of the conclusion? Doesn't the conclusion follow only if there is some rational principle mandating that I take as my end being a kind person rather than a cruel person? If I am correct in my defense of the first step, then this question should not reappear with regard to the conclusion. That is, if "I ought to avoid being cruel" is a correct gloss on the (non-inferential) belief that cruelty is vicious, then the conclusion does follow. If Hume's account of the ability of moral sentiments to motivate us in accordance with an ideal of virtue is compelling in securing that first step, then its practical import carries through to the conclusion. We thus have Radcliffe's desideratum for Hume's practical reasoning: reasoning

to a conclusion “that precedes and can be causally connected to [the reasoners’] actions” (255). Radcliffe concludes: “If reasoning about means to one’s ends is instrumentalist reasoning, then the upshot of my discussion is that Hume’s theory of practical reasoning is instrumentalist” (265).

Now, the person who does boast in front of her friend is not on Hume’s view therefore open to the criticism of acting practically irrationally. The reasoning in Radcliffe’s example is practical in the sense of being reasoning in the service of action; it is not practical in the sense of consisting in the recognition of rational principles over and above those of theoretical reasoning (e.g., reasoning concerning causal relations). Instead, the practical criticism appropriate to the boaster is that of being, as Radcliffe puts it “less than a morally virtuous person” (258). In Radcliffe’s example, even the cruel person who goes on to boast in front of her friend may be disposed to believe that refraining from boasting is necessary to avoid cruelty on the basis of the relevant evidence. The cruel person’s practical defect lies in her lacking a disposition to respond to such a belief by in fact refraining from boasting. This is what separates the cruel and kind persons.

Radcliffe’s reading offers what is perhaps as compelling a case as one can make for an instrumentalist conception of practical reasoning in Hume. How does that reading fare against arguments for a skeptical reading, such as Korsgaard’s?

Let us begin by considering Korsgaard’s *causation is not rational guidance argument* against interpreting Hume as an instrumentalist. Proponents of such an interpretation may object that the first premise of Korsgaard’s argument is question-begging in assuming that one can secure the normative status of practical, instrumental, reasoning only by interpreting it as pertaining to the rational necessity of action. Why assume, that is, that excellence in practical reasoning, and so practical rationality as Hume would understand it, must be understood in terms of rational necessity alone. On Radcliffe’s reading of Hume, he traces the normative status of practical (both prudential and other virtuous) reasoning that employs the instrumental principle to the normative status of the sentiment-derived beliefs from which it proceeds. With respect to prudential reasoning, Radcliffe writes: “To insist that prudence be regarded as a requirement of rationality rather than morality begs the question concerning the authority of reason” (264). The point generalizes for the other of Hume’s moral virtues.

Furthermore, nothing in this account mandates the odd picture of Hume’s agents proceeding as mere spectators to the forces of sentiments operating in or on them. Attention to the nuances of Hume’s account of the virtues equips him to avoid casting his agents in so unattractive a role.³²

The theory of instrumental practical reasoning that Radcliffe thus attributes to Hume does not concern itself with hypothetical imperatives as the Kantian understands them; that is, as imperatives whose normative status derives from one’s rationally willing an end (as opposed to one’s sentimentally endorsing some

desire). If we understand Korsgaard's second argument, the *incoherence of the instrumental principle without normative foundation argument*, as an argument that the instrumental principle *understood as a hypothetical imperative* cannot stand alone, Radcliffe's Hume may respond that the argument misses its target.

On a different reading, Korsgaard's second argument yields a requirement that genuine principles of practical reason be such that they admit of violations stemming from specifically rational defects not derivative of or reducible to instances of theoretical irrationality. The relevant objection to Radcliffe's instrumentalist Hume then is that his theory of practical reasoning does not yield any such species of defect in the cases where the agent's reasoning is faulty. The question to press here in reply is why those not already drawn to the Kantian view should accept the suggestion that faults of practical reasoning must be understood in terms of rational as opposed to some other distinct defects of practical thought. Intuitively, one might plausibly require that there be *something* especially compelling, on reflection, about the standards of practical reason qua standards of practical reason. But Hume and his defenders should balk at the suggestion that one can purchase this only by understanding the principles as Korsgaard suggests. Hume does, of course, have something to say about the special character of the virtuous agent's practical thought. As we have seen, morally virtuous agents possess a practical and motivational psychology that is approved from the general point of view.

I will not pursue the debate between Radcliffe's Hume and Korsgaard's Hume any further here. I will return to the debate in closing, however, when I urge that it is one worth pursuing in a different direction: a direction in which the distinction between what I've dubbed an action-theoretic versus a virtue-theoretic account of practical reason comes into better view. For now, note that the reading that Radcliffe offers of Hume prepares him to meet the minimal criteria for practical reasons and practical reasoning that I introduced at the outset. In fact, I think Hume does better in meeting these criteria than Radcliffe's reading seems to allow. I return to both these points in concluding, as well.

III. The Contemporary Debate: Internalism and Beyond

For longer than some will care to remember, the debate over contemporary theories of practical reason was framed in terms of a so-called internalism requirement on practical reasons. Locating the relevant internalist doctrine in Hume's text, Nagel writes:

The most influential anti-rationalist internalist is of course Hume . . . [Hume makes] explicit an extremely attractive theory of the justification of action which has had enormous effect on ethical theory. The view is

that any justification must appeal to an inclination in the individual to whom it is offered and that the justification proceeds by drawing connections between that inclination and other things (notably actions) which are means to its satisfaction. The inclination then becomes transferred to these by association, which is what makes persuasive justification possible. . . . [This view] will state that among the conditions for the presence of a reason for action there must always be a desire or inclination capable of motivating one to act accordingly. (10)

In Hume's hands, according to Nagel, the internalism requirement on practical reasons amounts to the requirement that all such reasons trace their motivational source to the desires or inclinations of the agent to whom the reason is said to apply. Thus understood, the internalism requirement supports a constraint on moral reasons that the Kantian is eager to reject. As Nagel concludes, on Hume's justification of reasons to be moral, "[a]ny justification ends finally with the rationally gratuitous presence of the emotion of sympathy; if that condition were not met, one would simply have no reason to be moral" (11).

Recall Korsgaard's skeptical interpretation of Hume. In distinguishing between motivational and content versions of skepticism, Korsgaard there puts present day Humeans on notice that they cannot purchase motivational constraints on the scope of practical reason for free. The internalism requirement on practical reasons states a conceptual connection between normative reasons and motivation; whether a particular theory of practical reason meets that requirement turns on its substantive account of what practical rationality is. As we have seen, Korsgaard thus suggests an ecumenical reading of the internalism requirement: "Practical-reason claims, if they are really to present us with reasons for action, must be capable of motivating rational persons" ("Skepticism," 317). Korsgaard's understanding of the requirement appears so ecumenical, in fact, that one of her main contemporary Humean targets, Bernard Williams, eagerly embraces it.³³ Of course, Williams, like Hume, has a particular account of how that requirement must be met, namely, by relativizing reasons to what he dubs the motivational set of the agents to which they are taken to apply. Addressing the Kantian, he argues: "Someone may say that every rational deliberator is committed to constraints of morality as much as to the requirements of truth or sound [theoretical] reasoning. But if this is so, then the constraints of morality are part of everybody's S, and every correct moral reason will be an internal reason. But there has to be an argument for that conclusion" (Williams, 44). In effect, Williams's reply endorses Korsgaard's diagnosis that the real issue of contention between the Kantian and the Humean is over the content of practical reason. Where Williams differs is in his insistence that the Humean prevails in justifying the particular substantive account of practical reason he does.

Recall, now, the more recent requirement on practical reasons that Korsgaard defends, what I called the rational guidance requirement. Reports Korsgaard:

I have come to think that there is a problem with thinking of these issues in terms of the internalism requirement. The internalism requirement is concerned only with whether a consideration that purports to be a reason is capable of motivating the person to whom it applies. And I think the real question is not only whether the consideration can motivate the person, but whether it can do so while also functioning as a requirement or a guide. (“Normativity,” 243)

Given that Korsgaard here intends to present a stronger challenge to the Humean, it might seem odd to find some influential contemporary Humean instrumentalists claiming that their view in fact is uniquely suited to explain how considerations pertaining to action might have the requisite feature. Yet, that is just what some contemporary Humeans claim.

Contemporary Humean Instrumentalism about Practical Reason

Many contemporary philosophers continue to regard Humean instrumentalism as the strongest contender on the contemporary field of theories of practical reason. Donald Hubin writes: “Humeanism, it is fair to say, is the theory to beat; perhaps it is even accurate to think of it as the default position” (“What’s Special,” 30). On a familiar gloss, Humean instrumentalists about practical reason hold that all reasons for acting have as their ultimate source the desires of the agent to whom those reasons are properly ascribed and that all transmission of reasons for acting occurs across causal or (certain kinds of) constitutive connections between desire-anchored ends and means to their attainment.³⁴ Moreover, contemporary Humeans appear poised to take on Korsgaard’s rational guidance requirement, going so far as to argue that the Humean instrumentalist is uniquely suited to explain how it is that reasons for acting as the Humean understands them are capable of rationally guiding the agents whose reasons they are.

Among the most prominent defenders of Humean instrumentalism writing today are Hubin and James Dreier. Both Hubin and Dreier argue that instrumentalism’s primary philosophical appeal lies in the special authoritative status of the instrumental principle. As Dreier writes, “The special status of instrumental reason is due to its being the *sine qua non* of having reasons at all.”³⁵ Hubin likewise attempts to set out “what’s special” about Humeanism, though in doing so he decomposes two independent components of the Humean view. Because Hubin offers a more detailed exposition of his view, I focus my attention there.

With regard to the thesis that desires are the ultimate source of an agent's reasons for acting, note first that contemporary Humeans rely on the so-called "desire/belief" model of rational action, a model committed to reducing all reasons for action to desire/belief pairs. Second, as Hubin makes clear in discussing what he calls the Thesis of Desire-Based Reasons, the Humean intends "desire" to be interpreted broadly, to encompass as Hubin puts it, "any positive conative state that might plausibly be claimed to motivate action. In particular, it covers states that a more sensitive psychology would call 'caring about' or 'valuing'" ("What's Special," 32). As Hubin interprets it, the Thesis of Desire-Based Reasons holds that, "[t]he ultimate source of reasons for an agent to act, in the sense relevant to rational advisability and to the rational appraisal of agents, is in the subjective, contingent, conative states of that agent" (ibid.). The general idea behind the Thesis of Desire-Based Reasons is that reasons for acting must be capable of being someone's reasons for acting; they must, that is, be capable of explaining what motivated the agent to act as he or she did. An influential argument from the so-called Humean Theory of Motivation would, if sound, lend support to the Thesis of Desire-Based Reasons. That argument, as first set out by Michael Smith, proceeds as follows:³⁶

1. Having a motivating reason is, *inter alia*, having a goal,
2. Having a goal is being in a state with which the world must fit and,
3. Being in a state with which the world must fit is desiring.

If this argument has a virtue, it is that it commits itself on just what kind of states are admissible as "desires" on the Humean picture. In short, the Humean Theory of Motivation holds that all intentional action is teleological, or goal-directed, and that any teleological, or goal-directed, state of an agent is a desire. These states are alike in having as their object a possible state of affairs and possessing what the Humean describes, invoking a metaphor, as a "world-to-mind direction of fit" (as opposed to the "mind-to-world direction of fit" that marks cognitive states such as belief).³⁷ When the more psychologically sensitive Humeans, such as Hubin, speak of an agent's "caring about" or "valuing something," then, their theory gives those words a certain spin: to care about or value something is, for the Humean, to have a possible state of affairs as one's object of attraction or aversion.

So much for what the Humean means by "desire." What does it mean to say that the Thesis of Desire-Based Reasons is a thesis concerning the *source* of reasons for action? Apparently, what is intended is that desires as the theory understands them account for the authority that rational agents grant Humean reasons for action in their practical thought. As Hubin's statement of the thesis makes explicit, the thesis holds that "the ultimate source of reasons for an agent to act, *in the sense relevant to rational advisability and to the rational appraisal of agents*, is in the subjective, contingent, conative states of that agent" ("What's Special," 32).³⁸

Now, in addition to a thesis concerning the practical authority of desires, the Humean theory of practical reasons embraces a thesis about how such authority is transmitted: reason-giving force is conveyed from desire-given ends to the means necessary to realizing them. Insofar as an agent is instrumentally rational, her desire for a certain end will extend to the means necessary for securing that end (or else, perhaps discovering a stronger aversion to the necessary means, she will abandon the end). As Hubin states it, the Thesis of Pure Instrumentalism holds that “reasons are communicated from ends to means—that he who has a reason for the ends has also a reason for the means” (ibid.). The thesis thus concerns the connections *via* which reason-giving force is conveyed, namely, “across causal, criterial, and mereological connections” (ibid.).

It seems that Humean reasons for acting, on Hubin’s view of them, should fare well in meeting Korsgaard’s rational guidance requirement. After all, on Hubin’s view, the desires on which an agent’s reasons for acting ultimately rest have as their object states of affairs whose features must matter to the agent—precisely because the relevant features are objects of the agent’s desires. What else is to guide an agent on reflection if not her conception of what matters?

Hubin proceeds to argue that the only way in which an agent can remain unmoved by Humean reasons is one that reveals her to violate pure instrumentalism, a principle that Hubin argues is uncontroversial, at least so long as it remains isolated from the Humean’s substantive thesis about the practical authority of desire. Hubin reasons thus:

1. An agent’s valuations [i.e., her Humean desires] “define the agent’s evaluative point of view” (E)
2. According to the Humean, reasons for acting are generated from E by the principle of pure instrumentalism
3. The principle of pure instrumentalism is uncontroversially true
4. Therefore, the point of view from which the Humean makes assessments of the agent’s reasons for acting (and, so, assessments of the agent’s practical rationality versus irrationality) just is the agent’s own evaluative point of view
5. Therefore, on the Humean theory, an agent is not logically free to remain unmoved by the evaluative point of view from which ascriptions of reasons are made. (“What’s Special,” 38)

Hubin claims, on the basis of this argument, that there is something “special” about Humean theories of practical reason in contrast to their competitors:

There is a special kind of practical defect in those unmoved by Humean reasons. They run afoul of pure instrumentalism; whereas those unmoved by other sorts of reasons may simply not be moved by those

features that ground the evaluation of the states of affairs in question.
(*ibid.*)

In effect, Hubin claims that Humean instrumentalism is uniquely suited to avoid what some call the problem of the “alienation of practical reason,” that is, the problem that a theory of practical reason may not be able to answer the question “Why be rational?”³⁹ The question is understood here not as making the incoherent demand for reasons to care about reasons. Rather, it is meant to express the fact that an agent may well remain unpersuaded of the status of the relevant conception of practical reason as a practical ideal. As Kurt Baier claims, “[b]y anchoring reason in desire, by making it the slave of the passions, the theory seems to be in an especially strong position to answer those who press [the ‘why be rational?’ objection]” (194). Hubin, for his part, concludes that “the agent who is irrational in the Humean sense cannot avoid the motivational *force* of our judgment about him by pleading that he does not *care* about the ends in question” (“What’s Special,” 39). The Humean instrumentalist’s charge that an agent violates Humean principles of practical reason—the charge that the agent is practically irrational, as issued from the Humean’s mouth—is in this way, Hubin writes, “unshuggable” (*ibid.*).

What are we to make of Hubin’s claims on behalf of Humean instrumentalism as a theory of practical reason? Let us first consider how his instrumentalism fares with respect to Korsgaard’s *causation is not rational guidance* argument. Recall that Korsgaard suggests there that “the rationality of an action . . . depends upon the agent’s being motivated by her own recognition of the rational necessity of doing the action” (Korsgaard, “Normativity,” 222). In reply to the argument on behalf of the historical Hume, I noted both Hume’s (or, Radcliffe’s Hume’s) focus on practical reasoning understood as reasoning that “precedes and can be causally connected to actions” (Radcliffe, 255) and drew attention to a rich and nuanced psychology of virtuous action that secures the normative status of such reasoning in features other than rational necessity. Neither route of response, however, is a happy one for Hubin’s instrumentalist.⁴⁰

First, in adopting the desire/belief model of action as a model of acting from reasons, Hubin cannot then retreat to a position on which it suffices for a desire/belief pair being my reason that it precede and be causally connected with my action. At least, Hubin cannot retreat to this position while maintaining that ascriptions of Humean irrationality are “unshuggable.” It may not be open for one to be *unmoved* by reasons thus understood but it certainly remains open for one to remain *unconvinced* that they warrant one’s acting in the way they cause one to act. So long as the latter is a possibility, Humean ascriptions of irrationality remain “shuggable” in a way that an adequate response to the problem of the alienation of practical reason is supposed to avoid.

Second, the rational necessity of action is precisely what Hubin is trying to capture in attempting to establish the special import of evaluations of action made from the agent's perspective. On his view, rational necessity just is the necessity recognized from this perspective, as opposed to other perspectives (the moral perspective, say). He writes: "Rational advisability is advisability from just one perspective. Because this perspective is constructed from the agent's own values, it is one to which the agent has a special relationship."⁴¹ Thus, Radcliffe's reply that the rational requirement condition is question-begging is not available to Hubin. Absent a compelling account of the authority of the agent's perspective on her "subjective, contingent, conative states," then, Korsgaard's first argument threatens Hubin's view.

Hubin's understanding of the authority of the agent's perspective on her desires emerges most clearly in response to what I've called Korsgaard's *incoherence of the instrumental principle without normative foundation argument*. Suppose we grant Hubin his claim that the Thesis of Pure Instrumentalism—formulated as it is in terms of the transmission of *reasons* from ends to their necessary means—is uncontroversially true. Korsgaard's second argument nonetheless presses the question whether the Thesis of Pure Instrumentalism in conjunction with the Thesis of Desire-Based Reasons as the relevant thesis about the source of reasons can avoid a dilemma. The dilemma Korsgaard would pose is this: Hubin's Humean either jettisons the Desire-Based Reasons Thesis in favor of some other noninstrumental rational principle, such as one requiring agents to adopt as ends *what they have reason to desire*, or admit that the Humean theory of practical reason is merely descriptive, that is, lacking in critical bite.⁴²

Recall that Korsgaard proposes impaling Hume on the second horn of the dilemma. Her case for doing so turns on a reading in which Hume cannot deny that an agent acts on the basis of her strongest passions (a reading that Radcliffe accepts). In consequence, the only available explanation for Hume in cases where an agent appears not to take the means necessary to her avowed ends is that either she has a stronger aversion to the means or she has made some mistake, for example, mistaken causal reasoning. In the first case, the agent does not violate the instrumental principle because she does end up doing what is necessary to what she in fact most desires. In the second case, her fault lies in a mistake of, at most, theoretical reasoning. In neither case, Korsgaard notes, does the agent make a genuine error of distinctively practical reason.

Now, Hubin denies that an agent's intentional actions always reveal the agent's desires, whether the strongest or otherwise most significant. Although on Hubin's view "to intrinsically value a state of affairs is to be in a state that *typically* motivates action to produce the state of affairs," he defends the possibility of a gap between an agent's intentional actions and what she intrinsically desires. Hubin offers, for example, the case of Amelia, a daughter who says things that provoke

conflict with her mother despite Amelia's sincere desire to avoid conflict with her mother (see "Groundless Normativity," 454). The problem with Amelia, as Hubin first describes her, is that her voluntary, intentional actions (what she says) have consequences that thwart her ends. Interpreting Amelia's case as one where what an agent does in fact thwarts her desire-given ends, Hubin takes himself to avoid Korsgaard's objection that anything an agent does counts as following the instrumental principle on its Humean understanding. Hubin further maintains that the possibility of the gap he defends provides the Humean instrumentalist all the leverage needed to erect a genuinely normative theory of practical rationality. Given Amelia's intrinsic desire for a good relationship with her mother, she has a reason, on Hubin's view, to abandon her current course of action for another better suited to realizing that end. She cannot both endorse the end of a good relationship with her mother and reject any reason to forego saying the things that have provoked her mother. She cannot, that is, without thereby exhibiting instrumental irrationality.⁴³

Even if we stipulate that Hubin's Humean here succeeds in marshalling resources Hume himself lacks, Hubin does not thereby gain a response to Korsgaard's ultimate concerns.⁴⁴ The main problems Korsgaard's second argument presses for Hubin's Humean are these: (1) a problem of whether an attempt to ground the practical authority of reasons in desires, as does the Thesis of Desire-Based Reasons, in fact succeeds, and (2) a problem of whether Hubin's Humean theory of practical reason indeed admits of violations properly understood as nonderivative defects of practical rationality (defects not derivative, that is, of defects of theoretical rationality).

Might Hubin gain ground on these problems by appeal to the kind of considerations we saw in play in equipping Radcliffe's Hume with a response to Korsgaard? I won't rehearse all the elements of Radcliffe's reply here; simply recall that Radcliffe's reply proceeds not by denying that Hume takes agents to act on their strongest passions but by equipping Hume both with a way of rejecting the idea that a pattern of reasoning to a conclusion "that precedes and can be causally connected to [an agent's] actions" does not warrant the title of practical reasoning and with an account of why certain dispositions of such practical thought are virtuous. Hubin's Humean instrumentalist differs in ways that prevent him from dismissing Korsgaard's argument in a similar manner. For one, Hubin's instrumentalist is concerned that the desire/belief pairs that constitute the building blocks of its account of action themselves function as the reasons from which agents act, so that the agent's response to their rational import is central to the theory. Second, Hubin is committed to defending violations of the instrumental principle as possessing a specifically rational normative status in a way that Radcliffe's Hume is not, ready as Hume is on Radcliffe's reading to treat the normative status of instrumental reasoning as derivative from the normative status of his ideal of practical virtue.

Hubin's own reply to Korsgaard's challenge to his version of Humean instrumentalism focuses on interpreting her second argument as pressing what I identify as the first problem above. Here, Hubin replies by boldly embracing the second horn of Korsgaard's proposed dilemma. In doing so, he aims to blunt its point by showing that the possibility of a gap between an agent's action and her intrinsic desires affords his theory all the critical resources it requires. The reply is bold in accepting that the practical authority or normativity of instrumental rationality "is groundless." He writes:

For at bottom, there is a fact—a brute fact—about the agent's subjective, contingent, conative states. And the critics of neo-Humeanism are right to say that, on the neo-Humean view, this fact is not intrinsically rationally appraisable. Their mistake, the neo-Humean contends, is in thinking that it must be. (Hubin, "Groundless Normativity," 466–7)

One need not be a Kantian to find this response deeply unsatisfying. One's disappointment, that is, need not stem from a commitment to defending some formal, noninstrumental principle of reason that would enable the appraisal of agent's final desires. It suffices that this lack of grounding threatens to undermine the purportedly special character of the charge of practical irrationality on Hubin's theory. Defending the special character of failings of practical rationality on his theory, Hubin writes at one point:

The Humean takes irrationality to be a special kind of failing—not a failure to adopt a particular evaluative perspective, but a failure to be motivated by the evaluative perspective one adopts. This means that the Humean analysis gives the diagnosis of irrationality a special place—one that seems plausible but also seems impossible on non-Humean analyses. So part of what makes Humeanism special is that Humeanism makes rationality (and irrationality) special. (Hubin, "What's Special," 41)

The defense here is potentially misleading, which becomes evident once one keeps Hubin's point about the groundless state of the instrumental principle's authority in view. What Hubin calls in this passage the "evaluative perspective one adopts" is, recall, the perspective of the agent's ultimate desires, that is, the subjective, contingent, conative states of the agent. Insofar as it makes sense to speak of the perspective of these psychological states, it is a perspective from which certain states of affairs enjoy special salience in virtue of being the conative states' objects. Hubin's language here of one "adopting" such a perspective misleads, however, if one takes it to suggest that an agent actively *endorses* the perspective provided by her (or certain of her) ultimate desires—so that, one might imagine,

it is an agent's failure to be motivated by an evaluative perspective she endorses that is at issue in failures of practical rationality and provides rational criticism its practical authority on Hubin's account. Hubin has no such account, as his acknowledgment of instrumental rationality's "groundless normativity" makes clear. *But now one may ask, what bars an agent from responding that the perspective on things provided by her desires is but one perspective on things?* Perhaps she endorses another. When Hubin glosses what he regards as, at bottom, brute facts about an individual's subjective, contingent, conative states in the language of caring, valuing, and adopting, he appears to bridge any possible gap between an agent and the evaluative perspective from which Humean assessments of practical rationality issue. On closer inspection however, the appearance fades. The agent's "evaluative perspective" becomes just one perspective among others she might endorse. Likewise, practical irrationality becomes at best one practical defect among others. To be sure, practical irrationality on such a view emerges as a predicament: a state where what one does or intends does not serve one's brute desires. But viewed from some other perspective from which to evaluate those desires themselves, irrationality so understood might in many cases be a "defect" worth embracing.

Consider, in this light, what becomes of Hubin's argument for the "unshruggability" of the ideal of practical reason he defends. The argument's first premise appears now to be false on the interpretation that Hubin must give it. The thesis of desire-based reasons requires that what premise 1 refers to as the agent's valuations be captured, ultimately, by final desires to avoid certain states of affairs and bring about others. If the evaluative significance that acting in some way has for an agent cannot be captured in such terms, then premise 1 is false. Arguably, the evaluative significance that acting virtuously has for virtuous agents cannot be captured in such terms.⁴⁵ In consequence, it remains open to such agents to remain unmoved by Humean reasons and they may do so without either running afoul of pure instrumentalism in its uncontroversial form or pleading that they do not care about their own evaluative perspective. Rather, such agents may point out that the Humean excludes her evaluative perspective as inadmissible from the start. To see that such agents do not, in remaining unmoved by Humean reasons, run afoul of the thesis of pure instrumentalism, consider that such agents no less than others appreciate, insofar as they possess the virtues of prudence and resolve, a reason to pursue the means to their ends.⁴⁶

Does practical irrationality, understood as means/end irrationality, emerge on Hubin's account as an irreducibly practical defect in any case? That is, as a defect not derivative from defects of theoretical rationality? I don't see that Hubin's discussion of Amelia establishes this. What, after all, is Amelia's failure in the case where she says things that have the unintended effect of provoking a mother with whom she wants a healthy relationship? It is natural to describe her case as a case where she is

mistaken about what actions of hers will have the intended effect of fostering such a relationship, that is, as a mistake of causal reasoning. Such mistakes of causal reasoning, even when the reasoning is in the service of action, do not signal irreducibly practical defects in the agents who make such mistakes. With regard, then, to the second problem I suggest Korsgaard's incoherence argument poses for Hubin's instrumentalism, Hubin's theory fails to support a charge of irrationality that concerns defects of practical reason not derivative of defects of theoretical reason.

I noted that one need not be a Kantian to find Hubin's reply to Korsgaard's incoherence argument unsatisfying. It is worth emphasizing this point in order to emphasize that the alternatives of, on one hand, defending noninstrumental, formal principles of practical reason that would enable rational appraisal of an agent's ends and, on the other hand, embracing the grounding of the practical authority of an agent's ultimate ends in brute facts of individual psychology are not exhaustive alternatives. The historical Hume arguably offers an alternative; pursuing contemporary Humeanism in a different direction arguably offers another.

IV. Reframing the Debate

What, after all, is the debate between Humean and opposing theories of practical reason a debate about? In the case of Hume's own historical context, I suggested, one best understands Hume's point to be that of showing his rationalist predecessors that reason as they understand it cannot alone account for our capacity to make and care about moral distinctions among different courses of action. While some would argue that this amounts to a form of skepticism about practical reason, we saw that Hume offers an alternative way of understanding the kind of claim that moral considerations make on how we act. Why suppose that any normative claim on us other than a claim of (narrowly) rational necessity must fail to give morality its due? Perhaps Bernard Williams has it right, after all, when he suggests that the Kantian's aim of securing a charge of irrationality against those who act immorally is but a misguided exercise of bluff.⁴⁷

Transported to the contemporary context, however, the case against neo-Humeans about practical reason (such as Hubin) is not so easily dismissed. There, the nuances of Hume's account of the virtues and vices of character go missing in favor of a desire/belief model of action in the service of bringing about those states of affairs that are the objects, ultimately, of brute desires. So, too, goes the appeal of Hume's ideal of virtue. This difference, a difference at the heart of the distinction between what I earlier referred to as virtue-theoretic and action-theoretic Humeanism, warrants further attention.

I regard Hubin's neo-Humeanism as a variety of the latter, action-theoretic, tendency. Action-theoretic Humeanism gives pride of place to a certain model of the structure and motivation of action and proceeds from there to offer an account

of, in general, reasoning in the service of action and, more particularly, reasoning in the service of moral action. The form of reasoning it countenances is in both cases the same: instrumental reasoning in the service of individual, desire-anchored ends. The evaluation of action informed by such reasoning—evaluation of such action as instrumentally rational or irrational—is end-independent in speaking only to the efficiency of a chosen means for securing a desired end. Whether the instrumentally rational agent is a moral agent is a further question, one requiring the further evaluation of the agent's ends themselves. While the action-theoretic Humean's ideal of rational action thus is not a moral ideal, it nonetheless aspires to be a practical ideal: an ideal according to which instrumental rationality is supposed to be an especially compelling practical excellence and instrumental irrationality the most damning of practical defects.

Radcliffe's interpretation of Hume hints at the possibility of another variety of Humeanism, what I've called virtue-theoretic Humeanism. The virtue-theoretic Humean presents certain patterns of practical thought as constitutive of virtues of character, dispositions of affect and thought that inform and motivate the virtuous agent's action. Such action is directed towards ends whose special normative status is secured not by anchoring them in just any ultimate desires but by identifying them as ends that appeal to those who embody a certain ideal of character. To her account of the motivational psychology of reliably virtuous characters, the virtue-theoretic Humean weds a defense of this ideal of virtuous character, one that provides the charge of viciousness its critical bite.

The resulting virtue-theoretic Humeanism thus offers a comparatively nuanced account of the practical thought of the virtuous and one that meets the two ecumenical criteria I set out for a theory of practical reason:

*Criterion*_{practical reason}: A practical reason is a consideration that counts or weighs in favor of regulating one's intentions (and other judgment-sensitive attitudes) in a certain manner.

*Criterion*_{practical reasoning}: An exercise of practical thought is an exercise of practical reason just in case its violation marks a specifically practical form of defect.

The specifically practical forms of defect on the virtue-theoretic Humean theory just are the defects of character we see in the vicious: imprudence, injustice, and so on. Such a Humean will thus forego an emphasis on practical irrationality as the preeminent practical defect in favor of a view where practical irrationality—understood as the kind of means/end irrationality that typifies the inefficient and lazy—is but one defect of practical thought among others that include imprudence, injustice, and so on.⁴⁸

Now, Korsgaard anticipates what appears to be a similar suggestion for interpreting Hume. She objects to such a reading, however, as follows:

But if Hume took this option [i.e., of treating principles of practical reason as grounded in ideals of practical virtue], it would begin to become unclear why it should matter whether we use the words “reason” and “rational” to signify that normativity [which our moral approval attaches to certain ends] or whether we use “virtue” and “virtuous” or some other words. We will have rescued the instrumental requirement for Hume, but only at the cost of showing that the word “virtue” simply does the work in his account of action that the word “reason” does in his supposed opponent’s accounts. Hume will have been engaging in what he supposedly despises, a verbal dispute. And he will have to grant the central point of this argument, which is that a *normative* principle of instrumental action cannot exist unless there are also normative principles directing the adoption of ends. (Korsgaard, “Normativity,” 233)

One should be careful about just what Korsgaard succeeds in establishing here. As for the historical Hume, the interpretation I have suggested (following Radcliffe’s cue) does not render the dispute between Hume and his rationalist predecessors merely a verbal dispute. On the contrary: interpreted in the way I suggest, Hume presents his rationalist predecessors with an account of virtuous practical thought that shows the necessary role that one must afford to sentiment in any compelling ideal of practical excellence. Normative principles pertaining to our sentiments direct the adoption of certain ends. The virtuous agent’s practical thought accords with such principles. Humean virtue is not, then, Clarke or Wollaston’s “reason” by another name.

Were one to follow the lead of Radcliffe’s Hume, moreover, one might arrive at a contemporary form of Humeanism that embraced the suggestion that we use virtue and vice terms to signify the normativity or practical authority of certain forms of practical thought, a form of Humeanism that is only misleadingly labeled “instrumentalist.” We would do better to allow “instrumentalist” to denote one position in a debate between those concerned to locate the normative status of certain forms of practical thought exclusively in formal principles of reason.

The pursuit and development of virtue-theoretic Humeanism would serve to shift our debate to debate over the forms of practical thought that would govern the kinds of persons we should aspire to be. For the Humean—though not only for the Humean—the sentiments will have a central role in such thought. So, too, will the Humean have something distinctive to say about the normative authority of such exercises of practical thought and the actions they inform. To be sure, the resulting account will not yield an account of practical thought that is

authoritative for all rational agents as such. The Humean's justificatory story will instead aspire to survive the survey of the sympathetic, rational creatures that we are. In this it will aspire to be authoritative for all human agents in virtue of our humanity, if one likes.

In all of this there are likely to remain fairly distinctive points of disagreement in how the Humean as opposed to non-Humean conceives of excellent practical thought and its relation to morality—but those disagreements are not likely to leave the field of options in the theory of practical reason as it is.

NOTES

1 Both neo-Aristotelians and neo-Kantians have been influential in this respect. On behalf of the neo-Aristotelians, see, for example, John McDowell, "Noncognitivism and Rule Following," in *Wittgenstein: To Follow A Rule*, ed. Steven Holtzman and Christopher Leich (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 141–62, and "Two Sorts of Naturalism," in *Virtues and Reasons: Philippa Foot and Moral Theory*, ed. Rosalind Hursthouse (New York: Clarendon Press, 1995), 149–79. For the neo-Kantian view, see, for example, Christine Korsgaard, "Skepticism about Practical Reason," *The Journal of Philosophy* 83.1 (1986): 5–25 (Repr. in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996]); "Kant's Analysis of Obligation: The Argument of *Groundwork I*," in *Creating the Kingdom*, 43–76; and "The Normativity of Instrumental Reason," in *Ethics and Practical Reason*, ed. Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut (New York: Clarendon Press, 1997), 215–54.

2 Compare, for example, the view of practical reasoning defended by Simon Blackburn in his *Ruling Passions: A Theory of Practical Reasoning* (New York: Clarendon, 1998) with the comparatively nuanced view defended in Valerie Tiberius, "Humean Heroism: Value Commitments and the Source of Normativity," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 81.4 (2000): 426–46.

3 Such decoupling is evident, for example, in the work of Donald Hubin I discuss below.

Although I don't discuss here interpretations of Hume that equip him with an account of moral evaluation without, I would argue, fully appreciating his contribution to understanding the practical thought that informs virtuous action, such interpretations can be found in some philosophers' so-called "spectator complaint" against Hume. For discussion of the complaint, and a response on Hume's behalf, see Kate Abramson, "Two Portraits of the Humean Moral Agent," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 83.4 (2002): 301–34.

4 I do not claim that these two trends are exhaustive; neither will I go to any great lengths in the following to defend the distinction.

5 For one typical division of the field, see for example, the introduction to Cullity and Gaut, *Ethics and Practical Reason*.

6 It is worth being clear from the beginning about other limits of the present discussion. First, I restrict myself in what follows to material that post-dates 1970, the date of publication of Nagel's modern classic on practical reason. See Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970). Second, in deciding which among this still quite voluminous literature to emphasize, I have had to forego discussion of material others will judge no less worthy of discussion. My focus is influenced, of course, by my own interests in the topic.

7 Here, I follow T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999). Hereafter, I drop the qualification.

8 Contemporary Kantian constructivists differ from Hume's own eighteenth-century rationalist opponents but the differences are not central to my discussion here.

9 In referring to "formal" standards of reason, I intend a contrast with substantive standards requiring that reasoning have a particular content. Kant's Categorical Imperative (i.e., act only on those maxims you can at the same time will as universal laws) or the instrumental principle (i.e., one who wills an end must will the necessary means) impose formal standards on reasoning in the sense I intend. In contrast, the principle "always maximize utility" introduces the substantive aim of utility maximization as a standard for one's reasoning.

10 Peter Railton, "On the Hypothetical and Non-Hypothetical in Reasoning about Belief and Action," in Cullity and Gaut, *Ethics and Practical Reason*, 53–79. As Railton explains, "On the usual view of things, two agents in the same epistemic situation (same evidence, same background beliefs) would have the same reasons for believing any given proposition, regardless of possible differences in their personal goals" (293).

11 Samuel Clarke, *A Discourse concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion* excerpted in *British Moralists 1650–1800*, ed. D. D. Raphael (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1991), 191–225. For a helpful discussion of Clarke in this context, see Rachel Cohon, "On An Unorthodox Account of Hume's Moral Psychology," *Hume Studies* 20.2 (1994): 179–94.

12 William Wollaston, *The Religion of Nature Delineated*, excerpted in D.D. Raphael, *British Moralists*, 239–58.

13 Among the classic sources for Hume's account of the role of reason in action are his arguments that reason cannot oppose passion in influencing the will (T 3.1.1.5–10; SBN 457–8), that neither passions nor actions represent facts and so are neither true nor false (as are the products of reason) (T 3.1.1.9; SBN 458), that one cannot derive moral conclusions from judgments of relations of ideas or matters of fact (i.e., from judgments of reason) (T 3.1.1.17; SBN 463), that one cannot derive "ought" judgments from "is" (that is, factual) judgments (T 3.1.1.26; SBN 469). References to Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* refer to the Clarendon Edition of the *Works of David Hume*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006). Hereafter, cites to Hume's *Treatise* will be designated T Book.chapter.section.paragraph, followed by the corresponding Selby-Bigge/Nidditch edition page number (ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992)).

14 I deliberately leave room here for the possibility of an anti-rationalist though not skeptical position about practical reasons.

- 15 Jean Hampton, "Does Hume Have an Instrumental Conception of Practical Reason?" *Hume Studies* 21.1 (1995): 57–74, 68.
- 16 Elijah Millgram, "Was Hume a Humean?" *Hume Studies* 21.1 (1995): 75–93. See, especially 80.
- 17 John Broome, "Normative Practical Reasoning," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* Supplementary Volume 75 (2001): 175–93, 178.
- 18 Donald Hubin, "What's Special about Humeanism?" *Nous* 33.1 (1999): 30–45, 30. Emphases in the original.
- 19 A similar, though (I think it fair to say) less influential reading of Hume as a practical skeptic is found in Hampton, "Does Hume Have an Instrumental Conception of Practical Reason?" and in her *The Authority of Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Hampton traces its source to Hume's naturalism.
- 20 Korsgaard's reading of Bernard Williams's position has Williams supposing that motivational skepticism has force independently of content skepticism, as well.
- 21 Contemporary attempts to escape payment for such motivational constraints proceed by treating the so-called internalism requirement on practical reasons as having force against the anti-Humean independently of controversial assumptions about the content of practical reason. Again, Korsgaard ("Skepticism") reads Williams as making one such attempt. I discuss the contemporary analogue in section 3.
- 22 Korsgaard, "Normativity," especially 220–34.
- 23 To be clear: Korsgaard does not mean to suggest that the agent must have the thought that reason requires her to act in such a way. Her recognition of the rational necessity of her action might take the form, for example, of recognizing that her friend's suffering provides a reason for her to do what she can to relieve it. The intended contrast is with being merely caused to relieve the friend's pain by the perception of her suffering—as one might, for instance, by means of some psychological aversion and irrespective of reasons for doing so.
- 24 See T 2.3.3.6 (SBN 416) for the relevant cases.
- 25 For a recent attempt to come to terms with the precise nature of the relevant error requirement, in the context of an argument that Kantian constructivists cannot themselves embrace it, see Douglas Lavin, "Practical Reason and the Possibility of Error," *Ethics* 114 (2004): 424–57.
- 26 Elizabeth Radcliffe, "Kantian Tunes on a Humean Instrument: Why Hume Is Not Really a Skeptic about Practical Reasoning," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 27 (1997): 247–69, 254.
- 27 It is important to stress, with Radcliffe, that Hume does not suggest that the virtuous person, as such, must employ such reasoning in deciding what to do.
- 28 For Hume's discussion of the general point of view, see especially T 3.3.1.25–31; 588–91.
- 29 See here the discussion at Radcliffe, 265.

30 Nicholas Sturgeon, "Moral Skepticism and Moral Naturalism in Hume's *Treatise*," *Hume Studies* (2004): 3–83, 14.

31 In the case of those lacking in virtue, Radcliffe suggests, a "sense of duty" suffices to move them to do what the virtuous agent would do. As she explains, "In these cases, it makes sense to see Hume's view as holding that the sense of duty (one's moral sensibility) disapproves of one's own character and produces the accompanying belief that there are certain traits (virtues) one ought to have" (259).

32 For a relevant interpretation of Hume's account, see again Abramson, "Two Portraits."

33 Williams notes, "In this respect, I have no basic disagreement with Christine Korsgaard's excellent paper 'Skepticism about Practical Reason.'" Bernard Williams, "Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame," in *Making Sense of Humanity and Other Philosophical Papers 1982–1993* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 44n3.

34 This is merely a sketch but one that will gain in detail as we go. Again, Richard Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); David Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); and Hubin, "What's Special" provide examples of desire-based Humeanism, and Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Cambridge: Blackwell Press, 1994), and "The Humean Theory of Motivation," *Mind* 96 (1987): 36–61, an example of a prominent proponent of the philosophical psychology from which desire-based Humeanism gains support. The picture suggested by Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," in *Moral Luck* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 101–13, and "Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame," in *Making Sense of Humanity and Other Philosophical Papers, 1982–1993* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 35–45, likewise lends support to the relevant philosophical psychology. Although I think it is worth distinguishing subjective versus objective forms of Humeanism, philosophical usage typically assumes that Humeanism is committed to a subjective theory of value—on the thought that an objective theory would afford reason the role of assessing ends and, so, afford reason a non-instrumental function (see, for example, Gauthier, 25). On my view, a theory of practical reason grounded in so-called objective ends or values might still warrant the title "Humean" in virtue of other features.

35 James Dreier, "Humean Doubts about the Practical Justification of Morality," in Cullity and Gaut, *Ethics and Practical Reason*, 81–99, 99.

36 Michael Smith, "The Humean Theory of Motivation," *Mind* 96 (1987): 36–61, 55.

37 The thought behind the metaphor is that the constitutive aim of desires is to bring the world into accord with them whereas the constitutive aim of beliefs is to bring them into accord with the way the world is. More prosaically, beliefs aim to represent states of affairs whereas conative states aim to bring them about.

38 If Korsgaard is correct, acceptance of the Thesis of Desire-Based Reasons, on the interpretation necessary for it to give rise to reasons, commits one to a noninstrumentalist principle of practical reason: the principle that the fact that you desire some possible state of affairs gives you a reason to pursue it.

39 For discussion of the problem in these terms, see Kurt Baier, "Rationality, Reason, and the Good," in *Morality, Reason, and Truth*, ed. David Copp and David Zimmerman (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Allanheld Publishers, 1984): 193–211, 193. Baier attributes the phrase to Brandt.

40 I owe thanks to Elizabeth Radcliffe here for urging me to be clearer on the differences in reply to Korsgaard's argument open to her and to contemporary Humean instrumentalists, such as Hubin.

41 Donald Hubin, "The Groundless Normativity of Instrumental Rationality," *The Journal of Philosophy* 98.9 (2001): 445–68, 468.

42 This is how Hubin ultimately understands the proposed dilemma in Hubin, "Groundless Normativity."

43 Hubin goes on to argue for an even stronger position: the Humean instrumentalist can defend a form of criticism of ends themselves, namely, the criticism that there are instrumental reasons for taking up or abandoning certain ends. Hubin returns here to the example of Amelia, who he now imagines as having an instrumental reason to abandon her end of a healthy relationship with her mother. Amelia's case now is one where achieving the end of a healthy relationship with her mother seems hopeless and pursuing it requires so much of her energy that she thereby precludes herself from realizing any of her other ends. In this case, Hubin argues, "instrumental rationality, as understood by the neo-Humean, recommends that Amelia extinguish (to the degree that she can without incurring too high a cost) her intrinsic desire to have a healthy relationship with her mother" ("Groundless Normativity," 457). I take it that the criterion for whether the cost of doing so is too high is whether doing so would require some greater frustration of intrinsic desires. It is not, that is, the sheer *number* of potentially frustrated intrinsic desires that here speaks in favor of Amelia extinguishing her desire for a better relationship but, rather, the *degree of pain* that their frustration would cause as compared with the pain of foregoing a healthy relationship with her mother. This, then, is the way in which what Hubin calls the instrumentally rational scrutiny of ends plays out on his neo-Humean picture.

44 Hubin's understanding of Korsgaard's dilemma admits as much. See Hubin, "Groundless Normativity," especially section 5.

45 For argument that the significance to the virtuous agent cannot be captured in such terms, see Christine Swanton, "Profiles of the Virtues," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 76.1 (1995): 47–72, and Michelle Mason, "Moral Virtue and Reasons for Action" (Ph.D. Diss., University of Chicago, 2001). The failure of Hubin's theory to capture the evaluative significance of the reasons of the virtuous agent remains a problem for those Humeans committed both to the desire/belief model of action and to the claim that what is special about their theory is that the reasons for acting it issues carry a motivational appeal that is "unshuggable."

46 Why, in any case, does Hubin suppose that any fundamentally practical defect must be one whose import is "unshuggable" by the agent? Indeed, the vices of character, understood as practical defects, are noteworthy for disposing their possessors to shrug off just those considerations that matter to the virtuous.

47 See Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," 111.

48 See Kieran Setiya, "Hume on Practical Reason," in "Ethics," special issue, *Philosophical Perspectives* 18 (2004): 365–89, for a recent reading of Hume that equips him with such a pluralistic understanding of the practical defects. For one way that a contemporary Humeanism warranting the title "virtue-theoretic" might go, see again Tiberius, "Humean Heroism." Work pre-dating Radcliffe's that is arguably in a virtue-theoretic vein includes W. D. Falk, "Hume on Practical Reason," *Philosophical Studies* 27 (1975): 1–18, and Annette Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's Treatise* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991).