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Natural Obligation and Normative Motivation in Hume's *Treatise*

TITO MAGRI

My first aim in this paper is to explore the complex relations among motives, rules and obligations that underlie Hume's moral psychology in the *Treatise*.¹ These relations are conspicuous in the artificial virtue of justice, but can also be detected in impartial moral appraisal and in prudential preference and choice.² These issues are systematically linked. Hume's account of the motivation to justice involves a motivation to appraise actions and characters impartially and to act accordingly. And this involves, in turn, a non-instrumental kind of rationality—a capacity for preferring objects according to their real value and for acting according to these preferences. All this may appear surprising, given the standard interpretation of Hume's theory of motivation and value. But what I want to show, by a careful reading of Hume's texts, is that this interpretation stands in need of a major revision. My second, related aim in this essay is to raise and begin to discuss the general and complex issue of how a concept of normative motivation can be made consistent with a naturalistic, Humean framework. In this connection I suggest that our motivation for a rule-constituted activity can be conceived in terms of what Hume calls *natural obligation*. A natural obligation is a natural motive for action which is corrected by some general rule and thus motivates action differently from what it would have done on its natural content (the uncorrected ends and means it suggests to an agent). Conflicts between natural obligations and natural motives can arise not because of their different contents but because of the role played in the former by general rules. The

relative weight attached to natural obligations and to natural motives does depend on the influence of rules and not on accidental causal circumstances. Natural obligation has thus some distinctive features of normativity. The problem then becomes that of explaining this normative dimension within the general framework of Hume's theory of mind and motivation. In the third section of the paper I attempt to solve this difficult problem (which is equivalent to that of how prudential rationality is possible) for an important class of cases. Normative general rules (or prudential rationality) are implemented in the structure of motivation, through the influence of the position in time of objects on imagination and desire. This gives rise to a complex cognitive and causal pattern of preference and action that accounts for the phenomena of rule-constituted behavior and of prudential rationality. By showing how and to what extent natural obligations and rational rules are consistent with a Humean framework, I hope to outline some aspects of a naturalized conception of normativity and reason.

1. The Natural Obligation to Justice

Rules and obligations play a major role in Hume's theory of justice. This is because of a motivational paradox that arises from the contrast between two principles. One is a general motivational constraint on morality: "No action can be virtuous, or morally good, unless there be in human nature some motive to produce it, distinct from the sense of its morality" (T 479). The other is a principle concerning our motives for just conduct: "[W]e have naturally no real or universal motive for observing the laws of equity, but the very equity and merit of that observance" (T 483).³ The two principles seem to be in evident conflict; and this raises a deep motivational riddle concerning justice: "As no action can be equitable or meritorious, where it cannot arise from some separate motive, there is here an evident sophistry and reasoning in a circle" (T 483). Hume looks for a way out of this predicament in telling apart justice as an artificial virtue from the body of our moral attitudes (T 483–484). However, I am not interested in his theory of justice as such, which has been studied by many commentators,⁴ but in the motivational structure expressed by the paradox.⁵

Hume is careful to dispel the impression that it is impossible for human beings to act on a sense of duty: "When any virtuous motive or principle is common in human nature, a person, who feels his heart devoid of that principle, may hate himself upon that account, and may perform the action without the motive, from a certain sense of duty" (T 479). Hume thus allows that the sense of duty can motivate.⁶ But as Hume admits just after the text we have quoted, this explanation presupposes that there is in general an original virtuous motive for a given kind of actions and that the mechanism of moral evaluation is in place and working—which is just what is at issue in

the case of justice. We may also add that it does not by itself explain why some kinds of moral action (like justice) have to be motivated by a sense of duty.⁷

It is important to understand in what sense the paradox of justice has to do with motivation.⁸ The paradox does not arise because of the kind or the content of our motives—so that they should be replaced by motives of another kind or content to make justice possible. Quite the contrary, self-interest, which is the “original motive to the establishment of justice” (T 499), is also excluded from the possible motives of justice as “the source of all injustice and violence” (T 480). Hume can avoid inconsistency because self-interest is a motive for justice only insofar as it is “deriv’d...from artifice” (T 489); or because of an “alteration of its direction” (T 492); or by pursuing its goals in an “oblique and artificial manner” (T 521). Artificial self-interest seems to Hume to be different enough from natural self-interest to motivate a different line of conduct:

But how exactly do they differ? Hume speaks of “natural motives” as: (1) motives that move a person “without any combination or convention with others” (T 532); (2) motives that pertain to the consequences of performing individual actions in individual circumstances (T 497, 533); (3) motives that differently motivate different agents (or the same agents at different times) according to what happen to be their stronger beliefs and desires (T 488–489).

It should thus be clear why there can be no natural motives for justice. The trouble is not with their content but with their naturalness. The basic features of Humean justice are its dependence on coordination and convention; its relation to the consequences of classes of actions, that is, to the consequences of everyone, or nearly everyone, acting in a given way; and its limited responsiveness to what the agents happen to desire or believe. Unless our motives are consistent with these features, they cannot motivate justice. Thus, self-interest can be a motive for justice only if the form it takes is causally dependent on a convention, is referred to consequences of classes of actions, and is an intrapersonally and interpersonally stable motive for acting. If it (or any other eligible motive) fails to conform to these conditions, the motivational paradox of justice arises.

A lack of fit between self-interest as a natural motive and the artificial virtue of justice is to be expected if we keep in mind the role played in the latter by general rules. A natural social virtue like generosity needs general rules only as rules of thumb, to achieve economy of thought in deciding what sort of actions, and in what sort of circumstances, count as generous. Justice needs general rules in a different and more important role. We may express this role by saying that general rules are constitutive of justice, while they only advise about how to behave generously.⁹ There cannot be a practice of justice apart from rules of justice; while there can be generous conduct apart from any rules of generosity. This has obvious consequences for motivation. Generosity

can be supported by (some of) our natural motives because it can have good consequences in any single instance and without any coordination. On the other hand, justice is linked to its consequences (to the “good” which results from it) in a different way. It is only because of the combination of mankind and their joint acceptance of certain rules that just actions are followed by their proper consequences (T 579). But we have a motive to act only in view of the good consequences of our actions. Thus justice as a rule-constituted practice has no appeal for natural motives.

This is both the root and the principle of solution of the motivational paradox of justice. Since justice is a rule-constituted practice, natural motives cannot be adduced for it. But natural motives could take a new direction if, while remaining the same in kind, they were corrected by general rules. It is thus important to see how general rules could correct our motivations. I think that the following suggestion keeps very close to Hume’s text:¹⁰ (A) a general rule corrects our natural motives, so that they come to support a given kind of activity, and is thus constitutive for it, in that it modifies the value that agents ascribe to those of their actions to which these natural motives respond and that fall within the scope of the prospective activity; (B) this is done by modifying what the agents see as the consequences that are likely to result from their performing or not performing those actions; and (C) this is done, in turn, by redescribing those actions as instances of a general class, or of a general practice, of relevantly similar actions.

To correct our motives for an action by means of a general rule is to stop viewing that action as a single event and to start describing it as one of a class of individual or social actions. The consequences of performing or not performing it thus are regarded as the consequences of performing or not performing a rule-defined class of actions—like keeping or breaking a habit or conforming or not conforming to a shared practice. This typically changes our attitudes towards that action, either because we may feel regret for having broken a habit or establishing a bad precedent or because we fear the reactions from others to our unruly behavior.¹¹ Representing actions in this abstract, general way can thus make us move away from natural motivations. In the case at hand, if our self-interest takes into account the consequences of actions seen as instances of a general class (that is, as they come to be described in a conventional rule of justice), our motives can and usually do become different. And in terms of these motives, it may become sensible for us to act justly. The general rule is operating essentially as a cognitive pattern—as a pattern of imagination (we will see more of this in section 3).

Hume employs the concept of a natural obligation to characterize the motives for justice that stem from rule-corrected self-interest. He speaks of “the natural obligation to justice, viz. interest” (T 498); and says that “interest is the first obligation to the performance of promises” (T 523).¹² In both cases he is contrasting natural obligation to moral obligation. Self-interest becomes

a motive for justice insofar as individuals coordinate and converge on viewing some of their self-interested actions under a general description that corresponds to the content of a prospective rule of justice. Each of them consequently comes to regard, and to expect each of the others to regard, his performing the relevant actions as having the consequences of performing an act described as a case of a shared practice. And this actually changes the consequences of their actions. If this coordination is achieved, self-interest may end up motivating actions consistent with that rule of justice and establishing its authority for the concerned individuals.¹³

This is a natural ground for action (in contrast with a moral one) because it is the first, original or natural motive that is required to start the whole mechanism of morality;¹⁴ and because, of course, it has the same content of natural self-interest—advancing the good of the agent. But why call it an obligation? I think that the answer is to be found in the “somewhat singular” (T 497) connection of interest with the rules of justice. Artificial justice can be complied with only because of an artificial interest: if an “alteration” of the “direction” of self-interest takes place, it may come to restrain itself (T 492–493). But nonetheless an alteration and a restraint must take place. It is this fact that is stressed by Hume through the notion of “a natural obligation of interest” (T 568). There is continuity between natural motives and motives for justice. But there is also a split between natural self-interest, which measures advantage with regard to what happens in single cases, and artificial self-interest, which pertains to the consequences of conforming or not conforming to a general rule. Since what we do out of self-interest within the context of a rule is not what we would have done from our natural motives alone, we can be said to be under an obligation.

The natural obligation of justice is Hume's rendering of what it is to have a reason to act justly. The motive for justice is framed by general rules and is opposed to other motives (also of the same kind). This has a clear normative import. Natural obligation is not another kind of natural motive, with a given aim or content, which has to compete with natural motives of different kinds, with different aims and contents. This conflict and this balancing of motives would lack any normative import—and anyway would not solve the original paradox. The outcome of the correction that Hume has in mind is that a motive with a given aim or content motivates a course of action (described in terms of a rule) different from the one it would have motivated as a natural motive. This difference between motives cannot be explained only by their contents and causal connections but by the role of general rules in shaping their structure. This is the source of the normativity of natural obligation, not only in the case of justice but also in the other I will discuss below.

The natural obligation to justice gives the original motive that supports justice without presupposing any moral appraisal of it. But why is the sense of duty our only real and universal motive for justice? In this regard Hume

contends that, within a numerous society, we are prone to lose sight of our rule-corrected interests (T 499). If the consequences of just or unjust actions are not clear, self-interest cannot be expected to restrain itself. Thus a different motive is required in the many cases where natural obligation cannot be depended upon—a motive like the sense of duty. On the other hand, natural obligation can start the mechanism of moral evaluation. Corrected self-interest (an original motive) is approved as virtuous, since it would meet the praise of an impartial observer considering how its actions are beneficial to human society or to the public interest (T 499–500). There is thus an explanation of our moral approbation of justice. But, according to Hume, this is not enough to explain our moral motivation to act justly—especially if that motivation is grounded upon the sense of duty. Moral approbation, moral motivation and moral obligation are not necessarily linked in Hume’s theory. But this is exactly what seems to be the case for justice. To have a full explanation of our motivation to justice we must then explain why our moral motivation to it must be a sense of duty. And to this end, we must look at what Hume has to say about moral appraisal and moral motivation in general.

2. The Natural Obligation to Impartial Moral Appraisal

Justice might appear as a special case of moral motivation. Hume explicitly says that while we conform to justice only because of the sense of duty, we are led to conform to natural virtues by our “natural sentiments of humanity” (T 518).¹⁵ Hume’s words notwithstanding, I suggest that morality in general confronts us with the same motivational problems of justice. More particularly, impartial moral appraisal is motivated by a kind of natural obligation.

Attention should be paid to a general principle connecting motives and moral evaluation:¹⁶

Since no action can be laudable or blameable, without some motives or impelling passions, distinct from the sense of morals, these distinct passions must have a great influence on that sense. ’Tis according to their general force in human nature, that we blame or praise [...] We always consider the natural and usual force of the passions, when we determine concerning vice and virtue; and if the passions depart very much from the common measures on either side, they are always disapprov’d as vicious. (T 483)¹⁷

This principle seems to be put forward by Hume as a complete theory of moral judgement or evaluation. We have and we share beliefs about the natural and usual course and force of passions. These beliefs decide what passions we should expect to motivate a person in a familiar enough context. These expectations give us a sense of the appropriateness of her character and

conduct and make us determine concerning her virtue or vice, according as they are satisfied or not. What is striking is that, when Hume puts himself explicitly to the task of discovering "the true origin of morals" (T 575), he seems to have completely forgotten these ideas. He now advances another theory of moral approbation. According to this theory, we praise or blame characters or mental qualities on the basis of their tendency for the good of society or mankind (T 577).¹⁸ This kind of moral appraisal is explained by means of sympathy—"a very powerful principle in human nature" (T 577). The pleasant or unpleasant feeling of our praise or blame is grounded upon, and explained by, our sympathy with the pleasant or unpleasant feeling of someone's passions, as we infer them to be from their cause in the actions of an intelligent being whose character is the object of the evaluation (T 590–591).

We are confronted with two different views of the structure of moral approbation. The first makes no recourse to sympathetic feelings and to the consequences of motives or characters in accounting for our praise or blame of them. We appraise motives or characters directly because they agree or not with some of our expectations. The second makes us praise or blame them indirectly, according as we experience pleasure or pain in sympathizing with the pleasant or painful passions caused by them. Furthermore, the two principles can lead to different evaluations of the same actions, mental qualities and characters, since the naturally partial course of our passions induces an "unequal affection" for different persons, and makes us regard any transgression of this partiality as "vicious and immoral" (T 488).¹⁹

However, the two principles could be reconciled by regarding them not as complete and competing theories of moral appraisal but as playing different but complementary roles in the process of moral evaluation. Hume aims (although unclearly) at establishing some general correlation between the kind of (non-moral) motives we have to act and the way in which we morally praise and blame actions and characters. Hume seems sometimes to suggest that the general features of our motives are regulative for sympathetic appraisal.²⁰ Sympathy would be blind if it were not directed towards a specific class of persons and if the set of consequences of actions that are relevant for moral appraisal were not in this way fixed. But this depends, in its turn, on our expectations about the motives of the person to be appraised, given their relations to the persons affected by her actions—to the "narrow circle" in which she moves. Acquaintance with the nature of man—that is, with the general course and force of our passions—thus gives direction and scope to sympathy. Had that course and force been different, so would have been our moral sentiments, because we would have sympathized with the passions of other people, affected in other ways by the conduct of the person to be appraised.

But the point can be pressed further. It is not only how we sympathetically appraise characters that is influenced by the usual course of passions. The fact itself that sympathy plays a crucial role in morality depends on what are our usual and strongest motives for action. I am not denying that Hume views sympathy as a natural faculty. But its role in determining our moral praise and blame is not natural. We are not naturally disposed to appraise the motives and the characters of persons through sympathy with the passions of those affected by their actions. The sense of morality based on an "extensive sympathy with mankind" (T 619) is artificial. Hume points out that "all sentiments of blame or praise are variable"; they are contingent on factors like the "nearness or remoteness" of the person who is the object of evaluation (T 582) and of the person with whom we sympathize (T 581); or the "present disposition of our mind" (T, 582); or the tendency of actions or character "to our own benefit, or to that of our friends" (T 583). This strong partiality must be corrected if we are to reach impartial morality on the basis of our sentiments.

On the other hand, corrections of this kind, although "common with regard to all senses" and required to "make use of language" and to "communicate our sentiments to one another" (T 582), have an air of paradox. Since "we can naturally no more change our own sentiments, than the motions of the heavens" (T 517), it seems that we cannot change our appraisal of characters either.

Hume seems to suggest that general rules are constitutive for impartial moral appraisal.²¹ He makes the functional point that some kind of generality is required to avoid contradictions in our judgments of actions and characters and to endorse them in a distinctive moral way. We must praise and blame from "steady and general points of view," leading to a "more stable judgement of things" and independent of "our present situation" (T 581–582). This general point of view can be interpreted as a sort of meta-rule directing us to judge the character of a person by imagining what would be the painful or pleasant feelings of someone affected by the actions that could be expected from a person of such a character—and thus directing us to follow the general rules that make us frame these expectations and feelings. There is a clear rationale behind this meta-rule. To achieve an impartial moral evaluation via the mechanism of sympathy, sympathetic feelings must be disentangled from particular circumstances. But we have also to fix on a point of view that is determinate enough to elicit sympathetic responses. The feelings of the concerned parties offer just this point of view.

This kind of correction cannot be effected by simply regulative rules. It goes against the essential partiality of our natural sentimental responses to actions and characters and their orientation to particular circumstances. A regulative rule tells how to perform a kind of activity that would be performed anyway (though in a different or less perfect way). But no activity of impartial

moral appraisal is possible unless general rules frame our response to actions and characters. This becomes clear if we consider that impartial moral evaluations are typically framed in counterfactual terms.²² First, we must figure out how we would appraise the mental qualities of a person were our situations, dispositions of mind, and interests those of the persons that are directly affected by them. Second, we must in many cases be able to sympathize with non-existent feelings, that is, with the feelings of non-existent persons.²³ In both cases, we must look at the objects of our evaluation under an abstract description, or by following general rules.²⁴ This abstract description is constitutive, and not simply regulative, of our sympathetic response, because only it can justify the counterfactual beliefs (or allow us to check the imaginative representations) that are required for that response to take place. We infer what would be our feelings, were we to take the place of the concerned persons, or what would be the feelings of a class of non-existent persons, in the same way as we infer the behavior of someone with whom we are not directly acquainted—that is, by applying a general rule or abstract description.²⁵

Sympathetic, impartial appraisal is thus a rule-constituted activity and not an unstructured affective response. Therefore it stands in need of an adequate motivational ground. But what can be our motives to engage in it? In this context, Hume turns again to the language of obligation:

We are quickly oblig'd to forget our own interest in our judgments of this kind, by reason of the perpetual contradictions, we meet in society and conversation, from persons that are not plac'd in the same situation, and have not the same interest with ourselves. (T 602)

Extensive sympathy is not as lively as when our interest is concerned, or that of our close friends “nor has it such an influence on our love and hatred. But being equally conformable to our calm and general principles, 'tis said to have an equal authority over our reason, and to command our judgment and opinion” (T 584). Hume even presents sympathetic appraisal as required by reason:

Here we are contented with saying, that reason requires such an impartial conduct, but that 'tis seldom we can bring ourselves to it, and that our passions do not readily follow the determination of our judgment. (T 583)

The “impartial conduct” referred to here is the activity of praising and blaming on the basis of an extensive sympathy. This is evidence enough that Hume thinks that we are in some sense obliged to appraise morally in this way and that this motivation is in some sense grounded on reason. But what kind

of obligation is appropriate here? The motivational structure of sympathetic appraisal is analogous to the motivational structure of justice. We have natural motives driving us to appraise actions or characters that are not different in kind or content from those leading us to impartial appraisal.²⁶ But, just like self-interest in relation to justice, these natural motives must be altered and re-directed if they are to support impartial appraisal. It is in this sense that we can be said to be obliged to it. But this obligation cannot originally be moral. It would be perversely circular to ground our sympathetic praise and blame, which makes us have a sense of morals, on some sense of moral obligation.²⁷ Thus (just as in the case of justice) Hume must be interpreted as introducing a natural obligation as the original motivation to engage in sympathetic appraisal.

From this point of view we can also see how Hume's two principles of moral appraisal play complementary cognitive and causal structural roles. Extensive sympathy can be the source and standard of morality only if the usual and strongest course of our motives is of a certain kind. Sympathetic appraisal is constituted by general rules that correct in an impartial sense our sentiments of praise and blame. But were the common course and force of our passions and motives strongly partial, no such rule could establish itself. As a consequence of the first principle, we would be bound by our motives to strongly partial ideas of vice and virtue. On the other hand, if the usual course of passions and motives is not so strongly partial, the rules constituting sympathetic appraisal can establish themselves. Hume seems to have in mind this possibility when he says that men are motivated to take a common point of view by the desire to "agree in their sentiments and judgments" and to "converse together" in "reasonable terms" (T 581, 591). Impartial moral appraisal is constituted by rules that emerge from a change in our motives and in our shared and reciprocal expectations of motives. There is however an important difference between the natural obligations to justice and to impartial moral appraisal. In the case of justice, natural obligation consists in a motivating passion (self-interest) restraining itself through reference to a general rule. The natural obligation to impartial appraisal is more complex. This kind of appraisal presupposes that the usual course of our passions and motives be corrected by rules, so that the desire to agree in our judgements can arise and our sense of our interest can be modified.²⁸ On this basis we can converge on the constitutive rules of impartial appraisal, which in their turn correct the natural feelings of praise and blame. In the natural obligation to impartial appraisal, thus, two distinct levels of rules and of correction by means of rules are at play.²⁹

On this interpretation, Hume can explain why some general areas of moral conduct (like justice) are motivated by a regard for duty. This kind of motivation is indeed typical for impartial morality. We have natural motives to perform many virtuous actions—loving our children, being grateful to our

benefactor and so on. But the complex cognitive and motivational structure of sympathetic appraisal makes us extend our moral views much further than that. There is thus a systematic lack of fit between the natural motives to virtue and the moral views made possible by extensive sympathy.³⁰ I take this as suggesting (although I will not develop this suggestion) that the general motivation to act in an impartially moral way is that we feel morally obliged: we are displeased at the "neglect, or non-performance" of such an "action, or quality of mind" (T 517). In the case of impartial morality we cannot but find ourselves defective, and blame ourselves, for the lack of the right kind of motives. Avoidance of this blame gives us an indirect, dutiful motive for abiding by impartial morality. Acting out of the sense of duty can thus be a common and important kind of moral motivation. It is required by justice only because justice is paradigmatic of virtue according to the demanding standards of impartial morality.

3. Reason, the Distant Good and Normative Motivation

Hume suggests almost incidentally that impartial moral appraisal is motivated by a requirement of reason, adding that reason must here be understood as "a general calm determination of the passions, founded on some distant view or reflexion" (T 583). Reason motivates us to impartial morality as a practical principle that is distinct from instrumental rationality in that it can assess the value of final objects of choices and is capable of opposing passions and desires (T 415).³¹ I want now to expand on Hume's suggestion, by showing how non-instrumental reason (which I will also call prudential reason) can motivate and how it comes to be implemented in human nature.³²

Reason as a calm passion is a rule-constituted disposition to assess and select ends, emerging from a correction of our natural evaluative dispositions. I think that the sort of calm passion Hume equates with reason is "a general appetite to good, and aversion to evil, consider'd merely as such" (T 417). Reason is thus a disposition to give preference to objects proportionally to their "real" or "intrinsic" worth or value (T 372). This rational preference is founded on a distant view or reflexion that makes us consider them independently from accidental circumstances or from comparison with other objects (T 375, 583). This view is in turn grounded on "custom and practice" which bring to light the principles by which our passions are varied, settle "the just value of every thing," and "guide us, by means of general establish'd maxims, in the proportion we ought to observe in preferring one object to another" (T 294). These maxims shape our preferences as "general rules" that should be accounted for "from the same principles, that explain'd the influence of general rules on the understanding" (T 293).

Rational preferences are thus clearly dependent on rules. To form them we must adopt a general or abstract description of the objects or, equivalently, we must look at what would be the consequences of making a choice in a class of circumstances. The value of objects can thus be assessed independently of current desires and of particular circumstances influencing the imagination. This is their intrinsic or real value. It is intrapersonally and interpersonally stable—except for some catastrophic variation in the circumstances and attitudes of individuals. And it refers to objects not only as instruments but also as potential ends of action. On the other hand, if we did not suitably generalize the representations directing choice, we could act only on the beliefs and the desires that happen to be stronger in a particular case. We could never proportion preference to something like the real or intrinsic value of objects. We would never have in a proper sense reasons for acting. (This does not mean that rational preferences are independent of our natural desires, but that they represent a correction of them.) Rule-constituted, rational preferences typically conflict with uncorrected motives for acting. It is because of this that reason influences action as a requirement—we are under a natural obligation to follow it.

This potential conflict between reason as a calm passion and our natural motives introduces a clearcut distinction between instrumental and non-instrumental rationality. Hume has famously expressed the idea that desires can give an unreasonable turn to an instrumentally rational line of conduct:

'Tis as little contrary to reason to prefer even my own acknowledg'd lesser good to my greater, and have a more ardent affection for the former than the latter. A trivial good may, from certain circumstances, produce a desire superior to what arises from the greatest and most valuable enjoyment; nor is there any thing more extraordinary in this, than in mechanics to see one pound weight raise up a hundred by the advantage of its situation. (T 416)

Hume is not here embracing any deep skepticism concerning practical reason. What we should learn from this famous text is that a purely instrumental conception of reason does not account for the intuitions and the standards of rationality that we usually display in our conduct (and that underlay the sense of paradox that Hume obviously wanted to raise with his examples).³³ Hume sees a basic difference and a potential conflict between preferences responding to real or intrinsic value and preferences expressing desires that just happen to be stronger at a given moment or under accidental circumstances. Thus the efficient choice of means to satisfy our desires is not sufficient to ensure that our conduct will be acceptable for us.

Hume conceives of rational preference along the lines of moral appraisal and justice: in all three cases natural attitudes are corrected by a general,

abstract description of a course of action or of an object of choice. But we are now at a very deep level of this theory. The normative motives for justice and morality depend on the capacity of reason to support and impose upon us the relevant constitutive rules—the rules that suitably correct our natural desires. But the rules of reason must somehow be self-supporting. However, it is in discussing reason in this normative role that Hume raises a deep problem that is of general relevance for any naturalistic conception of non-instrumental rationality. I will discuss it by examining a cause of unreasonable (but instrumentally rational) behavior: the influence of position in time on evaluation and choice. Although Hume's ideas concerning practical reason are not exhausted by this problem, it sheds much light on the complex structure of normative motivation.

Hume considers this cause of unreasonable conduct in Book III of the *Treatise*, at the beginning of the section "Of the origin of government." Hume asks himself how is it possible that men, whose interest cannot be better consulted than by "an universal and inflexible observance of the rules of justice," do nonetheless violate them to an extent which makes it necessary to institute government (T 534). The search for an answer leads him to his most original, complex and satisfying discussion of preference and rationality:

It may be ask'd, how any disorder can ever arise in society, and what principle there is in human nature so powerful as to overcome so strong a passion [viz. interest], or so violent as to obscure so clear a knowledge? (T 534).

Hume's answer is quite surprising. He does not appeal to any violent passion overcoming the calm one that directs us to our greater benefit. He does not cast blame on any particular motive. On the contrary, he points to a general, structural feature of our motivations. It is convenient here to quote him at length:

It has been observ'd, in treating of the passions, that men are mightily govern'd by the imagination, and proportion their affections more to the light, under which any object appears to them, than to its real and intrinsic value. What strikes upon them with a strong and lively idea commonly prevails above what lies in a more obscure light; and it must be a great superiority of value, that is able to compensate this advantage. Now as every thing, that is contiguous to us, either in space or time, strikes upon us with such an idea, it has a proportional effect on the will and passions, and commonly operates with more force than any object, that lies in a more distant and obscure light. Tho' we may be fully convinc'd, that the latter object excels the former, we are not able to regulate our actions by this judgment; but

yield to the solicitations of our passions, which always plead in favour of whatever is near and contiguous. (T 534–535)

It is a natural, structural feature of human motivation that preferences corresponding to intrinsic or real value can be overcome by time-relative preferences which favour objects closer in space or in time.³⁴ Time relativity induces a split between our grasp of the authentic value of objects (grounded on general rules) and our motives to act (which can be unduly influenced by what is contiguous). Proximity in time influences desires and motives without necessarily influencing the appreciation of the value of objects. Thus values and motives come to be divorced; and this is the root of the rational shortcomings denounced by Hume (preferring one's acknowledged lesser good):

This is the reason why men so often act in contradiction to their known interest; and in particular why they prefer any trivial advantage, that is present, to the maintenance of order in society, which so much depends on the observance of justice. (T 535)

Our natural desires can be corrected by general rules so that we come to recognize that object A is of greater worth than object B. But since our desires are also naturally sensitive to proximity in time of their objects, we can find ourselves under a stronger motivational pressure to pursue B than A.³⁵ This explains (within a Humean framework) how it is possible that an instrumentally rational line of conduct may turn out not to be rational after all—and be recognized as such. It is important that the desires leading to our preference for A over B can be the same (in kind and content) as those leading to our preference for B over A. The conflict is not between different kinds of desires, but between two motivational patterns where the same kinds of desires occur. One pattern is shaped by general rules; another is responsive to the position in time of the objects of choice. If we are caught in the second pattern, we may be unable to act according to our rule-constituted perception of values; and our instrumentally rational conduct can become (and be judged) irrational or even absurd.

But time relativity does not only raise practical difficulties for prudential conduct. It also raises a conceptual issue concerning the possibility of non-instrumental rationality. Were our natural desires attuned to the intrinsic value of objects, there would be no need of rules or obligations to make us choose according to that value: we would already be disposed in that sense. Because of the temporal relativity of desires, prudential rationality requires a correction of the natural course of desires. Thus general rules come to be constitutive of this kind of rationality. But these rules seem to be impossible, for the very reasons that make them necessary:

This quality, therefore, of human nature, not only is very dangerous to society, but also seems, on a cursory view, to be incapable of any remedy. The remedy can only come from the consent of men; and if men be incapable of themselves to prefer remote to contiguous, they will never consent to any thing, which wou'd oblige them to such a choice, and contradict, in so sensible a manner, their natural principles and propensities. Whoever chuses the means, chuses also the end; and if it be impossible for us to prefer what is remote, 'tis equally impossible for us to submit to any necessity, which would oblige us to such a method of acting. (T 535–536)

Hume is here facing a very deep paradox of rationality. Non-instrumental reason is a rule-constituted evaluative disposition that is expressed by many of our activities (like abiding by justice and appraising characters impartially). But now it appears that general rules cannot possibly play this constitutive role. There is a conflict between the role ascribed to the rules of reason and their implementation in human nature. And this, within a naturalistic, Humean framework, is sufficient to call into question the very idea of these rules. If it is a basic, structural fact about our nature that we cannot desire or be motivated to act in a given way, we cannot desire or be motivated to frame and follow a rule that makes us act in that way. The time relativity of our natural desires is such a fact. It is because of this fact that we need rules to choose and act on a temporally neutral description of the objects. But just the same fact seems to make these rules inaccessible for us. How can we frame the thought that a remote object is preferable to the contiguous one that we actually prefer, if our preferences are conceptually relative to time? The very idea of a distant, greater good seems to be necessarily out of our reach.

Hume has sketched a solution (and a good one) to this problem, by showing how the general rules of reason are implemented in human nature and how we can acquire the concept of a greater, distant good. The complex of rules underlying prudential rationality is implemented in the same psychological structure responsible for prudential irrationality. Prudential rationality and irrationality stem from the same natural cognitive and motivational root—from the influence of proximity in time on our imagination and on our passions. And rationality is no more difficult to explain on this psychological basis than irrationality is—even if in many circumstances it is practically difficult to prefer and act rationally.

Let us follow Hume's text:

But here 'tis observable, that this infirmity of human nature becomes a remedy to itself, and that the provision we make against our negligence about remote objects, proceeds merely from our natural inclination to that negligence. (T 536)

The correction of our bias for contiguous objects is thus based on the causes of that very bias. Hume's argument is in two steps. The first accounts for the possibility of rational preferences, attuned to intrinsic value and shaped by an abstract description of an object or situation:

When we consider any objects at a distance, all their minute distinctions vanish, and we always give the preference to whatever is in itself preferable, without considering its situation and circumstances. This gives rise to what in an improper sense we call reason, which is a principle, that is often contradictory to those propensities that display themselves upon the approach of the object. In reflecting on any action, which I am to perform a twelve-month hence, I always resolve to prefer the greater good, whether at that time it will more contiguous or remote; nor does any difference in that particular make a difference in my present intentions and resolutions. My distance from the final determination makes all those minute differences vanish, nor am I affected by any thing, but the general and more discernable qualities of good and evil. (T 536)

Non-instrumental reason, as a practical principle which opposes our natural time-relative inclinations by appealing to the general qualities of good and evil, turns out to be grounded on a cognitive limitation—on a weakness of our imagination. We can appraise objects of choice in terms of their general and more stable qualities just because we cannot represent them as they would appear to us if they were closer. Thus we neglect all the accidental features that would otherwise influence our preferences and could give them an unreasonable bent. In this way, it is as if our preferences were corrected by general rules, that is, by a general description of their particular objects. And this is in its turn the same as appreciating objects in terms of their real value. There is no need to assume a specific faculty to account for this fundamental normative capacity. The constitutive rules of non-instrumental reason are conceptually admissible in a naturalistic, Humean framework because they directly realized in a generic structural feature of the natural mind.

Hume has to account for our taking a critical and evaluative stance to our desires—even more, for any such stance being there to be taken. In a consistent Humean framework desires account for values and for motives. How much we value an object is a linear function of how much we desire it. And what we are most motivated to do is to achieve what we desire the most. Now, to be prudentially rational is to be motivated proportionally to the value of the objects; to be prudentially irrational is to be motivated out of proportion with that value. But since desires, motives and values are causally and rationally linked, it seems that they cannot but be proportioned to each other and thus that there is no fact of the matter as to whether an action is prudentially

rational or irrational.³⁶ This is the conceptual problem raised by non-instrumental rationality; and it is at this fundamental level that the sensitivity to time of natural desires is related to it. If the position in time of their objects did not make any difference for our desires, the values we ascribe to objects and our motives to act with regard to them would always be aligned. We would form only one set of preferences, which would be expressive of all the considerations relevant for choosing and acting. In this way, there could not be any ground for impugning or even discussing the preferences we happen to have, which would be fully responsive to our one and only evaluative stance (that of our occurrent desires).

But we have seen that desires are sensitive to time, so that with regard to the same object we can have desires that are the same in kind but which can lead to opposite preferences. In this way we can form two divergent sets of preferences, grounded on a time-induced difference in the way we represent their objects (which in its turn influences our desires). This divergence accounts for the stance we can take in assessing our motives for acting—for our having the concept of a good which is greater than the one we prefer. What we need for this is a gap between values and motives and a consequent split in our grounds for action. Hume's theory of time-sensitive desires provides for this within strict naturalistic constraints. It is to be noted that, had we stronger cognitive resources, we would lack the apparatus required for non-instrumental rationality. A clear, lively grasp of how the objects would appear to us when the moment of choosing comes would prevent us from framing the concept of something as being intrinsically preferable (as opposed to being occurrently preferred). Given the Humean links between desire, value and motivation, the temporal neutrality of desires would be a bane on all but the instrumental kind of rationality. It is also to be noted that the desires expressed by our rational preferences are not of a different kind of content from those expressed by our irrational ones. An intrinsic, natural difference between rational and irrational desires would go against the Humean framework—on any interpretation of it. The difference is drawn not in terms of kind or content, but of causal and cognitive structures of motivation, which give different shapes to desires with the same contents and make them provide normatively different grounds for acting.

The same general mechanism can also explain (and this is Hume's second step) how we form a resolution to act on our rational preferences and stick to it. Since this resolution directly depends on a general structural feature of the mind, which of course is not in need of any motivation, non-instrumental reason is a self-supporting motivational principle. Hume's idea here is that we cannot but notice the inconsistency displayed by our preferences and be displeased at it:

But on my nearer approach, those circumstances, which I at first over-look'd, begin to appear, and have an influence on my conduct and affections. A new inclination to the present good springs up, and makes it difficult for me to adhere inflexibly to my first purpose and resolution. This natural infirmity I may very much regret, and I may endeavour, by all possible means, to free my self from it. I may have recourse to study and reflexion within myself; to the advice of friends; to frequent meditation, and repeated resolution: And having experienc'd how ineffectual all these are, I may embrace with pleasure any other expedient, by which I may impose a restraint upon myself, and guard against this weakness. (T 536–537)

Hume devises a very interesting motivational dynamic to account for our desire to act reasonably—one that anticipates contemporary research in this field.³⁷ First: our desires, given their temporal relativity, are bound to change as we approach the moment of choice. On a distant view we give preference to the object that is in itself preferable. But when we get closer in time to the objects of choice, our preferences tend to shift and incline us to choose the one that is nearer (whatever its intrinsic value). Our preferences are not only temporally relative, but temporally inconsistent. The effect of distance in time on our imagination has ceased; and consequently the grip of reason on our motives has loosened. Second: we cannot but notice that a conflict arises in our desires, putting much pressure on our reasonable decision. Awareness of this conflict and of the shift in our preferences induces regret and gives us a motive to restrain ourselves to our previous, reasonable preferences. Hume is well aware of the difficulties that this restraint presents. He is skeptical about our being able to stabilize rational preferences by means of reflection or repeated resolution and thinks that (for what concerns justice) the only likely expedient is government. But the main point of his analysis is another. It is that, whatever we do to overcome this inconsistency, we do it “with pleasure.” That is, we either have a motive to regulate our conduct directly according to the real value of objects, even in the presence of contrasting desires, or else we have a motive to attempt to change our circumstances, so that this regulation becomes possible. The “regret” at the infirmity revealed by not adhering to our former decisions accounts for our viewing ourselves as required to act in a reasonable way. Thus we are obliged either to prefer rationally or to embrace an expedient that makes us act rationally, on Hume’s own definition of what it is to be obliged: to feel displeased at the neglect of an action (T 517). This is a kind of natural obligation, which implements the influence on our conduct of non instrumental reason.

Non-instrumental practical reason is thus conceptually possible within a Humean framework. As a self-supporting principle of action, it can account generally for our having a wide range of normative motives, like those implied

(in the quite complex way I have outlined) by impartial appraisal and by justice. Of course, much more is required for a full understanding of this part of Hume's philosophy. In particular, we need a fine-grained analysis of the structure of prudential reasons (or natural obligations) that support impartial morality and justice. But what we have seen provides sufficient support for two conclusions. First, general rules and natural obligations enter in depth into Hume's theory of motivation—which has a very complex causal, cognitive and rational architecture. Second, we can make a place, within a Humean, naturalistic framework, for the concept of normative motivation. Natural obligation is a ground of action that has motivational force but also a normative import—a normative import that responds, in the last analysis, to non-instrumental rationality. Natural obligation can thus be seen as a promising Humean, naturalistic rendering of the concept of a reason for action.

NOTES

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1 Citations to David Hume: *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), cited as T; *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), cited as EHU and EPM.

2 For a discussion of this see David Fate Norton, "Hume, Human Nature, and the Foundations of Morality," *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, edited by David Fate Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 168–171.

3 For a recent discussion see Francis Snare, *Morals, Motivation and Convention: Hume's Influential Doctrines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

4 See Jonathan Harrison, *Hume's Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); Robert Sugden, *The Economic Theory of Rights, Co-operation and Welfare* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); Eugenio Lecaldano, *Hume e la nascita dell'etica contemporanea* (Bari: Laterza, 1991).

5 This is also the scope of the excellent discussion of Hume in Stephen Darwall, *The British Moralists and the Internal "Ought"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

6 See Charlotte Brown, "From Spectator to Agent: Hume's Theory of Obligation," *Hume Studies* 20.1 (1994): 30–31.

7 See Terence Penelhum, "Hume's Moral Psychology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, edited by D. Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 135.

8 See Kenneth O'Day, "Hume's Distinction between the Natural and Artificial Virtues," *Hume Studies* 20.1 (1994): 121–141.

9 See Thomas Hearn, "General Rules in Hume's *Treatise*," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 8 (1970): 411, for the notion of "corrective, reflective and directive" rules, which bears some resemblance to constitutive rules. See also Walter Brand, *Hume's Theory of Moral Judgement* (Dordrecht/Boston: Kluwer, 1992), 38–42, for a related distinction between rules of imagination and rules of understanding.

10 "A single act of justice is frequently contrary to public interest; and were it to stand alone, without being follow'd by other acts, may, in itself, be very prejudicial to society.... Nor is every single act of justice, consider'd apart, more conducive to private interest, than to public; and 'tis easily conceiv'd how a man may impoverish himself by a signal instance of integrity, and have reason to wish, that with regard to that single act, the laws of justice were for a moment suspended in the universe. But however a single act of justice may be contrary, either to public or private interest, 'tis certain, that the whole plan or scheme is highly conducive, or indeed absolutely requisite, both to the support of society, and the well-being of every individual" (T 497).

11 For this understanding of general rules, at least in their constitutive role, see Nicholas Rowe, *Rules and Institutions* (New York/London: Allan, 1988); George Ainslie, *Picoeconomics: The Strategic Interaction of Successive Motivational States within the Person* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Robert Nozick, *The Nature of Rationality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

12 See also T 523 and 569.

13 I omit here any discussion of the strategic structure of the practice of justice and of its exact relation to the self-interest of all the parties involved.

14 It is not natural in the sense in which I have spoken before of natural motives. We could say that, in opposition to these natural motives, corrected self-interest is an artificial motive. In my view, natural obligation is the same as what Darwall (*British Moralists*, 296–298) calls "rule obligation," and distinguishes from moral obligation and natural obligation.

15 "Tho' justice be artificial, the sense of its morality is natural. 'Tis the combination of men, in a system of conduct, which renders any act of justice beneficial to society. But when once it has that tendency, we naturally approve of it; and if we did not so, 'tis impossible any combination or convention cou'd ever produce that sentiment" (T 619–620).

16 Páll Árdal, *Passion and Value in Hume's Treatise* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1966), 166–168, discusses this point with some uneasiness. See other discussions in Harrison, 4; Norton, 170.

17 "As every immorality is deriv'd from some defect or unsoundness of the passions, and as this defect must be judg'd of, in a great measure, from the ordinary course of nature in the constitution of the mind; 'twill be easy to

know, whether we be guilty of any immorality, with regard to others, by considering the natural, and usual force of those several affections, which are directed towards them" (T 488); "no action can be requir'd of us as our duty, unless there be implanted in human nature some actuating passion or motive, capable of producing the action. This motive cannot be the sense of duty. A sense of duty presupposes an antecedent obligation: And where an action is not requir'd by any natural passion, it cannot be requir'd by any natural obligation; since it may be omitted without proving any defect or imperfection in the mind and temper, and consequently without any vice" (T 518); "No action can be either morally good or evil, unless there be some natural passion or motive to impel us to it, or deter us from it; and 'tis evident, that the morality must be susceptible of all the same variations, which are natural to the passion.... For as all property depends on morality; and as all morality depends on the ordinary course of our passions and motives; 'tis evident, such a partial conduct must be suitable to the strictest morality, and cou'd never be a violation of property" (T 532).

18 For simplicity, I restrict my discussion to social virtues, artificial or natural. Other grounds would be the usefulness of that character or mental quality for the person possessed of it; or its immediate agreeableness for himself or for others.

19 Some of the problems I treat here are discussed in Annette Baier, "Natural Virtues, Natural Vices," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 7 (1990): 24–34, although in a different perspective.

20 "Being...acquainted with the nature of man, we expect not any impossibilities from him; but confine our view to that narrow circle, in which any person moves, in order to form a judgment of his moral character. When the natural tendency of his passions leads him to be serviceable and useful within his sphere, we approve of his character, and love his person, by a sympathy with the sentiments of those, who have a more particular connexion with him" (T 602).

21 See Thomas Hearn, "General Rules and the Moral Sentiments in Hume's *Treatise*," *Review of Metaphysics* 30 (1976): 61–62.

22 As Árdal (54) very aptly puts it, "only a principle that allows the possibility of sympathy with non-existent emotions will help towards the explanation of moral evaluation." On the general issue of the correction of sympathetic sentiments, see Elizabeth Radcliffe, "Hume on Motivating Sentiments, the General Point of View, and the Inculcation of 'Morality'," *Hume Studies* 20.1 (1994): 37–58.

23 "We blame equally a bad action, which we read of in history, with one perform'd in our neighborhood t'other day: The meaning of which is, that we know from reflexion, that the former action wou'd excite as strong sentiments of disapprobation as the latter, were it plac'd in the same position" (T583–584).

24 See Brand, 119; Brown, 24.

25 "An Irishman cannot have wit, and a Frenchman cannot have solidity" (T 146) is a well-known example of a behavioral inference, drawn (erroneously) in a single case from a general rule or description.

26 Such an appraisal is in effect implied in the theory of indirect passions proposed by Hume in Book II of the *Treatise*.

27 I think that Stephen Darwall commits this sort of mistake when he grounds our willingness to place ourselves in the appropriate conditions of moral judgement on a "desire to act rightly" (Darwall, *Impartial Reason* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983], 57).

28 See Árdal, 119: "the motive for judging things from a special point of view, distinguishing the subjective appearance from the objective reality, is simply convenience." See also John Mackie, *Hume's Moral Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 122–123; Annette Baier, "Master Passions," in *Explaining Emotions*, edited by A. O. Rorty (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 403–423; Annette Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 177–181.

29 The theory of moral judgement proposed by Hume in the second *Enquiry* gives indirect support to the connection between principles of moral appraisal that I have detected in the *Treatise*. The motivational assumptions underlying the two works are of course different (the influence of the usual course of passions does not imply that we feel "a warm concern for the interests of our species," EPM 225). But the idea of an influence of our motives on our distinctively moral sentiments is the same: "We surely take into consideration the happiness and misery of others, in weighing the several motives of action, and incline to the former, where no private regards draw us to seek our own promotion or advantage by the injury of our fellow creatures. And if the principles of humanity are capable, in many instances, of influencing our actions, they must, at all times, have some authority over our sentiments, and give us a general approbation of what is useful for society, and blame of what is dangerous or pernicious."

30 See the excellent discussion in Radcliffe, 47–53 (although I do not think that moral motivation, on an "ideal observer" interpretation of moral judgment, can be approximated by natural sentiments).

31 This is a principle that (Hume says) only in an "improper sense" may be called reason (T 415, 536). But I think that Hume means that it is improper to equate that principle with "thought and understanding" (T 463)—like the rationalist philosophers he is opposing—not that there is any impropriety (or impossibility) in the concept of prudential reason.

32 For a different treatment of this last issue see Marie Martin, "The Rational Warrant for Hume's General Rules," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 31 (1993): 254.

33 For a very interesting alternative reading of this famous text and of the whole of Hume's conception of practical reason, see Jean Hampton, "Does Hume Have an Instrumental Conception of Practical Reason?" *Hume Studies* 21.1 (1995): 57–74. Some of the things I say in this paper should be seen as a response to her interpretation. I disagree with the kind of skepticism about practical reason that Elijah Millgram ("Was Hume a Humean?" *Hume Studies* 21.1[1995]: 75–93) ascribes to Hume—although I am in sympathy with his view that Hume's semantics is connected with his philosophical psychology.

34 Hereafter I will only consider distance in time, both because time has a much stronger influence than space on our sentiments (T 429) and because Hume concentrates on time in unraveling the causes of unreasonableness.

35 G. Ainslie's *Picoeconomics: The Strategic Interaction of Successive Motivational States Within the Person* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) offers an excellent, principled discussion of temporal sensitivity of preferences as the basis for irrational behavior. See also Alfred Mele, *Irrationality: An Essay on Akrasia, Self-Deception and Self-Control* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 84–93, drawing on earlier work by Ainslie, for an account in these terms of akratic behavior. A related problem of rationality is discussed as the “toxin puzzle” in Gregory Kavka, “The Toxin Puzzle,” *Analysis* (1983).

36 This problem about prudential reason displays the same logic that underlies Hume's discussion of unphilosophical probability, and particularly of the difficulty concealed in the distinction of “judgment” and “imagination.” See T 149 and Tito Magri, “The Evolution of Rationality in Hume's *Treatise*,” *The Philosophical Forum* 25 (1994).

37 See Ainslie; Nozick; and Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error* (London: Macmillan, 1994), 217–219.

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