



**Book Review: Francis Snare, *Morals, Motivation and Convention***

Beryl Logan

*Hume Studies* Volume XVIII, Number 1 (April, 1992) 113-114.

Your use of the HUME STUDIES archive indicates your acceptance of HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use, available at

<http://www.humesociety.org/hs/about/terms.html>.

HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the HUME STUDIES archive only for your personal, non-commercial use. Each copy of any part of a HUME STUDIES transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

For more information on HUME STUDIES contact [humestudies-info@humesociety.org](mailto:humestudies-info@humesociety.org)

<http://www.humesociety.org/hs/>

**Francis Snare. *Morals, Motivation and Convention*. Cambridge: University Press, 1991.**

Let me begin by saying what this book is not. It is not, nor does it claim to be, a neat exegesis of what Hume has to say about moral obligation, justice, and convention in book 3 of the *Treatise*. Its focus is, rather, on the use and claims of contemporary Humeans (such as Davidson, Williams [p. 2], Hart, Rawls, and Mackie [p. 4]) in what Snare calls their (and his) “smug” acceptance of the doctrines central to book 3: “These [doctrines] provide the *loci classici* of a number of apparently interrelated theses and arguments in moral philosophy, philosophical psychology, social and political philosophy which have become a part of the intellectual baggage of no small number of contemporary philosophers. With only a bit of exaggeration I will call such philosophers and such doctrines ‘Humean’” (p. 1). The doctrine which is central here, to Hume and to Snare, is non-cognitivism and thus sentimentalism.

This is not an easy book to read. It is a complex weaving of intricate patterns of propositions, revisions of propositions, and conclusions from revised propositions into a fabric of theory and application, a weaving that demands careful attention from its reader. It is a very detailed investigation into what Hume can claim consistently and plausibly about sentimentalism and its influence on moral obligation, justice and convention.

While Snare includes himself in the category of the “smug” contemporary Humean, he suggests that he may be a “mole”—he does not accept non-cognitivism and thus sentimentalism with quite the smugness of his fellows nor, following these fellows, does he depart from Hume’s own view of the relevance of sentimentalism to justice and convention.

Part 1 of the book consists of an analysis of non-cognitivism and thus sentimentalism, focusing on the “influence argument”: reason is inert, and can have no influence on the passions; the moral distinctions we do in fact make influence the passions; therefore, the moral distinctions we make are not derived from reason. This is Hume’s non-cognitivism and thus sentimentalism. Snare argues that the only acceptable version of its first premise is: “No action, passion, volition, is in its entirety, the sort of thing that can be either (a) true or (b) false” (p. 72). The next step is to determine whether this premise leads to non-cognitivism. Snare’s criticism of his fellow Humeans is that they “smugly” accept the influence argument as conclusively proving non-cognitivism, while Snare regards other arguments, which he does not discuss, to be more promising.

Snare further departs from the company of contemporary Humeans in part 2 of his book—applications of the theory of sentimentalism, particularly as concerns motivating reasons for acting. Such Humeans, he claims, do not regard sentimentalism as able to provide the theoretical basis for Hume's claims for moral action, particularly with respect to justice, as there is no "continuity" between sentimentalism and a theory of virtue which they regard to be the theoretical basis for Hume's claims in the latter parts of book 3 of the *Treatise*. While Snare will argue for a thesis of continuity between sentimentalism and a theory of virtue, he also sees value in a neutral position, that non-cognitivism is neutral with respect to substantive moral views.

My concern with Snare's book is exegetical; book 3 of the *Treatise* is isolated from the earlier books, and it is not clear that such isolation is valuable or desirable for Snare's purposes. For example, in part 1 Snare does not discuss a theory of belief, important in regard to motivating reasons. This also arises at one point in part 2, in his discussion of the imagination in relation to property. If the imagination is only seen as that faculty that arbitrarily associates ideas, then Snare is entitled to his characterization of the fixation of certain rules as being "arbitrary" (he admits this is his word). However, the imagination also associates on the basis of custom and experience, and in this sense is non-arbitrary.

The appeal of Snare's book for Hume scholars lies in his exacting unpacking of what Hume does and can argue for in book 3 with respect to sentimentalism and motivating reasons in part 1 of book 3, and the work Hume regards these motivating reasons to be able to do or not do with respect to the regard to justice. However, the price to pay for this is readability. With great patience and determination, though, its value may be extracted.

*Beryl Logan, York University*