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Hutcheson on Practical Reason

STEPHEN DARWALL

Sections II iii 1 and III i 1 of Hume's *Treatise* ("Of the Influencing Motives of the Will" and "Moral Distinctions Not Deriv'd From Reason") are generally regarded as the classical critique of ethical rationalism and statement of an empirical naturalist approach to practical reason.¹ There Hume famously argues that morality cannot be based on reason since reason cannot strictly oppose or endorse any action or motive. Reason's task is the "discovery of truth and falsehood." It has no power to motivate the will by itself. Rather, its function is to inform us of facts whose practical relevance depends on motivational sources—desires and aversions—that are entirely separate from it. All this is well known. What is less well appreciated is how much Hume's discussion owes to the writings of Francis Hutcheson. Hume presents his conclusions in more skeptical terms, but the main lines of his account, as well as significant details, derive directly from Hutcheson. Indeed, it is difficult to avoid the impression that Hume had Hutcheson's *Illustrations* as well as Hutcheson's *Letters* to Gilbert Burnet on his desk for easy reference while composing these sections.²

Hume's aim in *Treatise* III i 1 is to clear the way for the Hutchesonian thesis he will introduce in Section 2, that moral distinctions derive "from a moral sense." He begins Section 1 with two Hutchesonian observations: (i) moral "perceptions" naturally influence passions, and (ii) without such a natural mechanism all moralizing would be in vain.³ In the next few pages alone we find Hume relying on:

- (a) Hutcheson's distinction between "speculative" and "practical" truths (T 457; L 209);
- (b) Hutcheson's definition of reason as what discovers truth (T 458; L 209; IL i 215);
- (c) Hutcheson's description of two categories of truths reason can discover that are relevant to action: those concerning which objects give pleasure and those concerning "what means are most effectual to obtain such objects" (T 459; cf. 414-416; L 209);
- (d) Hutcheson's claim that actions can neither conform nor be contrary to truth in any way that distinguishes alternatives for choice, and hence that actions can be neither reasonable nor unreasonable in that sense (T 458; L 212; IL i 215-216); and
- (e) Hutcheson's point that any attempt, such as Wollaston's, to understand vice as a kind of falsity cannot explain how there can be degrees of vice and virtue (T 460; IL i 216-217).

Even Hume's example of the fruit desired for its apparent pleasant taste comes from *Illustrations* (T 460; cf. 416-417; IL i). And Hume's famous 'is/'ought' passage contains distinct echoes of Hutcheson's

it were to be wished that writers would guard against...involving very complex ideas under some short words and particles which almost escape observation in sentences, such as 'ought,' 'should'...[and] our English gerunds, 'is to be done,' 'is to be preferred,' and such like. (T 469; L 213)

Treatise II iii 2, "Of the Influencing Motives of the Will," owes yet further debts to Hutcheson. Hume's critique of "talk of the combat of passion and reason" and of the idea that reason alone can motivate closely follows Hutcheson's arguments in *Illustrations* and his *Letters*. And Hume's distinction between calm and violent passions also comes from Hutcheson, as does Hume's claim that however reason-like calm passions may be, distinguishing acts motivated by them from those motivated by violent passions does not, now to quote Hutcheson, "set rational actions in opposition to those from instinct, desire or affection" (IL iv 283). Nothing can motivate a rational agent independently of all "instincts and affections" (IL i 218).

So an important source of Hume's "critique of practical reason" is Hutcheson. But if this is not as well appreciated as it should be, it is even less well recognized that there is a tension within Hutcheson's own account, one that is ultimately reflected in Hume's as well. My object in this essay is to display and explore this tension.

Hutcheson's critique of practical reason in *Illustrations* grew out of his reactions to rationalist objections that Burnet had raised to his theory of the

moral sense as advanced in the *Inquiry*.⁴ Without this stimulus, Hutcheson tells us, *Illustrations* would never have “seen the light” (E xiii). Burnet’s objection was that the good of all is not something we simply happen to desire or, through a contingent moral sense, happen to approve the desire of, but rather an end fitting and reasonable in itself that makes a demand on any rational agent. In response, Hutcheson appears to move to the opposite extreme. Reason has no role to play in dictating or criticizing ends, he seems to say. Any “exciting reason” for acting must be instrumental, showing that an action will advance some end the agent already has. This radical critique departs, however, from the constructive account Hutcheson gives of rational deliberation in his *Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections*. In what follows I wish to explore the differences between these two discussions of practical reason and their respective relations to Burnet’s rationalism and to Hume’s account in the *Treatise*.

We should begin with Burnet. In his second letter, Burnet raises a revealing objection to the distinction between theoretical and practical truths that Hutcheson had drawn in his first letter. Hutcheson’s purpose had been to argue that if reason is “our power of finding out truth,” then practical reason must be the power of discovering truths that are relevant to action. Theoretical truths, he says, concern “the relations of quantities or of any other objects among themselves,” whereas practical truths are about “what objects are naturally apt to give any person the highest gratifications, or what means are most effectual to obtain such objects” (L 209). Burnet replies that the latter truths seem no less theoretical or speculative than the former. Both concern how things *are*, while the practical question facing a deliberating agent is what she *should do*. In order to arrive at a “practical truth properly so called,” Burnet argues, an agent must move beyond any truth about how things are, say, that an action is necessary to achieve some purposed end or to realize some “gratification.” She must also take some such theoretical truth as a justification or *reason for acting*. She must think she *should* act for that reason, that, as he puts it, she is “obliged to act toward such objects.”

Burnet’s objection gives expression to what we might call a *normative theory of the will*, a view common to rational intuitionists such as Samuel Clarke, John Balguy, and Richard Price and to a strand of *autonomist internalism*, as I call it, that included Shaftesbury and Butler, and, later, Kant.⁵ According to these writers, agency involves more than being subject to various desires and aversions and being moved by whichever happens to be strongest. An agent must be able to distinguish between what she is in fact moved to do and what she *should* be moved to do, between what Butler called the “power” and the “authority” of her motives.⁶ The question that faces her as a deliberating agent is not what she *will* do—that is a “speculative” question—but what she has reason *to* do or *should* do. And it is only because agents can

act for their own reasons—for what they themselves regard as normative reasons *to act*—that we can impute their actions to *them* as opposed simply to some motive *in them*.

Thus Burnet is saying that any genuine practical truth must be a *normative truth*. It must concern what a person should or has reason to do. To Hutcheson's proposal that to a person pursuing an end the fact that an action is a necessary means to that end is a practical truth, Burnet replies that "the fitness of means to an end lays no obligation but as the end is reasonable" (L 221). The fact that an action is necessary to achieve an end can provide a reason to take it only if there is some reason to pursue the end.

If Burnet's objection is revealing, so also is Hutcheson's reply. Burnet would not have caviled about Hutcheson's examples of practical truths, Hutcheson says, "had he defined the word obligation" (L 226). This may sound like nit-picking, but it manifests a deep issue between Hutcheson and Burnet. That Hutcheson would have made this reply should have been clear from his earlier letter, if not, indeed, from the *Inquiry*. In the former, Hutcheson considers Burnet's claim that the public interest is an end that is fitting and reasonable in itself and thus one that any rational agent should seek. Hutcheson allows that if advancing the public interest promotes the agent's interest and if, as he thinks we can assume, any (rational human) agent desires his own good, then the public interest can be recommended to the agent on these grounds. He also allows that as we can assume that any rational human agent desires the public interest in some way, the trivial fact that advancing the public interest will advance the public interest recommends the end on this ground. What he is not prepared to accept is that there is some further sense in which a person could have a reason to seek the public interest. His claim is not just that such a thought would be false, but that it would be unintelligible. "For what reason should the public interest be regarded?" he imagines someone asking. "What means that 'should'?" he replies (L 216). If it means, "Does promoting the public interest promote the agent's interest?", its meaning is clear enough. If it means, "Does promoting the public interest promote the public interest?", its meaning is also clear, if uninteresting.⁷

Obviously, Burnet would accept neither reformulation. Both of Hutcheson's proposed substitutions are speculative by Burnet's lights, since they concern how things *will* or *would be*, not how someone *should act*. Burnet's position is that a "practical truth properly so called" cannot be reduced to any proposition concerning natural fact, including facts about which actions will produce pleasure or happiness (what Hutcheson calls "natural good"). That an action will promote natural good is one thing, but that this fact is a *reason* for doing it, a ground for its being what the agent should do, is another. Only the second is a practical proposition; the first is merely speculative.

Now Hutcheson agrees with Burnet that *moral* propositions cannot be reduced to propositions about natural *good*. That is a major thesis of the

Inquiry, after all. But he thinks, as I shall show presently, that moral propositions do concern matters of natural fact. Burnet denies this because he thinks that moral truths are distinctively practical in the irreducibly normative sense I have just mentioned. As we've seen, Hutcheson denies that any such sense exists and, hence, that there are any irreducibly normative truths of the sort Burnet supposes. But it is important to see that Hutcheson also denies that *moral* truths are practical in his (Hutcheson's) own sense. These are subtle points about which it is important to be clear.

Hutcheson's doctrine of the moral sense is meant to explain the existence of simple ideas (which he calls "approbation" and "condemnation") that are distinct from and irreducible to those of natural good and evil and that form the core of all moral ideas. "Moral good and evil," he says, are qualities "apprehended in action, which procur[e] approbation, attended with desire of the agent's happiness," and "condemnation or dislike," respectively (IN intro). This makes moral facts independent of facts about natural good, but still natural facts. All moral facts ultimately concern what qualities of character and human practice "procure" the distinctively moral responses of approbation and condemnation on contemplation.

Hutcheson believes that only motives, "affections of rational agents," (IN I) are morally good or evil in the first instance. But he does accept a derivative sense in which moral sense can recommend actions to "our election" as something to do. Since universal benevolence is the morally best motive, and since someone with that motive aims at the greatest happiness of the greatest number, an action that will actually achieve this end is morally best for an agent to perform. Thus Hutcheson agrees with Burnet that there is a sense in which the public interest is morally fit, namely, that actions that promote this end are morally good *to do*. But he holds that this is reducible to the natural fact that the motive that has this end as its object is one that, as a contingent matter, we are caused to approve when we contemplate it.

What's more, for Hutcheson, *moral truths are not practical truths*. Moral sense makes possible approbation and condemnation, but these, Hutcheson insists, are pleasant and painful perceptions or sensations, not any desire or affection that could motivate action (E 24, 44). As will become clearer when we consider his constructive account in the *Essay*, the only *motives* Hutcheson thinks rational human beings can have concern *natural good* for themselves and others. The fact that an action is morally good, therefore, is not itself a reason for *doing* it, nor does it assert the existence of reasons for doing it. Rather, it is a fact about an *observer's* response to a desire that would motivate it—benevolence. What someone who has that desire would herself take as reasons are considerations of natural good, not of moral good.

Thus it is that in *Illustrations*, when he considers an alternative formulation Burnet offers of a "practical truth properly so called," "it is best that all be happy," Hutcheson replies, "But here again, what means best? morally best,

or naturally best?" (IL i 231).⁸ Burnet cannot intend the latter, since he has already rejected that as merely speculative. But as Hutcheson understands the former, it cannot be a practical truth either.

Recall Hutcheson's remark that Burnet would not have objected to his (Hutcheson's) distinction between speculative and practical propositions "had he [Burnet] defined the word obligation" (L 226). Burnet's complaint, again, was that Hutcheson's examples of practical truths are still speculative, since they don't directly pronounce on what one should do. Hutcheson, however, believes that there are only two clear meanings that 'ought' or 'obligation' can have, at least when these words are not used, as Burnet clearly is not using them, to refer to some positive law or command.

When we say one is obliged to an action, we either mean, 1. that the action is necessary to obtain happiness to the agent, or to avoid misery: Or, 2. that every spectator, or he himself upon reflection, must approve his action, and disapprove his omitting it, if he considers fully all its circumstances. (IL i 232)⁹

"I ought to do something," therefore, can only mean that my doing it is necessary to my natural good or that my doing it is morally good. And of these, only the former is a practical truth. Since Burnet believes that genuine practical truths are not reducible to those concerning natural good, he must think 'ought' has some other relevant meaning. Hutcheson denies, however, that there is any other relevant meaning for it to have. 'Ought'—"that confused word" (IL i 249) is an "unlucky word in morals" (IL ii 251). Writers should be required to substitute clear analyses for such "short words" in their writings (L 213).

This explains why Hutcheson presents the rationalist target of his criticism in *Illustrations* as a "wa[y] of speaking" rather than as a genuine philosophical alternative (IL intro, 213). As he sees it, ethical philosophy is a contest between but "two Opinions [which] seem both intelligible, each consistent with itself" (IL intro, 210, 213). One is the "Epicurean" alternative "revived by Hobbes, Rochefocault, and others of the last century," including Christian theological voluntarists, according to which all desires are reducible to self-love and all approvals are based on the evaluator's advantage (IL Intro, 210). The other is Hutcheson's position, that we have benevolent desires in addition to self-regarding ones and that we have a moral sense through which we disinterestedly approve all benevolent desires in proportion to the extensiveness of their objects. In addition to these two, there are also rationalists, such as Burnet, who formulate their views in ways that "seem to signify something different from both the former opinions" and speak of ends and actions as conforming to or departing from reason, or as being obligatory, in some sense irreducible to Hutcheson's natural and moral good. Hutcheson's

goal in *Illustrations*, however, is to show that there is no such further sense, and hence that such schemes are either unintelligible or reduce to his own.

Since according to the rationalists obligation consists in a demand of reason (see L 224, e.g.), Hutcheson's strategy is to submit this idea to critical scrutiny. "But what is this conformity of actions to reason?" he asks. "When we ask the reason of an action," there are two different things we might be asking (IL i 217). We might be asking about what Hutcheson calls *exciting reasons*—"What truth shews a quality in the action, exciting the agent to do it?" Or we might be asking about *justifying reasons*—what "truth [about the action] express[es] a quality, engaging our approbation?" Hutcheson argues that "all exciting reasons pre-suppose instincts and affections," and that all justifying reasons "pre-suppose a moral sense" (IL i 218). In saying that reason can require an action or end independently of any desire or sense, Hutcheson thinks that the rationalists must be trying to hold either that something can be an exciting reason "antecedent" to any desire or instinct, or that something can be a justifying reason "previous" to a moral sense. By Hutcheson's lights, however, this position is not simply false, but unintelligible. Once it is accepted that reason is "our power of finding out true propositions," it is simply inconceivable that reason alone could make something either an exciting or a justifying reason.

This thought is based on the same "direction of fit" considerations that underlie contemporary "Humean" theories of motivation.¹⁰ "Writers on these subjects," Hutcheson says, "should remember the common divisions of the faculties of the soul" (IL i 219) into two, reason and the will, which Hutcheson defines by their distinctive and correlative functions. Reason aims to "presen[t] the natures and relations of things" as they really are. Its function is representative, to accurately reflect reality—to "accept," as it were, representations that correspond to the facts and reject those that do not, including, of course, facts concerning the naturally good and evil consequences of alternative acts. Will, on the other hand, has no representative function. Its function is "to pursue" and "to shun" (IL i 219), specifically, to pursue and shun alternatives to the extent that reason presents them as producing natural good and evil, respectively. While reason's function is to make representation fit reality, the will's is to make reality fit it, specifically, to produce actions that, as reason represents reality, will actually produce natural good and prevent natural evil. Given these different functions with their respective directions of fit, therefore, it is simply unintelligible that reason alone could make anything an exciting reason, since that requires a faculty that has the direction of fit of will or desire.

A similar argument holds for justifying reasons, although it must be posed in terms of the distinctive function of approbation and condemnation. We should notice first, however, exactly what Hutcheson means by a "justifying reason" and how it differs from what contemporary philosophers call

justifying or normative reasons for acting. For Hutcheson, a justifying reason is a “truth expressing a quality, engaging our *approbation*” (IL i 217, emphasis added). But since the object of Hutchesonian approbation in the first instance is a motive or a performance expressing a motive, justifying reasons must, again, in the first instance, be truths *about* motives or motivated actions and not, therefore, truths that could be reasons for action or motives themselves. What justifying reasons justify is *approbation*—an observer’s response on contemplating a motive or motivated action—not action or an alternative for choice for an agent deliberating about what to do. Thus Hutcheson gives as central examples a justifying reason for approving of “hazarding life in a just war” in the fact that it “evidences publick spirit” and a justifying reason for condemning luxury in that it “evidences a selfish base temper” (IL i 218). As we’ve noted, Hutcheson also accepts a derivative sense in which moral sense does approve of acts “for election,” namely, as what someone with motives that elicit approbation would do. But even this derivative sense does not track the contemporary notion of a normative reason for acting, since it is restricted to grounds of *moral* goodness. Hutcheson plainly thinks considerations of the agent’s own natural good are reasons for her to act, but he would not say that they were justifying reasons, even derivatively.

Justifying reasons are thus tied to the distinctive *observer’s felt responses* that Hutcheson believes delimit the moral sphere: approbation and condemnation. Since by a moral sense Hutcheson just means a “determination of our minds to receive the simple ideas of approbation or condemnation, from actions observ’d” (IN I viii), it is, again, simply inconceivable that something could be a justifying reason, independently of a moral sense.

We can now appreciate why Hutcheson thought the rationalists did not pose an intelligible alternative to those of Epicureanism and his own view. We need not worry about the justice of this charge. Plainly it depends on a conception of reason and its relation to action that rationalists would not accept. Our interest is in how in *Illustrations* Hutcheson minimizes the deliberative role of reason in ways that are in tension with the constructive account he himself offers in the *Essay*.

Strictly speaking, all that Hutcheson’s anti-rationalist agenda requires him to hold in *Illustrations* is that no exciting or justifying reasons can be based in reason *alone*. The power of determining truth, absent other “instincts,” is insufficient to root either justifying or exciting reasons. In particular, reason alone can dictate no ends. And so creatures lacking instincts beyond the power of reason could have no reason to pursue any ends.

At points, however, Hutcheson goes beyond this and seems, at least, to say, not just that nothing can be an exciting reason antecedent to some practical instinct additional to reason, but that nothing can be an exciting reason except in relation to some *end* the agent already has, and, therefore, that there can be no exciting reasons for “ultimate ends.” “As to the ultimate

ends," he writes, "to suppose exciting reasons for them, would infer, that there is no ultimate end, but that we desire one thing for another in an infinite series" (II i 220).

This simply assumes, however, that having an exciting reason for desiring something and desiring it for the sake of some further end are the same thing. This assumption is unwarranted. It is possible that someone could desire something for its own sake and have exciting reasons for doing so, though it still be true that she would not have these exciting reasons unless she had some motivational susceptibilities or "instincts" additional to reason. These motivational susceptibilities could not be the same thing as reason, nor could they be created by reason, but they might nonetheless be *triggered* by reason. Thus, a creature's motivational structure might be such that it can acquire desires or ends through the use of reason. For example, it might lack an abstract desire for natural good, or for its greatest natural good, of a sort that would move it to seek means to this end, but nonetheless be such that when it apprehends, through reason, the prospect of natural good, it then forms a desire for this good, and for the means to it.

Nor is this merely a theoretical possibility. In the *Essay*, Hutcheson says that this is exactly what happens in our own case. "The *calm selfish Desires*," he says, "determine any Agent to pursue every Object or Event known either by Reason or prior Experience to be good in itself" (E 32). In other words, human nature is such that when we come to know through reason or experience that some natural good is in the offing, we acquire some desire to pursue it. Consider such a desire arising through reason, that is, through reason's determination that some natural good can be had. The desire itself will be for the specific natural good. Do we have an exciting reason for this desire? An exciting reason for an action is a quality in the action exciting the agent to do it. So an exciting reason for a desire (or end) would have to be a quality in the object, exciting the agent to desire it (have it as end). Now if all exciting reasons for desires or ends must derive from *further* desires and ends (it being impossible that ultimate ends have exciting reasons), then any exciting reason for a desire for some specific natural good would have to derive from some such further desire or end as the desire for natural good in general, or for the greatest natural good. If that were so, the agent would be moved to desire some specific good by the rational apprehension that having this specific good is a way of achieving good in general, or the greatest good. But Hutcheson specifically denies that this is the way our psychology works.

We need not imagine any innate idea of good in general, of infinite good, or of the greatest aggregate: much less need we suppose any actual inclination toward any of these, as the cause or spring of all particular desires. It is enough to allow, that we are capable of enlarging, or by abstraction, of coming to these ideas: that we must,

by the constitution of our nature, desire any apprehended good which occurs a-part from any evil: that of two objects inconsistent with each other, we shall desire that which seems to contain the greatest moment of good. (E 32)

The human constitution is such that when we apprehend the availability of some good through reason, we come to desire it. The quality in the object, apprehended by reason, that excites a desire for it is simply its specific natural goodness, not that this object will tend to achieve the object of some other desire, such as natural good in general, or the greatest good. So by Hutcheson's lights, there would seem to be an exciting reason for this ultimate desire, i.e., a quality in the object exciting the agent to desire it other than its instrumental relation to some further end. This constitution is itself no part of reason. There could be rational beings who lack it. But Hutcheson does here clearly say that rational *human* beings *do* desire a good they apprehend through reason, without that desire being excited by a reason that depends on some further end or desire.

Similarly, Hutcheson says in *Illustrations* that nothing can be an exciting reason for an agent except in relation to some desire or affection (e.g., IL i 218). If this includes what Nagel calls *motivated desires* (that is, desires that exciting reasons can themselves motivate), or if, what amounts to the same thing, we count as a desire a motivational susceptibility to forming desires (ultimate ends) on apprehending goods, that will be unobjectionable enough and consistent with what Hutcheson argues in the *Essay*.¹¹ If, however, we understand 'desire' more narrowly as what explains current tendencies to seek the realization of its object, then it will be both unwarranted and at odds with Hutcheson's mature psychological theory.

We should turn now to Hutcheson's psychology, as he develops it in the *Essay*. What is most remarkable, in light of his critique of practical reason in *Illustrations*, is the way the *Essay's* psychology embeds a conception of practical reasoning that goes well beyond instrumental rationality and that includes the rational formation of *ends*. This is implicit, indeed, in the *Essay's* opening passage:

The nature of human actions cannot be sufficiently understood without considering the affections...; or *those modifications of the mind consequent upon the apprehension of certain objects or events, in which the mind generally conceives good or evil.* (E 1, emphasis added)¹¹

Apprehending objects as promising (natural) good or evil is part of the function of reason, as we have seen. In order to have what Hutcheson variously calls "desires," "affections," "pure or calm desires or affections," or "will," therefore, a being must form motivational states in response to what its reason apprehends as naturally good or evil. Of course, Hutcheson doesn't

think that reason is sufficient to know natural goods. A creature also requires the sensibilities (Hutchesonian “senses”) necessary for it to have pleasure and some idea of it. Nor are these the only motivations to which human beings are subject. In addition to (pure) desires or affections, we also have what Hutcheson calls “passions,” “violent passions,” or “propensities.” But only pure desires, Hutcheson evidently believes, are *rational motives*. Passions, by contrast, involve a

strong brutal impulse...sometimes without any distinct notions of good...attended with a confused sensation either of pleasure or pain, occasioned or attended by some violent bodily motions, which keeps the mind much employed upon the present affair, to the exclusion of every thing else,...[so] as to prevent all deliberate reasoning about our conduct. (E 29, see also E 43, 63-4)

Hutcheson’s distinction between calm or pure desires or affections, on the one hand, and violent passions, on the other, amounts to a distinction between motivations that are responsive to the agent’s theoretical reasoning about her practical situation and those that arise independently of reason, whose strength is unresponsive to reason, and that tend “to prevent all deliberate reasoning about our conduct.” The former, Hutcheson believes, always have as their objects natural good or the avoidance of evil, whether for the agent or someone else. Hutcheson’s invocation of the classical formula for will, “*appetitus rationalis*” (E 30n; IL i 219), is thus no mere nod to orthodoxy. As he thinks of it, *pure* desire, affection, or will is precisely that form of motivation that depends upon and is responsive to reason.¹³ At one point, he calls it “rational desire” (E 65).

Thus Hutcheson’s position in the *Essay* is that, far from it being the case that reason has no role to play in forming ends, reason is *always* involved in the forming of pure or calm desires, including those for ends. It is our nature that when, through reason, we apprehend the prospect of some natural good for ourselves or others, we tend to desire it. And when we apprehend the prospect of evil for ourselves or others, we naturally tend to shun that. Of course, these desires do not arise through reason alone. So there is nothing in this idea that conflicts with Hutcheson’s rejection of the rationalist claim that reason can dictate ends by itself. But by the same token, reason is not here always instrumental. It is not the case that a calm desire formed through reason is always for some “subordinate end” that is a means to some further “ultimate end.” Hutcheson is quite clear that when, on rationally apprehending the prospect of some good, we come then to desire it, we do not necessarily do so as a means to some further end (E 32). Indeed, for Hutcheson, all calm desires for ends result from the use of reason.

Section II of the *Essay* contains an account of what Hutcheson calls “the natural laws of pure affection.”¹⁴ Taken together, these aim to describe the

phenomenon of fully calm desire, that is, the desire for good and evil “as they appear to our reason or reflection,” without the attendant sensual confusion and violence of the passions (E 29). As befits Hutcheson’s empirical naturalism, these “natural laws” are descriptive rather than prescriptive, at least in the first instance. Nonetheless, they can also be read as providing a naturalist theory of practical normativity, one we might call the *calm deliberation view*.¹⁵

The first two laws define selfish and benevolent (“private” and “publick”) desires, respectively. When taken exhaustively, as evidently intended, they entail a universalistic hedonism (all desires are for the [natural] good of some being or other), not as a thesis about all motivation, but as a claim about human rationally motivating states: the motives of a rational human will.

1. Selfish desires pursue ultimately only the private good of the agent.
2. Benevolent or publick desires pursue the good of others, according to the systems to which we extend our attention, but with different degrees of strength. (E 39)

It is the third law that states the central idea of Hutcheson’s theory of calm desire.

3. The strength of the private or publick desire of any event, is proportional to the imagined quantity of good. (E 39)

The other laws elaborate this basic idea in various ways, making it clear that the strength of calm desire depends on total *net* good or, rather, on total *net expectable* good, and that the value of pleasure depends only on its duration and intensity.

Since it seems obviously false that our desires track total net expectable pleasure as a matter of fact, even when they are preceded by thoughts of obtainable good or pleasure, there is a problem about how Hutcheson means his theory of calm desire to be understood. To elaborate further an example that Hutcheson mentions himself, we may desire the happiness of family, friends, and countrymen out of proportion to its value in the universal scheme, even when the former desires result from rational apprehensions of the good of these “narrower systems.” And a similar remark might be made about temporal perspective in the intrapersonal case. An agent may have a greater desire for some pleasure in the nearer future than for an exactly equal pleasure in the farther future, even though both desires are occasioned by an accurate estimate of the pleasure to be received at the respective times.

Hutcheson does not directly address this problem in the *Essay*, but there are remarks in his *System of Moral Philosophy* that suggest how his answer

might go.¹⁶

When the soul is calm and attentive to the constitution and powers of other beings, their natural actions and capacities of happiness and misery, and when the selfish appetites and compassions and desires are asleep, 'tis alleged that there is a calm impulse of the soul to desire the greatest happiness and perfection of the largest system within the compass of its knowledge. (S 10)

The sense in which the strength of calm public desires naturally varies with total net expectable good, then, is that this is the case when the mind is calm and "attentive to the constitution and powers of other beings." "When upon recollection we present to our minds the notion of the greatest possible system of sensitive beings, and the highest it can enjoy, there is also a calm determination to desire it" (S 50). Likewise, in the intrapersonal case, "there is found in the human mind, when it recollects itself, a calm determination toward personal happiness of the highest kind it has any notion of" (S 50).

This suggests that we should read the laws of calm desire as *embedding an ideal of rational deliberation*. They are empirical generalizations, but about an ideal human deliberator whose deliberations are free of the perturbing influence of passion and appetite (which "prevent all deliberate reasoning about our conduct"), and whose use of reason is ideal, providing her with perfectly accurate representations of all natural goods and evils in prospect, to which she is ideally attentive. Nothing in the rational determination of truth entails that private and public desires of the appropriate strengths will arise from it. But, Hutcheson believes, human beings do have these dispositions, as a matter of fact; we are disposed to the most extensive private and public desires, respectively, "when upon recollection we present to our minds," the most extensive notions, respectively, of our own happiness and of the happiness of all.

Hutcheson has, then, a much farther-reaching account of practical reason than, taken on its own, *Illustrations* might suggest. Reason is no mere instrument to ends antecedently given. On the contrary, reason is itself required to raise the calm affections—most important, "the two grand determinations" of our nature: "one toward our own greatest happiness, the other toward the greatest general good." Moreover, each of these two dominant calm desires, when properly raised by reason, is "capable of such strength as to restrain all the particular affections of its kinds, and keep them subordinate to itself" (S 50). A human being who reasons ideally about his situation will have two dominant desires: one for his own greatest good, the other for the greatest good overall.

This raises the obvious question: How does Hutcheson think a rational human agent weighs reasons deriving from these potentially conflicting

desires? In closing, I shall want to consider this question briefly in relation to the objections Burnet had posed. Before I do, however, we should note how the tensions revealed in Hutcheson's views about practical reason resurface in Hume's *Treatise*. As I remarked at the outset, Hume's account is officially more skeptical than Hutcheson's. There is nothing in Hutcheson to match Hume's rhetoric in the latter's "'tis not contrary to reason" passages (T 416). On the other hand, it is little noted that when Hume discusses cases where desires and actions *do* arise from reasoning, although by reason "directing" "impulses" that are not themselves created by reason, he mentions two different cases that correspond to the two different kinds we have discussed in Hutcheson, and which Hutcheson himself explicitly mentions in his *Letters'* definition of practical truths. The second is the familiar kind of case with which Hume's position is most closely identified, namely, where someone has a desire for some good and discovers by reasoning the means to acquiring it. The first, however, is the same sort of desire for an ultimate end that Hutcheson discusses in the *Essay*: "'Tis obvious, that when we have the prospect of pain or pleasure from any object, we feel a consequent emotion of aversion or propensity, and are carry'd to avoid or embrace what will give us this uneasiness or satisfaction" (T 414).¹⁷ Hume goes on, of course, to say that when judgments of either of these kinds accompany desire or action, it is always only the judgments and not the desires or actions that "speaking strictly and philosophically" that are in accord with or contrary to reason, and then, only by virtue of their being true or false, respectively. It is nonetheless true that Hume includes among the kinds of judgments that lead us to *call* desires and actions rational and irrational, both of those Hutcheson mentions in his definition of practical truths in *Letters*: "what objects are naturally apt to give any person the highest gratifications" and "what means are most effectual to obtain such objects" (L 209).

Finally, if Hutcheson holds that rational deliberation leads, respectively, to the desire for the agent's greatest natural good and to the desire for the greatest good of all, how does he think a rational agent is to balance these when they conflict? The remarkable fact is that Hutcheson's moral psychology does not allow this question even to arise. The question facing an agent who must choose between doing what would be best for herself and what would be for the greatest good of all is, which she should do. Which considerations, those of the agent's own good or those of the good of all, are weightier reasons for acting? As you will recall, this was the form that, Burnet held, distinctively practical questions take. Recall now Hutcheson's reply. When it is not used to refer to some positive law, 'ought' can only mean either (a) necessity to the agent's happiness or (b) what moral sense would approve of.

Suppose an agent could be faced by a choice between A, promising the greatest natural good for herself, and B, promising the greatest natural good

for all. By Hutcheson's definitions, the agent prudentially ought to do A and morally ought to do B. (She morally ought to do B because she morally ought to have a motive [universal benevolence] that would dictate doing B.) But this appears to leave the deliberative problem of what to do unresolved. Should she do what she prudentially ought? Or should she do what she morally ought? Hutcheson's position appears to be that there is no clear sense of 'should' that allows these questions to arise in these terms.

NOTES

This paper was presented at the December 1995 meetings of the Eastern Division meetings of the American Philosophical Association. The session, including a paper by Kenneth Winkler, was held to commemorate the tercentenary of Francis Hutcheson's birth, more or less. I am indebted to members of the audience and to an anonymous referee for *Hume Studies* for many helpful comments.

1 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978); hereafter cited as T.

2 *Letters Between the Late Mr. Gilbert Burnet and Mr. Hutchinson, Concerning the True Foundation of Virtue or Moral Goodness. Formerly published in the London Journal. To which is added, a Preface and a Postscript, wrote by Mr. Burnet some time before his Death* (London, 1735). This is appended to Peach's edition of *Illustrations*; page references to this edition will be cited in the text as L. Francis Hutcheson, *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections. With Illustrations on the Moral Sense* (London, 1st ed., 1728; "third" edition, 1742). In addition to facsimile editions, there is also a contemporary edition of *Illustrations* edited by Bernard Peach (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971). References to the *Essay* will be to page numbers of the 1742 edition, cited in the text as E. References to *Illustrations* will be to the same edition, cited as IL, followed by section numbers to ease comparison with Peach's edition, followed by 1742 edition page numbers.

I discuss Hume's debt to Hutcheson in the initial presentation of his moral sentimentalism in T III i 2, and tensions between this and other aspects of his ideas that depart from Hutcheson in my "Hume and the Invention of Utilitarianism," in M. A. Stewart and John Wright, eds., *Hume and Hume's Connexions* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), 58-82.

3 *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue, in Two Treatises, I. Concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony, Design, II. Concerning Moral Good and Evil*, 5th ed. revised (London, 1753). This edition, published after Hutcheson's death, incorporates the corrections that were collected at the end of the fourth edition (1738), which was the last edition published during Hutcheson's lifetime. References will be to section and subsection number of this edition, thus: IN I vii-viii and IN IV vi.

The influence of moral sense (or sentiment) on passions and actions is

indirect for both Hutcheson and Hume. I discuss this in *The British Moralists and the Internal 'Ought': 1640-1740* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 223-237, 303-306. See also Charlotte Brown, "Is Hume an Internalist?" *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 26 (1988): 69-87.

4 Burnet's objections were raised in letters written to the *London Journal* following the publication of the *Inquiry* in 1725 (later collected and published in *Letters*).

5 Autonomist internalism is the view that what it is to be under an 'ought' is for it to be the case that the exercise of autonomous practical thinking would give rise to a conclusive motive for so acting. I describe this tradition in *The British Moralists and the Internal 'Ought'*.

6 Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel* (London, 1726), II 14.

7 Note that in the *Illustrations*, Hutcheson says that talk of 'obligation' is reducible, not to that of the agent's or the public interest, but to that of the agent's interest or moral approbation (moral good). (II i 232) But he also there insists that the latter truths are not practical truths. More about this complication below.

8 This formulation derives from Cumberland. For a discussion, see *The British Moralists and the Internal 'Ought'*, chap. 4.

9 See note 7; also, compare Hume on the natural and moral obligation to justice at T 498.

10 See, for example, Michael Smith, "The Humean Theory of Motivation," *Mind* 96 (1987): 36-61; and I. L. Humberstone, "Direction of Fit" *Mind* 101 (1992): 59-83.

11 Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 29-30.

12 I omit "and passions" after "affections" since Hutcheson more usually reserves "desire" and "affection" for the "modification of mind" he here describes, and sometimes uses "passion" to refer more particularly to "violent" motivations, which are accompanied by strong current sensations that distract from deliberation, and which he distinguishes from desires and affections.

13 Consider in this connection Hutcheson's rejection of Locke's theory that desire is a kind of uneasiness: "the simple idea of desire is different from that of pain of any kind, or from any sensation whatsoever" (E 44).

14 The following draws on *The British Moralists and the Internal 'Ought'*, 226-228.

15 For a contemporary version of this position, see Richard Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979). I discuss the development of this view in Cumberland and Hutcheson in *The British Moralists and the Internal 'Ought'*.

16 Francis Hutcheson, *A System of Moral Philosophy*, 2 vols. (Glasgow: Robert Foulis, 1747); cited hereafter as S.

17 For further discussion see Nicholas Sturgeon, "Hume on Reason and Passion," unpublished manuscript. It is, however, important for Hume that

this desire or affection is a feeling, whereas, for Hutcheson feeling is not intrinsic to desires and aversions. I discuss this aspect of Hume's views in "Hume's Cutting Edge Moral Psychology: What We are Learning About Sympathy's Devilish Details," presented at the 22nd International Hume Conference in Park City, Utah, July 1995.

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