



Hume on Reason

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One of the main concerns of Hume's Treatise of Human Nature² (T) is the investigation of the role that reason plays in belief and action. On the standard interpretation, Hume is taken to argue that neither our beliefs nor our actions are determined by reason; Books I and III are thus seen as sharing a common theme: the denigration of reason's role in human affairs. Arguing for this view, Kemp Smith claims that "Hume's principle of the subordination of reason to the passions runs through his whole philosophy"³, not merely through Books II and III.

This interpretation of Hume's enterprise presupposes that the faculty of reason whose role in action is discussed in Book III is the same faculty which has been shown not to determine belief in Book I. In this paper I argue that a univocal reading of 'reason' and related terms like 'reasoning' throughout the Treatise has the consequence that there are major internal inconsistencies in Hume's philosophy, cannot account for some important sections of the work, and leads to misinterpretation of the nature of his overall argument. In its place I develop an interpretation which avoids these difficulties and emphasizes the radical nature of Hume's naturalism.

The Argument of the Treatise

Let me begin by reviewing the salient features of the main argument of the Treatise. In Book I, Hume is concerned to show that our most fundamental beliefs -- e.g., about the continued and distinct existence of object, about what we are not presently observing, and in the existence of the self -- are not acquired by reason, but instead by the imagination, influenced by custom and habit. In a typical passage, he argues:

Reason can never shew us the connexion of one object with another, tho' aided by experience, and the observation of their constant conjunction in all past instances. When the mind,

therefore, passes from the idea or impression of one object to the idea or belief of another, it is not determin'd by reason... (T92)⁴

In Book III, and in Book II, Part III, Section III (*Of the influencing motives of the will*), Hume is concerned to show that *reason alone can never produce any action, or give rise to volition* (T414), and *the same faculty is as incapable of preventing volition, or of disputing the preference with any passion or emotion* (T414-415). Hume uses this result in Book III, Part I, Section I, to show that *the rules of morality...are not conclusions of our reason* (T457).

Proponents of the univocal reading of 'reason' would hold that the Treatise thus constitutes a continuous attack on reason, showing that it causes neither our most fundamental beliefs nor our actions and moral judgments. But if this reading were correct, Hume would fail to avail himself of an obvious and persuasive argument for the conclusion he reaches in Books II and III, and in the latter books he would contradict the results of Book I.

Conflict between Book I and Books II and III

If Hume did have the same faculty in mind throughout the Treatise, a strong argument to show that reason does not cause action would be available to him in Books II and III, utilizing the results he has established in Book I. The principal way in which reason would be thought to influence action is by informing us of facts about efficient means to achieve our ends and about the possible effects of actions -- facts about causal relations. Since the conclusion of Book I is that judgments about causal relations do not result from reason, it follows that even if such beliefs did cause action, it would still not be the case that reason caused action.

But Hume not only does not make such an argument in Books II and III, he denies one of its premises -- the claim that beliefs about causal relations do not result from reason -- which was the main conclusion of Book I. In the

later books he asserts repeatedly that reason can cause beliefs about causal relations. For example, in Book III, he says:

...reason, in a strict and philosophical sense, can have an influence on our conduct only after two ways: Either when it excites a passion by informing us of the existence of something which is a proper object of it; or when it discovers the connexion of causes and effects, so as to afford us means of exerting any passion. (T459)

Yet he denies in Book I that reason can inform us of either of these sorts of facts.

In Book II as well, in arguing that reason does not produce action, he assumes that it nevertheless does produce beliefs about causal relations. He says that when we have emotions of aversion or a propensity towards an object,

[T]hese emotions extend themselves to the causes and effects of that object, as they are pointed out to us by reason and experience. It can never in the least concern us to know, that such objects are causes, and such others effects, if both the causes and effects be indifferent to us. Where the objects themselves do not affect us, their connexion can never give them any influence; and 'tis plain, that as reason is nothing but the discovery of this connexion, it cannot be by its means that the objects are able to affect us. (T414, my emphases)

In this passage Hume not only allows that reason produces judgments about causes and effects, he asserts that reason is nothing but the discovery of such connections. So he must grant that reason can influence action by informing us of such relations, while if he used the results of Book I he could deny that reason even had an influence, since reason is not what causes us to have beliefs about causality.

One might attempt to explain the fact that in Books II and III Hume not only fails to utilize but denies the results about reason established in Book I by subscribing to Kemp Smith's view that Book I was written after Books II and III and by claiming that Hume changed his conception of reason in the interim. But even if we were

willing to attribute to Hume an inattention so great that he did not notice such an important inconsistency, the explanation is inadequate because the same conflict occurs between the two Enquiries,⁵ which were written later than the Treatise. In the Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding (EHU), Hume again offers the argument of Book I of the Treatise to the conclusion: *This transition of thought from the cause to the effect proceeds not from reason. It derives its origin altogether from custom and experience* (EHU 54). In the Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals (EPM), Hume repeats the argument of the Treatise that reason cannot produce action, and as in the earlier work, he here says that reason does have a role in influencing action by producing beliefs about causal relations. In Appendix I, he points out:

[I]t is evident that reason must enter for a considerable share in all decisions of this kind [about the usefulness of any quality or action]; since nothing but that faculty can instruct us in the tendency of qualities and actions, and point out their beneficial consequences to society and to their possessor... And a very accurate reason or judgment is often requisite, to give the true determination, amidst such intricate doubts arising from obscure or opposite utilities... [R]eason, when fully assisted and improved, [is] sufficient to instruct us in the pernicious or useful tendency of qualities and actions... (EPM285-6)

Paradoxes within Book I

In addition to the conflicts between Book I and the other Books of the Treatise, and between the Enquiries, difficulties for a univocal reading of 'reason' and other related terms emerge within Book I itself. While Hume usually does not here claim that reason both does and does not produce our fundamental beliefs, paradoxes emerge with regard to related terms, such as 'reasoning', 'inference', and the verb 'to reason'. On a univocal reading of such terms and of 'reason', Hume is committed to the paradoxical view that reason does not produce beliefs, e.g. about causal

relations, but that nevertheless we do reason and our beliefs are the result of such reasoning.

Throughout the Treatise (and in the Enquiry concerning Human Understanding) Hume describes the transition to a belief about the unobserved as an "inference". For example, he says that *after the discovery of the constant conjunction of any objects, we always draw an inference from one object to another...* (T88).⁶ Note that he entitles Book I, Part II, Section VI, *Of the inference from the impression to the idea*.

Hume also describes this transition as one of reasoning. He gives a case of an object *whose existence I infer by reasoning* (T102), considers an example of a man who comes to believe that if he goes forward he will sink and describes the method in which he proceeds in his reasoning to that conclusion, and often talks of our reasoning concerning causes and effects.⁷ In one passage he makes the point emphatically: *We infer a cause immediately from its effect; and this inference is not only a true species of reasoning, but the strongest of all others...* (T97n)

Hume also says in Book I that we reason from effects to causes. For example: *'Tis this principle, which makes us reason from causes and effects...* (T266)⁸. And he claims to have explain'd the manner, in which we reason beyond our immediate impressions, and conclude that such particular causes must have such particular effects. (T155)⁹

In further confirmation of the view that Hume thinks that the transition from the observed to the unobserved is one of inference and reasoning, consider the section entitled "*Of the reason of animals*" (Book I, Part III, Section XVI), in which Hume argues that animals, like us, reason and infer the existence of objects from other objects. Animals' actions, he says, *proceed from a reasoning, that is not in itself different, nor founded on different principles, from that which appears in human nature* (T177). For example, he describes the case of a dog who *infers his master's*

anger...The inference he draws from the present impression is built on experience, and on his observation of the conjunction of objects in past instances. As you vary this experience, he varies his reasoning (T178). It is because such inferences occur that Hume says, no truth appears to me more evident, than that beasts are endow'd with thought and reason as well as men (T176).

A view upholding a univocal reading of such terms, then, attributes to Hume the position that we reason to and infer such beliefs, that such transitions are ones of reasoning, but that reason doesn't produce the beliefs. And it must hold that, despite the fact that Hume concludes that animals have reason from the fact that they make some of the same inferences we do, he believes that in the human realm such examples of reasoning are not produced by reason. It must claim that whatever the faculty is which Hume thinks reasons and infers, it is not reason.

The resolution of the paradox

One might attempt to explain away such paradoxes by holding that Hume was only speaking loosely when he describes such cases as ones of reasoning. Kemp Smith takes this line; in discussing such passages he puts 'inference' in scare quotes, or terms it "so-called causal 'inference'".¹⁰ Thus, when he sums up what Hume has established, he says, "In the final outcome, so-called causal inference is found not to be inference at all."¹¹

The difficulty with this solution is that there are very many passages which have to be attributed to Hume's sloppiness, including the entire section *Of the reason of animals*. This solution would also leave unexplained the contradiction between Book I and Books II and III. It cannot account for why Hume fails to utilize his earlier conclusion that reason does not discover relations of cause and effect to show that therefore, even if beliefs about such relations did cause moral judgments, reason does not produce moral beliefs. It cannot explain why Hume in these

passages says explicitly that reason can discover such relations.¹²

As a general methodological principle of interpretation, rather than attribute to a philosopher widespread sloppiness and contradictory claims it is preferable to find an interpretation which accounts for the data without such assumptions. I think that there is another interpretation of what is going on in these passages which avoids these difficulties. The view I will propose holds that Hume is operating with two different conceptions of reason at various stages in the Treatise. He is arguing that if reason is viewed on the traditional conception, then reason does not determine us to have beliefs, e.g. about the unobserved. But he does not stop with this result. Hume is trying to give an account of human nature based on an examination of how we in fact operate, and when he investigates the processes that go on in us in coming to believe things, he comes to a discovery that we do reason to our beliefs, but what goes on when we reason is not what was traditionally thought to occur. His empirical investigation, then, results in a different understanding of what reason is like, and when reason is viewed according to his interpretation it can be seen that in making the transition from the observed to the unobserved we are reasoning and inferring. I see Hume, then, as rejecting reason under one conception as inoperative in human affairs, but arguing that if conceived in another way, reason does cause belief and influence action. This interpretation, which I develop below, will resolve the paradoxes and explain the inconsistency between Book I and Books II and III.

The Traditional Conception of Reason

In the Treatise Hume is attempting to discredit a particular view of human nature, central to which is a certain conception of the nature and function of human reason. One of the best exponents of this conception was

Descartes, though it was also held by others, especially by the rationalists. It will be useful to explore briefly certain aspects of the Cartesian view in order to explicate what I will be calling the traditional picture of reason.

For Descartes, the ability to reason is a capacity which distinguishes humans from animals. It is a God-given power which makes it possible for us to discern truth. On this view, assent is always a matter of free will; we choose to believe what we do. Therefore, we can acquire beliefs as the result of impulse and conjecture, as well as by reason.¹³ If we acquire a belief not through reason, we are liable to error, and it is merely accidental if our beliefs turn out to be true, since we lack good reasons in support of them. Hence, Descartes points out that impulse is a source of error because "impulse sways the formation of judgments about things on the part of those who their own initiative constrains to believe something, though they can assign no reason for their belief."¹⁴

Reason, on the other hand, proceeds only by means of indisputable arguments with undoubtable premises. Through its use we can see the truth clearly, and therefore, we should only give our assent to propositions discerned in this way. Descartes offers The Rules for the Direction of the Mind as a description of the method of reasoning we should follow in acquiring beliefs. Essential to this method is the requirement that one should "set aside as false" what might be doubted. Hence, in following the dictates of reason, Descartes says, "however probable are the conjectures which render me disposed to form a judgment respecting anything, the simple knowledge that I have that those are conjectures alone and not certain and indubitable reasons, suffices to occasion me to judge the contrary."¹⁵

On the traditional conception, then, we are following the dictates of reason only when we come to believe something because we have "certain and indubitable" reasons to think it is true. If reason is the source of a belief, the

person will satisfy two criteria in arriving at it: he will infer only from premises which he knows to be true, and his reasoning will proceed in accordance with the accepted rules of good inference.

On the interpretation of Hume's argument that I am proposing, one of the conceptions of reason with which Hume is concerned is this Cartesian view;¹⁶ Hume holds that if reason were like this then it would not determine our beliefs about the unobserved or the continued and distinct existence of objects.

Many of the passages in which Hume discusses reason confirm that he had this conception in mind. The most important piece of evidence is the nature of the argument he repeatedly uses to show that reason does not cause these beliefs. He says that if reason (or the understanding, which he often equates with this conception of reason¹⁷) did determine the belief, then it would have to proceed upon a principle which is well-founded, a *just conclusion* (T89); the transition would have to be a *just inference* (T89); and the conclusion *built on solid reasoning* (T90). He then proceeds to show that these conditions aren't fulfilled in these instances, for we in fact have no reason to believe these things (e.g., T139, 265). It is because these beliefs are unreasonable, then, that reason cannot be the source of them.¹⁸

Thus Hume, like Descartes, takes reason under this conception to proceed in accordance with well-founded principles of inference, from premises which are "just conclusions". But unlike Descartes, he thinks we do not have such justification for our beliefs. So if someone were to try to follow Descartes' rules and only believe what reason revealed to be well-justified, Hume thinks that such a person would not be able to have any of the most fundamental beliefs about matters of fact. And since we do have such beliefs, it follows that it is not reason which determines us to have them.

In his negative arguments, then, Hume is attacking reason as traditionally conceived by arguing that it plays no role in our acquisition of fundamental beliefs. But Hume does not stop with the negative sceptical argument. He goes on to explain how we do arrive at our beliefs, and to do so he proposes a different, naturalistic conception of what reasoning is like, based on observations of what goes on when we make inferences.

The Naturalistic Conception of Reason

In the introduction to the Treatise, Hume claims that a theory of human nature should explain *the nature... of the operations we perform in our reasonings* (Txv); he later claims to have given such an explanation (T155). He has determined that these operations are not those described in the traditional conception of reason. On my interpretation, however, he does not conclude that we therefore do not arrive at our beliefs through reasoning. Rather, he rejects the traditional conception of reason and proposes in its place another characterization, where it is a natural process in which we all engage in arriving at our beliefs. The positive phase of the Treatise is an attempt to put forward such an explanation of the nature of reason.

Hume thinks that observation reveals certain clear facts about the nature of reason. First, according to Hume reasoning is something all human beings, including children and *common people*, engage in (T177); therefore reasoning cannot be something so abstruse or subtle that it cannot be attributed to all normal people.

Second, Hume thinks that one can establish (by arguments *so obvious, that they never escape the most stupid and ignorant* (T176)) that animals, as well as human beings, reason and that their method of reasoning is no different from ours. Therefore, he offers a test for a successful explanation of the nature of reason:

Let us therefore put our present system concerning the nature of the understanding to this decisive

trial, and see whether it will equally account for the reasonings of beasts as for these of the human species. (T177)

While Hume thinks his theory meets both tests, the Cartesian model fails on each. Though on the traditional conception all human beings may possess the potential to reason, many if not most lack the method which Descartes advances to enable us to reason correctly. And on his view animals are thought to be incapable of reasoning.

A third characteristic of reason which Hume's investigation reveals is that reasoning does not proceed from well-justified beliefs. Hume has shown that we have no good reasons for our beliefs and that we continue to arrive at them by inference and reasoning nonetheless. This view conflicts with the traditional conception, which requires that we have "certain and indubitable reasons" for believing something if we have acquired it by reasoning. Hume also notes that we do not always reflect on our reasoning in the way that the Cartesian model requires. We do not pursue our reasonings to ultimate principles about the connexion between our premises and our conclusion, which would be required for our beliefs to be justified.

[T]he understanding or imagination can draw inferences from past experience, without reflecting on it; much more without forming any principle concerning it, or reasoning upon that principle. (T104)

Given this view of what naturalistic reason is not, it is possible to determine what it is. Hume argues that there are certain principles and relations of the imagination, involving e.g. custom, which associate and unite ideas. When the transition resulting from the operation of these principles terminates in a conclusion or belief, Hume calls the transition one of reasoning. Thus:

According to my system, all reasonings are nothing but the effects of custom; and custom has no influence, but by invivening the imagination, and giving us a strong conception of any object. (T149)

This strong conception or belief which results from reasoning is simply an idea which is lively and vivacious. Hume thus claims that the distinction between mere conception and belief lies in sensation; one feels different from the other. Similarly, the reasoning process by which our beliefs are acquired is claimed to be a kind of sensation: *reasoning and belief is some sensation or peculiar manner of conception* (T184). So he concludes: *Thus all probable reasoning is nothing but a species of sensation* (T103).

We can get a clearer idea of how Hume conceives of reasoning taking place by considering some of the examples he gives. In the section *"Of the reason of animals,"* he describes several inferences which dogs make, which he thinks are just like those of people:

From the tone of voice the dog infers his master's anger, and foresees his own punishment. From a certain sensation affecting his smell, he judges his game not to be far distant from him. (T178)

These inferences are natural transitions to belief; the dog does not make the inference by arguing that those objects of which he has had no experience resemble those of which he has (T178), which would be required, according to Hume, for his belief to be justified and hence a result of reason as traditionally conceived.

Hume presents another example (mentioned earlier): the man whose journey is interrupted by meeting a river in his path. He

foresees the consequences of his proceeding forward; and his knowledge of these consequences is convey'd to him by past experience, which informs him of such certain conjunctions of causes and effects. But can we think, that on this occasion he reflects on any past experience, and calls to remembrance instances, that he has seen or heard of, in order to discover the effects of water on animal bodies? No surely; this is not the method in which he proceeds in his reasoning. The idea of sinking is so closely connected with that of water, and the idea of

suffocating with that of sinking, that the mind makes the transition without the assistance of the memory. The custom operates before we have time for reflexion. The objects seem so inseparable, that we interpose not a moment's delay in passing from the one to the other.
(T103-104)

We are now in a position to have a fairly clear idea of Hume's naturalistic conception of reasoning. He sees it as a transition between ideas, resulting in belief, which occurs immediately and directly as the result of certain operations of the imagination. It occurs without justification for or usually even reflection on the principles utilized in inferring, and does not proceed from well-justified beliefs. It is thus opposed to the traditional conception on all counts. He concludes:

To consider the matter aright, reason is nothing but a wonderful and unintelligible instinct in our souls, which carries us along a certain train of ideas, and endows them with particular qualities, according to their particular situations and relations. (T179)¹⁹

Advantages of this Interpretation

It is important to note that the univocal reading of 'reason' cannot account for most of the passages described in this section. According to that reading, Hume thinks that reason does not determine us to arrive at our beliefs concerning the unobserved, etc. But in these passages reasoning is described as a transition which does result in these beliefs, and reason is the faculty which produces this transition. For example, at one point Hume even characterizes "reason" as more properly speaking, those conclusions we form from cause and effect.²⁰

The present interpretation explains such conflicts by construing Hume's argument as follows. If reason were the sort of thing it is characterized as being on the traditional conception, then it could not produce any of our fundamental beliefs. But observation reveals that we do reason and infer to our beliefs; however this reasoning is

not like that of the traditional conception. Rather, it is a natural transition to beliefs, determined by certain principles of the imagination.

This interpretation thus accounts for the conflict between Book I and Books II and III of the Treatise (and that between the two Enquiries) by holding that in the sections on action he is using 'reason' in his naturalistic sense; conceived in this way reason is precisely what does produce such beliefs. Then one construes the argument about action and morality in a way which offers a new explanation of the nature of his argument to the conclusion that reason alone does not produce action. Hume accepts that reason does cause beliefs about means-end relations and causal relations, and then argues that nevertheless, it alone cannot cause action or moral belief. Here again the traditional interpretation misconceives the argument. It is reason as conceived naturalistically which is the slave of the passions, and not reason as traditionally conceived which was found to be incapable of producing belief in Book I. The argument is silent about the existence of any faculty of reason as traditionally conceived, and about any possible role in which it could stand with respect to action.

The result of the naturalistic reading is a different conception of Hume's project in the Treatise; it shows that it is misleading to view his work as a thorough-going attack on the efficacy of reason. The position is actually more subtle: reason as traditionally conceived is held to be inoperative even in the production of beliefs; however, reason viewed naturalistically is seen as the major force in belief-acquisition. Even when conceived in this naturalistic way, however, reason is thought to be powerless to produce action by itself. In its subtlety this view is even more devastating to the Cartesian picture of man as a rational animal. Not only does the reasoning human beings use have no connection with good arguments,

34.

but even this kind of reason is unable to cause action without the assistance of the passions.

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1. I want to thank Annette Baier, Thomas Nagel, and Barry Stroud for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this manuscript.
2. David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, L. A. Selby-Bigge (ed.), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1975.
3. Norman Kemp Smith, The Philosophy of David Hume, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1966, 154.
4. He says this in almost the same words again at T97, and with regard to our belief in the existence of external objects at T193.
5. David Hume, Enquiries concerning the Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals, L. A. Selby-Bigge (ed.), Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1963.
6. See e.g. T.86, T97n.
7. See T183, T94, T95, T134.
8. See also T87.
9. And see the passage (quoted later) wherein Hume describes the case of someone who reasons justly and naturally from experience (T223).
10. Kemp Smith, op. cit., 350.
11. Ibid., 372.
12. Even within Book I Hume at one point assumes that reason can have a role in discerning means-end relationships; *We are conscious, that we ourselves, in adapting means to ends, are guided by reason and design.* (T176)
13. René Descartes, Rules for the Direction of the Mind, in Philosophical Works of Descartes (Haldane and Ross, eds.), Dover Publications, 1931, vol I, 44.
14. Ibid.
15. Descartes, Meditation 4, ibid., 176

16. I do not mean to imply that Hume had Descartes in mind in attacking it.
17. E.g., bottom T88.
18. At one point, Hume seems to subscribe to the view that reason could not originate false beliefs, either: *'tis a false opinion that any of our objects, or perceptions, are identically the same after an interruption; and consequently the opinion of their identity can never arise from reason...* (T209). There are also passages in which he seems to assimilate the unreasonableness of a judgment to its falsity; cf. T459.
19. It should be pointed out that this naturalistic conception is probably intended to apply only to what Hume calls "probable reasoning", reasoning concerning matters of fact. The other sort of reasoning Hume describes, "demonstrative reasoning," is concerned with relations of ideas, and seems to involve a comparison of ideas to determine whether one could be conceived without the other. Hume does not present a coherent, well-worked-out account of demonstrative reasoning; he is not much concerned with it. One may well ask, then, whether demonstrative reasoning is also held to be "a species of sensation", and even whether it is thought to result in beliefs, since Hume's account of how ideas acquire the vivacity requisite for belief rests on the kind of constant conjunction available only in probable reasoning. Hume's account is incomplete and I here ignore the problem of demonstrative reasoning.
20. Annette Baier drew this passage to my attention.