



**Simon Blackburn. *Ruling Passions: A Theory of Practical Reasoning***

Michelle Mason

*Hume Studies* Volume XXIV, Number 2 (November, 1998) 367-371.

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

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

HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the HUME STUDIES archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Each copy of any part of a HUME STUDIES transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

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

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

## Book Reviews

SIMON BLACKBURN. *Ruling Passions: A Theory of Practical Reasoning*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. vii + 334 pages. ISBN 0198247850 US \$29.95 cloth.

*Ruling Passions* is Simon Blackburn's answer to those who doubt that the quasi-realism for which he is best known can offer all we want in an ethical theory. Blackburn is keenly aware that his quasi-realism "smells of sulphur" to some (vi). By taking ethical judgments to be expressions of attitudes rather than apprehensions of moral facts or dictates of reason, doesn't quasi-realism threaten to corrode our confidence in the authority of those judgments? Blackburn's strategy is to show that it isn't so builds on his previous work to defend what he advertises as a theory of practical reasoning. The theory attempts to ground decisions about the regulation of our conduct in our sentimental natures while underwriting an ethics that escapes relativist threats and supports categorical ethical demands, features typically regarded as the property of the quasi-realist's more metaphysically suspect opponents.

Although presented with the flair and wit that distinguish his work, this book requires of the reader more effort than one might have hoped necessary to bring Blackburn's theory into view. That said, Chapters 1, 3, and 7-9 prove most central for understanding Blackburn's positive position. The main components of his position are: (i) an "input/output" (5) model of ethical sensibility, where inputs are representations of actions, situations, or characters as having certain nonevaluative properties and outputs are attitudes, emotions, or pressures on attitudes formed in response to such input; (ii) an expressivist account of evaluative discourse and thought that interprets ethical judgments as, in propositional disguise, expressions of those "practical states" (68, 77) the speaker has entered into in response to

relevant input; and (iii) a Humean theory of practical deliberation intended to illuminate the role of ethical judgments so understood in our decision-making.

The first two components, as well as the metaphysical and motivational desiderata that drive the quasi-realist to them, will be familiar to those acquainted with Blackburn's previous work. I focus on the more novel third component, the Humean theory of practical deliberation apparently intended to bear the burden of dissipating the sulphur. Although it ignores much in the book that warrants comment, this focus highlights the significance of Blackburn's theory for work in practical reasoning even for those who remain—as I do—queasy about quasi-realism.

In light of Hume's claim that "reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions," the Humean option in the theory of practical reasoning (at least, when it is allowed that the Humean *has* an option other than skepticism here) is typically thought to be restricted to instrumentalism: the view that the role of reason in action is limited to determining means for pursuing ends that are themselves ultimately grounded in desires not open to rational criticism. On the instrumentalist view, although everyone has a reason to pursue the means to his ends, beyond this practical reason is silent; the particular reasons that one has depend on one's desires. Some Humeans are content with this option. Among them are those who happily wield it in arguments denying that rationality requires allegiance to morality. Others strain to show how the interactions of instrumentally rational agents can give rise to rationally binding moral demands. Both groups, however, are confronted by a growing chorus of voices challenging the coherence of a strictly instrumentalist theory of practical reasoning altogether.

Blackburn's "Hume-friendly" theory of practical reasoning is not Humean in the instrumentalist sense. For one thing, Blackburn appears unwilling to regard even failures of means-end reasoning as cases of true practical irrationality, noting that "failing to adopt means to ends may be just a defect of passion for Hume" (239). The intended import of the claim and the relevant interpretation of the example Blackburn uses to illustrate it remain ambiguous in the text (239). However, in the appendix Blackburn writes of a case where someone claims to have only one end, to believe that some means is the only means to that end, and yet fails to take the means: "Even here, I don't know whether it is useful to talk about defects of rationality" (320). To be sure, the Humean can criticize such agents, but for Blackburn such disapproval itself expresses an attitude that reflects our contingent values or concerns, not the verdict of some independent tribunal of reason.

Blackburn's first departure from instrumentalism does not bode well for a theory of practical reasoning, unless one means to deny that there is any such thing in the strict sense, i.e., the sense that requires that there be some principle(s) of practical reasoning an agent must be motivated to follow, on pain of irrationality. Indeed, Blackburn's position here is likely to earn him the title of skeptic. Titles aside, one interesting implication of his position is that it presents a challenge to so-called Humean instrumentalists who simply assume the authority of the instrumental principle, often in debates meant to cast doubt on noninstrumentalist principles of practical reasoning. It also is worth noting that since, at least so far as I can tell, a consistent expressivist would treat failures of theoretical reasoning no differently than Blackburn here treats failures of means-end reasoning, expressivism undermines the strategy of assuming an asymmetry between the authority of theoretical reasoning and the authority of practical reasoning in arguments designed to challenge the latter.

Of course, it will come as little consolation to the sulphur-suspicious to note that, so far as quasi-realism is concerned, our theoretical and practical norms are thus of a piece. How, then, in Blackburn's position on practical reasoning supposed to *allay* their worries about quasi-realism's corrosive powers?

Blackburn's second point of departure from instrumentalism suggests a response. "Thinking about ends can certainly deserve the title reasoning," (239-240) he writes, proceeding to argue that his theory retains a perfectly respectable use of "reason" and "reasonableness." If I criticize your making a false promise in order to secure some undeserved personal benefit, for example, I am "deploying my values" to criticize yours (240). However, my values in such a case, unlike yours, have the advantage of surviving the scrutiny of the common point of view. I may even go so far as to say you have a reason to tell the truth in such a case, regardless of the state of your desires—for in saying so, I am not describing your psychology but, rather, expressing my attitude regarding the kind of consideration that should motivate you. Blackburn thus argues, against Kantians, that Humean ethics "Can be as demandingly categorical as possible" (258) and, against Williams, that a Humean can accommodate so-called external reasons (264-265). With regard to one's own ends, one may criticize some of these in light of one's other ends. According to Blackburn, this is all we *can* be up to when we describe ourselves as reasoning or asking what it would be reasonable to do. He writes, "'Reasonable' stands as a label for an admired freedom from various traits—ignorance, incapacity to understand our situation, shortsightedness, lack of concern for the common point of view." Although this latter is a set of considerations "that only affect me because of a contingent profile of

concerns or desires or passions," the failure to regard such freedom as reasonable "would itself be a defect of sentiment" (241). As Blackburn argues in a chapter devoted to the sentimentalism of Hume and Smith (Chapter 7), our natural sympathy with the imagined sentiments of others and our concern for common ground give rise to such standards of reasonableness. If someone lacks this sympathy, she is defective in lacking a mechanism that is natural to us.

Blackburn goes on to defend his Hume-friendly reason against the threats of relativism and naive subjectivism, honoring all the while the quasi-realist admonition against spooky metaphysics (Chapter 9). If, to invoke what could be the motto of his quasi-realist project, Blackburn is offering to let us have it all for less, why not buy it on the (metaphysical) cheap?

Here I can only offer one of my own doubts about buying: I doubt that quasi-realism entitles us to purchase the conception of desire to which Blackburn ultimately appeals in his attempt to allay any lingering worries that Hume "denies reason its real place in practical thought" (250). According to Blackburn, the most important mistake of the Humean's opponents is that of "objectifying" (255) desires, viewing people as the passive containers of these brutish forces that assail them. Blackburn suggests that this mistake leads Kantians to posit a noumenal self that takes its desires as objects of its gaze, weighing them at some independent tribunal of reason, lest the person be hopelessly heteronomous. To counter the objectifying mistake and the false picture of deliberation that accompanies it, Blackburn distinguishes two accounts of desire's place in practical deliberation. The distinction is that between regarding desires themselves as the objects that get weighed in deliberation and regarding an agent's desires as what frames deliberation, in the sense of selecting those considerations the agent regards as relevant for her deliberation and at what rank. This distinction is too often neglected.

On the first account of desire's role, deliberation is a matter of contemplating our own mental states. According to Blackburn, only when we mistakenly adopt this view are we apt to find desires too arbitrary or too "grubby" (255) to be the basis of our moral concerns, or to think that for a Humean, "the only reason not to be cruel/a fraud/unjust is that we do not want it to be so" (257), or to suppose that there is some general problem of normativity. The correct view of desire and deliberation, which Blackburn suggests is his Humean view, holds that, in deliberation, "it is the *world* we contemplate, not our own psychologies. In the typical deliberative question, 'Is *this* more important than/consistent with/to be ignored compared with *that*?', the demonstratives refer to aspects of the world, not desires" (255).

Blackburn is, of course, right—about both the phenomenology of deliberation and the fact that our deliberation engages features of the world. However, once the quasi-realist has blanched all values and reasons from the world (as his input/output model of ethical sensibility requires), it's not clear that his account of deliberation can be as appealing as his rhetoric suggests. It thus remains a question whether Blackburn's theory can make sense of how desires are related to those features of the world that an agent takes as reasons in deliberation. When Blackburn writes that "a reason is a feature that prompts concern" (257), what he must mean is that the relevant feature of the world provides a reason only because it prompts our concern, or desire (257). And this, I suggest, threatens to reintroduce old worries about authority. Of course, Blackburn may respond that the normative authority of certain "prompts of concern" in our deliberation ultimately derives from our typically caring whether we and other people (at least those who are sympathetic and concerned with the common point of view) are "prompted" to find useful or agreeable certain of our lower-order dispositions "to be prompted." However, I don't see this response as the reflection stopper it's supposed to be; rather, it passes the buck to ever-higher levels of attitudinal ascent. Perhaps this is not metaphysically spooky in the way Blackburn takes the notion of a realm of moral facts or of reasons to be. But then metaphysical parsimony was not our only concern.

Regardless of my lingering worry, Blackburn's book should force philosophers to rethink much of what they currently take for granted in debates about practical reasoning. Most importantly, it should force philosophers to rethink the correct characterization of the Humean option in such debates and the correct understanding of the role of desire in practical deliberation, a role that is too often obscured. For such contributions, even those of us who remain queasy about quasi-realism find ourselves in Blackburn's debt.

**MICHELLE MASON**

Department of Philosophy

University of Chicago

Chicago IL 60637 USA

email: mnm2@midway.uchicago.edu