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Elizabeth S. Radcliffe

Hume Studies Volume XXV, Number 1 and 2 (April/November, 1999) 101-122.

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Hume on the Generation of Motives: Why Beliefs Alone Never Motivate

ELIZABETH S. RADCLIFFE

Many philosophers subscribe to the Humean theory of motivation, the view that a belief must be conjoined with a desire in order to produce an action. Hume's thesis that reason alone does not motivate is taken as the ground for this theory: Reason produces beliefs only, and beliefs are mere representations of fact, which, without passions for the objects the beliefs concern, cannot move anyone at all. Discussions of the Humean theory of motivation usually begin with the motivating passions in place without asking about their genesis. This emphasis, I think, overlooks a good deal of what Hume's thesis concerning the motivational impotence of reason is about: It concerns the incapacity of reason to generate the motivating passions in the first place, and not just the ineffectiveness of beliefs, without passions, to produce action. The bone of contention between motivational rationalists and Hume is not merely about the need for a desire or a motivating passion, in addition to a belief, to generate action. In fact, the rationalist might well agree that actions are not caused by beliefs alone. Where Hume and at least some rationalists disagree is actually over whether beliefs can generate desires or motives. For example, can my belief that regular exercise is in my long-term interest by itself give me a desire or a motive to exercise regularly?¹

If I am right here, then discussion of Hume's theory of motivation needs to be supplemented by an account of his theory of motive formation. In this paper, I will offer an interpretation of Hume's theory of motive formation and show how it provides crucial support for a famous claim in his argument

against the moral rationalists—namely, that “reason can never either prevent or produce any action or affection” (T 458).² As it turns out, reason does play a necessary role in motive formation even for Hume, but the answer why it is not sufficient is a telling difference between a rationalist moral psychology and Hume’s.

Hume’s argument for the claim that reason alone cannot prevent or produce actions or passions has been subject to constant discussion in the literature. Until recently, the standard reading was that this thesis is equivalent to the assertion that beliefs on their own cannot motivate actions; readers derived from this interpretation “the Humean theory of motivation,” in which a belief-desire pair constitutes a motive to action.³ But this standard reading is currently being challenged; some say Hume is not a subscriber to the Humean theory of motivation and instead allows that some beliefs do motivate.⁴ For that reason, my paper falls into the following four parts. Section I settles two ambiguities concerning the scope of Hume’s conclusion that reason is not productive of passions and actions. Section II then rejects the suggestion from some recent authors that beliefs alone may generate motivating passions even if reason does not. Section III offers an interpretation of Hume’s positive account of motive formation and shows how agent dispositions are a central feature of that view, and Section IV answers objections this account may engender.

A clarification is in order before I begin. In Hume’s view, all motives are passions, but not all passions are motives (for example, benevolence is a motive, but pride is not [T 367]). So, in this discussion, I will be presenting an account of the production of “motivating passions,” those passions which when later coupled with beliefs about the means to the objects of the passions become motives to action. In contemporary discussions, the Humean theory of motivation concerns the pairing of a “desire” with a means-end belief, but as far as Hume is concerned, any motivating passion will do (fear, hope, grief, etc.); desire is simply among the list of motivating passions (T 574). Consequently, there is a *sense* in which Hume is not a Humean about motivation on my view, but this is not the same sense in which certain critics have argued he is not one. They hold this view because they think he is open to the possibility that particular beliefs motivate on their own without prior passions of any sort. I believe, on the contrary, that he thinks passions are necessary to motivation, but I also claim that the motivating passions include more than desires. Hume’s depiction of motivating passions and his interest in their genesis yields a richer and a more complex account of our motivational psychology than the contemporary Humean theory of motivation allows.

I. The Purview of Reason

The goal of this section is to settle some ambiguities that surround Hume’s denial that reason is motivating.

Hume argues:

- (1) Reason is the discovery of truth and falsity.
- (2) The only objects of reason are representative states of mind, which are of two sorts: relations of ideas or beliefs in matters of fact about the world. That is, reason deals only with representations.
- (3) Passions, volitions, and actions are not representative states of mind.
- (4) Therefore, passions, volitions, and actions are not objects of reason. That is, reason does not deal with passions, volitions, or actions.
(From T 458, given in slightly different form at T 415.)

The dispute between Hume and the motivational rationalists addressed in the argument above is obviously over the motivational force of reason, but there are at least two ways to understand the role of reason in motivation as the rationalists claim it to be. One way is to say that reason prompts actions themselves; another is to say that reason produces the motives that lead to action.⁵ That reason influences actions directly implies that realization of facts is sufficient for action; and on this line, the dispute between Hume and the motivational rationalists is over whether passion-like states (usually thought of as desires here) are necessary to action. On the second line, the dispute between Hume and the rationalists is about whether or not reason can produce the supposed requisite passions or feelings. This is the version of the dispute on which I want to focus, even though the typical rationalist line among Hume's predecessors was the former. First, the latter view makes a weaker claim. It does not attribute to the motivational rationalist a denial of the necessity of sentiments to action; rather, it centers the dispute on whether feelings or "propensities" to action can be rational, in the sense of their being generated by reason itself. On the assumption that propensities are necessary to action, if reason is productive of them, then reason by itself can be productive of action, and that is what is important to the rationalist line. Second, it is possible that some thinkers, such as Wolff and Leibniz, did hold the view I want to consider; their texts suggest such a view, and perhaps some readers understood them in this way.⁶

Hume's argument that reason does not deal with passions, volitions, or actions is followed by a further observation of his that gives rise to a question regarding the scope of his conclusion. Hume writes that his argument proves both directly and indirectly that actions do not derive their merit from "a conformity to reason," or their blameworthiness from "a contrariety to it." He says the indirect proof comes "by shewing us, that as reason can never immediately prevent or produce any action by contradicting or approving of it, it cannot be the source of the distinction betwixt moral good and evil, which are found to have that influence" (T 458). This comment, taken by itself, allows the possibility that reason might influence actions in some capacity other than by

course, the phrase “contradicting or approving” employs a metaphor, since reason for Hume is not the sort of thing that approves or disapproves; rather, his point is that reason, which deals with representations, can show actions neither inconsistent nor consistent with representations, since actions do not represent. So is there some other function reason might perform that would allow it by itself some bearing on action?

I think the answer must be “no,” in light of the following considerations. The characteristic activity of reason, on Hume’s view, is discerning the truth or falsity of an idea, which we then believe or disbelieve. But let us say for the sake of argument that reason can produce other products besides beliefs—that, for instance, my engagement of reason sometimes gives me a headache, which prompts me to take a couple of aspirins.⁸ Do we want to say then that reason is motivating in another role besides its role as discerner of truth and falsity? The problem is that if we say this about reason, then there are no limits to what could motivate us: eating ice cream quickly, staying in the sun for a long time, and drinking too much alcohol all give me headaches and so are motives to action in the same respect. Touching poison ivy makes me itch and in turn I scratch; thinking about the movie I saw last night makes me initiate a conversation on its characters. Do we also want to say that actions and memories can be motives too? On this line of argument, anything can be a motive, and so nothing productive comes out of considering such examples. When we ask whether Hume allows that reason might motivate, we want to know whether reason in its characteristic role motivates, since that is the only way we can identify reason at work; but it is in just that function (“contradicting or approving,” discerning truth and falsity) where Hume denies explicitly that reason has motivating force.⁹

II. Beliefs and Motives

So far, then, my conclusion is that Hume holds that reason on its own doesn’t motivate *at all*. But given the depiction of reason as that which produces beliefs from representations by discovering their truth (or disbelief by discovering falsity), is it fair to conclude that Hume means to say that no beliefs motivate by themselves? Some readers have answered that we cannot draw this conclusion, maintaining that there is evidence for Hume’s thinking that there are beliefs, not derived from reason, that do motivate.¹⁰ Some of their evidence is the following.¹¹ All typical motives are passions, and all passions are impressions of reflection. Impressions are those states of mind with the highest degree of force and vivacity. These facts together seem to indicate that motivation is a result of force and vivacity. Since beliefs are only second to impressions in forcefulness, some of them may very well be forceful enough to motivate.¹² Moreover, Hume seems to say something of the kind when he

writes about the influence on the passions of believing that an object has pleasurable or painful effects:

Nature . . . has neither bestow'd on every idea of good and evil the power of actuating the will, nor yet has entirely excluded them from this influence. Tho' an idle fiction has no efficacy, yet we find by experience, that the ideas of those objects, which we believe either are or will be existent, produce in a lesser degree the same effect with those impressions, which are immediately present to the senses and perception. The effect, then, of belief is to raise up a simple idea to an equality with our impressions, and bestow on it a like influence on the passions. This effect it can only have by making an idea approach an impression in force and vivacity. (T 119)

Furthermore, Hume seems to offer examples of motivating beliefs. At T I iii 3, "Of the influencing motives of the will," Hume tells of two ways in which passions appear to be controlled by beliefs:

First, When a passion, such as hope or fear, grief or joy, despair or security, is founded on the supposition of the existence of objects, which really do not exist. Secondly, When in exerting any passion in action, we chuse means insufficient for the design'd end, and deceive ourselves in our judgment of causes and effects.

In the paragraph after, he writes, "The moment we perceive the falshood of any supposition, or the insufficiency of any means our passions yield to our reason without any opposition" (T 416). A mother feels despair and grief over the kidnapping of her daughter on the supposition that the girl has been killed; but the police bring the mother news of her daughter's living in another country. The despair and grief vanish upon the belief that her daughter is alive, and are replaced by the passions of hope and joy. In another case, my desire to go out to the movie theater tonight is squelched when I discover that the new release I had intended to see has gotten bad reviews by the top critics. It looks as though belief is causing passions (motives) to go in and out of existence in these cases.¹³

Finally, Hume's general account of the creation of motives in the same section says 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). A natural reading of this is that a belief that an object will afford us pleasure produces a motivating passion for it, and our belief that an object will be painful causes a passion averse to it.¹⁴ This is consistent with the claim at T 119 that our ideas of the sources of natural good and evil (which are pleasure and pain)

will only affect our motivation when we believe the objects which are pleasurable or painful do or will exist.

But I want to argue that this accumulation of evidence does not show that Hume allows some beliefs to be motivating. The beliefs under consideration cannot be inferential, or derived from reason; for otherwise, Hume would have to concede to the rationalists that reason could produce motivating beliefs. It looks as though the beliefs in question must rather be simple attributions of perceptual qualities, founded only on a single experience and formed immediately. But, obviously, not all such beliefs could motivate on their own—not, for example, the belief that the sky is blue. The relevant subset of these beliefs Hume mentions in the quoted passages are beliefs that this or that object is or will be pleasurable or painful to me, or (what is the same) that this or that pleasurable or painful object exists, or will exist.

One problem with this interpretation, however, is that, for Hume, there simply *are* no noninferential beliefs about what exists in the world.¹⁵ For there to be a noninferential belief in a matter of fact, the two objects of perception and the relation between them would have to be present in a single experience. Of this occurrence Hume says, “We call this perception rather than reasoning; nor is there in this case any exercise of the thought, or any action, properly speaking, but a mere passive admission of the impressions thro’ the organs of sensation” (T 73). It looks as though he may be talking here about sense-perceptual beliefs acquired without conscious thought. But then he continues,

According to this way of thinking, we ought not to receive as reasoning any of the observations we may make concerning *identity*, and the *relations of time and place*; since in none of them the mind can go beyond what is immediately present to the senses, either to discover the real existence or the relations of objects. ’Tis only *causation*, which produces such a connexion, as to give us assurance from the existence or action of one object, that ’twas follow’d or preceded by any other existence or action; nor can the other two relations be ever made use of in reasoning, except so far as they either affect or are affected by it. (T 73–74)

In other words, we may observe the identity of our perceptions, their sequence, and their apparent location as immediately present to the senses; but from mere perceptions we cannot arrive at any beliefs which concern facts about (objects in) the world.¹⁶ Even the identity given in a single experience—identity of a perception with itself—tells us nothing about the continuing existence of an object throughout our interrupted perceptions.

Belief in object identity, Hume says, requires drawing on the inferential relation of cause and effect (T 74). Even simple perceptual beliefs go beyond

what is immediately given in sense perception and move to positing the world of objects, relying on inference to get there.¹⁷ Another way to put Hume's point is this: Any belief that involves existential commitment is inferential; all beliefs in matters of fact involve existential commitment; all beliefs in matters of fact are inferential. If all beliefs in matters of fact are inferential, then all of these beliefs are products of reason in some sense.

A second, related problem with the suggestion that noninferential beliefs about pleasant or painful objects may motivate is that the belief that an object will be pleasurable or painful (to me) is even less subtly inferential than those discussed so far. Not only does such a belief involve commitment to the world of objects, but it also requires inference to the future based on past experiences, along with the expectation that the future will continue in the same way as the past. If we remove our existence commitment and regard ourselves as motivated by the belief that a future experience (rather than an object) will be pleasurable, we still rely on inference to the future to get to *that* belief.¹⁸

Now, I want to consider an important counterclaim to my argument: namely, that Hume does not consider causal reasoning a function performed by reason "strictly speaking." If this were the case, then the thought process that underlies our simple quality attributions would not be a product of reason (strictly speaking); there would be no inconsistency between the denial that reason motivates and the thesis that some beliefs about the world do. Demonstration (deduction from "axioms") would then be the sole function of reason in the strict sense. This line might be supported in two ways. One way is to point to some key texts where Hume seemingly indicates that causal reasoning is a form of *sensation* (and hence, not reason). The other is to argue that Hume's denial that reason can motivate is used ultimately to argue against the moral rationalists, and the rationalists Hume is addressing regard morality as a matter of demonstration;¹⁹ in light of this fact, it would be plausible to think that Hume is concerned as well with reason only as demonstration. I will reply in turn to each line of argument here.

(1) The line that causal reasoning is a form of sensation seems to be supported by Hume's writing:

I conclude upon the whole, that belief is a more vivid and intense conception of an idea, proceeding from its relation to a present impression.

Thus all probable reasoning is nothing but a species of sensation. . . . When I give the preference to one set of arguments above another, I do nothing but decide from my feeling concerning the superiority of their influence. (T 103)

How seriously are we to take this generalization, which indicates that all probable reasoning—that is, all nondemonstrative reasoning—is a function of the faculty of sensation, rather than of reason? On Hume's account, sensation is the *immediate* cause of the belief, and in cases *in which I have had much previous experience with the phenomena*, the sensation alone is sufficient:

A person, who stops short in his journey upon meeting a river in his way; foresees the consequences of his proceeding forward; and his knowledge of these consequences is convey'd to him by past experience, which informs him of such certain conjunctions of causes and effects. But can we think, that on this occasion he reflects on any past experience, and calls to remembrance instances, that he has seen or heard of, in order to discover the effects of water on animal bodies? No surely; this is not the method in which he proceeds in his reasoning. The idea of sinking is so closely connected with that of water, and the idea of suffocating with that of sinking, that the mind makes the transition without the assistance of memory. The custom operates before we have time for reflexion. (T 103–104)

We know that inexperienced Adam, the first human being, would not have the vivacious idea of suffocation simply upon experiencing the complex impression of water. This is because he has no customs. Surely the way to take Hume's point is not that inference is uninvolved in the formation of the belief that water will suffocate; rather, after we have a sufficient number of conjoined experiences, the present impression of the water is sufficient to evoke the vivid idea of suffocation. The process of causal reasoning *includes* experiencing the constant conjunction of perceptions, experience that conditions the mind to pass from the first perception to the thought of the second. Then *after* the conditioning, only an impression is needed to provoke the idea. So, Hume cannot mean that causal reasoning simply is sensation.

(2) The other evidence in favor of the claim that Hume intends only to be arguing against the motivating force of demonstrative reasoning is that Hume is replying to a group of philosophers who considered morality demonstrable. But this evidence about the moral rationalists' characterization of reason is surely overridden by the fact that when Hume discusses in Book III why morality is not derived from reason, he makes it a point to argue *explicitly* for two separate conclusions. He argues (a) that it doesn't come from demonstrative reasoning, *and* (b) that it doesn't come from matter-of-fact (causal) reasoning (T 468). Hume's developing separate, detailed cases for each conclusion before he completes his argument that morality is not derived from reason shows that he does not mean to exclude causal reasoning from the province of reason in this context.

Is there anything left to be said in favor of the view that Hume thinks beliefs alone can produce motives? Even if one were tempted by the merits of the view on its own to attribute it to Hume, the temptation would be badly founded. This is so because, given some of Hume's presuppositions, the view is not coherent. To be plausible, the thesis that beliefs by themselves can motivate requires the thesis that only some do. But what features of a belief could determine whether it generates motives or not? On Hume's account, belief has (a) a representative dimension and (b) a nonrepresentative, or phenomenal, dimension.

Consider (b) first. The phenomenal dimension of a belief is the "force and vivacity" with which it strikes the mind. Hume does say that some ideas can approach the vivacity of impressions, although he indicates that these are unusual cases: "in sleep, in a fever, in madness, or in any very violent emotions of the soul" (T 2). Let us say for the sake of argument that some beliefs are as forceful as some passions; still, not even all passions are motivating. Hume says explicitly that pride and humility are not, and love and hatred only motivate by giving rise to passions that do. The strongest feeling of pride will motivate no more than the weakest. Neither are all impressions motivating. Pleasure and pain are, but surely a color or shape impression or a complex impression of a light bulb are not in themselves motives to action. Furthermore, Hume makes the point that some passions are felt so calmly as to be mistaken for conclusions of reason, and yet among these calm passions are motivating ones. He writes:

'Tis evident passions influence not the will in proportion to their violence, or the disorder they occasion in the temper; but on the contrary, that when a passion has once become a settled principle of action, and is the predominant inclination of the soul, it commonly produces no sensible agitation. . . . We must, therefore, distinguish betwixt a calm and a weak passion; betwixt a violent and a strong one. (T 418–419)

Hume must mean by "weak" here "motivationally weak," and by "strong," "motivationally strong," rather than something like "weakly felt" (unforceful) and "strongly felt" (forceful), respectively. Since the psychological state of the person who experiences violent passion is described as "disordered," surely that person is having a forceful experience. So, since some rather unvivacious passions do motivate, it follows that the phenomenal dimension of a belief could not determine whether that belief is motivating.

Now consider (a). If what the belief represents (its content) determines whether it motivates, then Hume is guilty of an inconsistency elsewhere. For here we have representation performing the function of motivating. Yet, by Hume's own argument, the explanation why reason and passion can never

oppose each other for governance of the will is that passions make no reference to anything outside themselves (T 415)—that is, they represent nothing—while reason deals only with representations. But if it were the case that beliefs motivate in virtue of what they represent, then representation does have an effect on the will. If representation has an effect on the will, it looks as though Hume's argument that reason and passion cannot be opposed loses its original ground. If that argument loses its ground, then so in part does the argument that reason cannot motivate (T 415), since that argument is logically connected to the argument that reason and passions cannot be in competition for governance of the will. Hume writes that nothing can oppose the impulse of a passion but a contrary impulse: "if this contrary impulse ever arises from reason, that latter faculty must have an original influence on the will" (T 415). In other words, if reason and passion are opposed at all, then it follows that reason can motivate (influence the will). So, undermining the thesis that reason and passion cannot clash over governance of the will also undermines the argument that reason is not motivating; and undermining the former thesis is just the effect had by the allegation that a belief's content determines whether it motivates. Consequently, there is no coherent way to understand in Hume's theory how only *some* beliefs might motivate by themselves.

Before I set out my constructive interpretation of Hume on the generation of motives, I want to consider Barry Stroud's critique of Hume on this topic. Stroud mounts a considerable case for the view that Hume was mistaken, on his own grounds, in arguing that reason cannot oppose passion for the direction of the will; consequently, according to Stroud, Hume's conclusion that reason cannot motivate does not follow from his own characterization of reason and passion.²⁰

Stroud notes that Hume's argument that reason cannot oppose passion depends on Hume's claims that (a) passions are "original existences" which make no reference to anything outside themselves, and (b) that reason discovers truth and falsity of ideas, which can only be done by reference to something the ideas attempt to represent. Since passions cannot be true or false, they cannot be opposed to the products of reason, which *are* true or false. Stroud contends that Hume is right to think that propositions, which are the bearers of truth value, cannot impart any force against passions, since they "are at best abstract entities with no location in time and space"—they are not "original existences" and so can cause nothing. But Stroud notes that Hume's describing reason as the discovery of truth and falsehood indicates that reason involves both its objects (propositions) and the believer's taking a certain attitude toward those objects. In other words, believing involves having a sentiment towards an idea, and that attitude or sentiment *is* "a modification of existence" (a state of a person's mind) and so a potential cause of action. There is no reason, he thinks, for Hume to deny that the state of mind which is believing can oppose passions.²¹

More devastating for Hume, if Hume's argument actually showed that passions cannot be in accord with or contrary to reason, it would also show that beliefs cannot be reasonable or unreasonable, according to Stroud. Believing something is not a proposition; it is rather to be in a certain state, just as being five foot high or being angry is to be in a state, and such states have no truth value.²² Ultimately, Stroud concludes that Hume has no real argument for the conclusion that reason alone cannot motivate. The claim that passions in addition to belief are necessary to produce action is not even substantiated by introspection, since we cannot find the requisite passions in the case of calm motivating passions.²²

But I think Stroud's interesting critique is far from conclusive. First, if beliefs just *are* attitudes or sentiments, this doesn't show that they might motivate, in Hume's view, since, as I have noted earlier, not all sentiments motivate. Furthermore, *all* mental states have some degree of force and vivacity, so, on Stroud's argument, it looks as though all of them could in some way be opposed to each other along that dimension. Yet, no one would argue that Hume's theory allows that sensations can impart a force against passions, even though sensations can have the same degree of force and vivacity as passions (passions are after all sensations of reflection). If Stroud's reply here is that we have good reason to think beliefs are more like passions than sensations, I am not sure why that is so. What distinguishes beliefs from passions is that the former are cognitive and the latter are not. Stroud puts the distinction in terms of beliefs' having propositions as their objects, and passions' not having such objects, but he goes on to maintain that *believing* is a "modification" of existence, a state of mind, which by Hume's standards can have a causal force. Sensations are also mental states with no propositional objects; so why are they not in the same position with respect to motivation? It must be, as I have already argued, that having a phenomenal dimension is not the determining feature of whether something is a motive.

Furthermore, Hume himself doesn't talk about propositions as the objects of belief; rather, he seems to indicate that beliefs themselves are true or false in virtue of how well they copy their causes in the world. For Hume, a belief is a vivacious, complex idea; it begins with a complex idea, such as, "Cat on the mat," whose force and vivacity are raised by a present experience. To believe is to have in mind a representation of the way things are, of which one's conviction is manifested by the vivacity of the idea. But there is no reason to think that the conviction itself is motivating on its own.

My conclusion in this section is that the evidence adduced for the thesis that Hume thinks some beliefs are motivating supports no such thing. One of my main contentions then is that Hume's claim that reason doesn't motivate on its own implies the claim that beliefs can generate no motives by themselves, since all beliefs about the world are derived inferentially, that is, by reason. This interpretation leaves some puzzling passages to be explained, as I

have already noted, and I will take those up in the last section, after I set out Hume's positive view on the generation of motives.

III. The Formation of Motivating Passions

The problematic passage from Book I of the *Treatise* where beliefs appear to motivate seems to be a precursor to a famous discussion of motivation in Book II, where Hume lays out his explicit theory of the relation between passion and reason. What *is* going on when a factual belief seemingly gives rise to a passion, if beliefs are products of reason and reason cannot produce passions? This question, I propose, can only be answered by looking at both Hume's discussion in "Of the influence of belief" (I iii 10) and his discussion of the effect of the prospect of pleasure and pain in "On the influencing motives of the will" (II iii 3). Many critiques focus only on the latter passage and produce a puzzle about the ancestral relationship between beliefs and motives that might be resolved by considering the two in conjunction. I think the way to understand Hume's account of motivation in the passages that apparently have beliefs producing passions is to bear in mind that his conclusion about reason is that it is not effective on its own. This leaves it open that beliefs might play a part in producing motives *when other mental states are present*.

In "On the influencing motives of the will," Hume contrasts the arousal of "aversion or propensity" toward an object based on the prospect of pleasure or pain with a hypothetical impulse that arises from reason (T 414). As already noted, he says that reason points out causes and effects of objects, but gives us no concern for them if we have no prior impulse from another source. Thus, we can conclude that the prospect of pleasure or pain, which is the basis of our concern, is not discerned by reason. So it follows on my argument that "the prospect of pleasure or pain" should not be regarded as a belief. In the section, "Of the influence of belief," after explaining how believing in the existence of certain objects (objects thought pleasurable or painful) boosts the vivacity of our ideas of natural good and evil (pleasure and pain) to the force of a passion, Hume continues:

As belief is almost absolutely requisite to the exciting our passions, so the passions, in their turn, are very favourable to belief; and not only such facts as convey agreeable emotions, but very often such as give pain, do upon that account become more readily the objects of faith and opinion. A coward, whose fears are easily awakened, readily assents to every account of danger he meets with; as a person of a sorrowful and melancholy disposition is very credulous of every thing that nourishes his prevailing passion. (T 120)

We find depicted here a mutual causal interaction between passions and beliefs, with the passionate nature, or dispositions, of a person as the back-

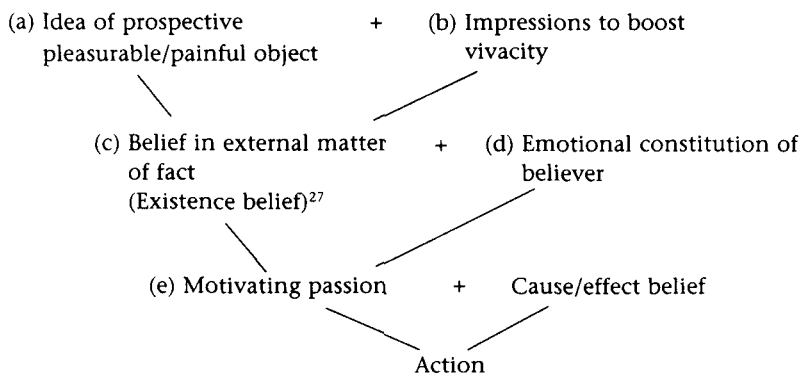
drop. This excerpt indicates that the passionate nature of a person can have an effect on what that person will believe, since the backdrop is also a causal contributor to the product. A person of a pessimistic nature more easily believes that his physical symptoms are signs of serious illness than an optimistic person believes the same of hers, and the coward more easily believes that there is danger lurking around the next bend than the courageous person does.²⁴

This passage shows us that Hume takes seriously the notion of personality, character, passionate nature, or disposition of an agent. The opening phrase, "belief is almost absolutely requisite to exciting our passions," can be read in this context as indicating that our passionate nature, when coupled with beliefs, generates individual passions that are motives for particular objects. Beliefs alone don't produce motives, but beliefs in conjunction with the dispositions of the person do. The relevant texts (from T I iii 10 and II iii 3), considered together, support the conclusion that Hume's theory of motive formation contains the following elements. The production of motivating passions requires, first, a representation with a belief in its truth. I have the idea of standing at the edge of a steep cliff. This could be an idea of imagination, but when reason evaluates the idea as accurate, I believe that I am standing at the cliff's edge. The production of a motivating passion requires, second, a particular disposition on the part of the believer. Since I am disposed to be fearful of heights, susceptible to vertigo, and so on, the representation of standing at the edge of the cliff is associated for me with the idea of discomfort. As a consequence of this association, when I come to the belief that I am actually standing at that location, I feel fear. But if I don't have these tendencies, but others, I might associate the idea of being at the cliff's edge with pleasure, and then I would feel joy at the view or at the sense of freedom I get standing there. Alternatively, I could be the sort of person who has no particular association with this experience and, therefore, little emotional reaction at all to the belief, considering my situation all very calmly and coolly, matter-of-factly, as we might say, as though I were only information-gathering. *The representation of the situation without a contribution from my emotional constitution doesn't affect me.*

If I am right, then on Hume's view, one's emotional dispositions can contribute to the generation of motivating passions in three ways. (1) They sometimes contribute to the content of the belief, which when combined with a disposition, generates a motive—that is, to whether an object is believed to be pleasurable or painful. For instance, Fred's passionate nature causes him to think of flying as displeasurable, while someone with different attitudes associates the thought of pleasure with the thought of her next trip. (2) Moreover, the passage about the coward and the melancholic makes the point that one's dispositions also can contribute to the phenomenal transformation of one's idea into a belief, that is, to the boosting of the vivacity of an idea to that of belief. Fred's nervous nature may contribute causally to his believing that there

is an engine problem with the plane on which he is flying, while others around him don't share that belief. (3) Even then, however, those beliefs require another contribution from the nature of the individual to produce a motivating passion. Perhaps a fellow traveler shares Fred's belief that the plane is having engine problems, but because of her calm dispositions, she is not motivated to disturb other passengers in the way that he is. For Fred, the contribution comes from the same basic dispositions that contributed to the belief. But it needn't go this way in all cases. Consider the following. If I am a pessimistic person, I may easily believe that my present writing project will not get accepted for publication, but that belief may or may not be productive of a motivating passion, depending on other things about my emotional constitution. I may develop envy of others who are successful; I may develop a motive of industriousness that spurs me to make my project better; or I may develop no emotional reaction at all, if I am not emotionally invested in the idea of publication of my work.

I am contending that in the passage concerning the prospect of pleasure or pain in "Of the influencing motives of the will," considered Hume's official account of motivation, Hume offers the more general account of motive formation illustrated in "Of the influence of belief." All motives start with (a) the idea of a prospective pleasurable or painful object (or state of affairs). When (b) present impressions prompt the agent to (c) believe the object (or state of affairs) to be present, then (d) the dispositions of the agent cause her to develop (e) a motivating passion for or away from the object.²⁵ This justifies Hume's asserting that reason cannot produce the passion alone, but directs it and figures out causal relations between the object of the passion and other objects or actions. Consequently, Hume's theory of motive formation, along with the Humean theory of motivation for action, can be sketched:²⁶



Humean Theory of Motivation

IV. Questions and Objections

How does this interpretation handle the problematic passages where beliefs seem to produce motives? I earlier cited three, and I will address them now in reverse order.

(1) Hume's general account of motivation says that we derive inclinations toward or against objects "from the prospect of pleasure or pain" (T 414), of which the most natural reading is that our belief that an object will be pleasurable or painful motivates us. My argument indicates that this is a misreading of Hume. The belief relevant to motivation is, "This pleasurable or displeasurable object exists."²⁸ This belief produces a motive toward the object, or away from it, and toward an alternative (not toward pleasure or away from pain, a point I will address shortly), only in conjunction with the passionate nature of the person.

(2) The second problematic text is where Hume indicates the two ways in which passions change in light of information. When a passion is founded on the supposition of objects which do not really exist, or when we choose an insufficient means to the end, our passions yield as soon as we understand the proper information (T 416). We are now in a position to see that neither of these cases implies that the beliefs alone generate the passions. If I like sweets and have set my sights on a particular croissant, thinking it to have a sweet filling, when I am told that there are no sweet croissants in this bake shop at all, I no longer have a craving for that croissant. But my passion for sweets, which in part provided the occasion for my wanting the croissant, is not affected. And of course the same point applies to false beliefs about means to ends. My passion for a particular object may vanish when I discover it won't fulfill my desire, but the more general appetites themselves are not changed.

(3) We saw earlier that Hume indicates that the effect of belief in the existence of a pleasurable or painful object (natural good and evil, he says) is to boost the vivacity of an idea to that almost equal to an impression and "bestow on it a like influence on the passions" (T 119). Nothing in Hume's description here implies that belief has this effect on its own. I have argued that Hume's account must be read against the background of dispositions of the person. In this light, it would be natural for Hume at this point to leave out of his account reference to the agent's nature, since the emotional nature of the person is always part of the mix. It would make sense then to focus on the contribution of belief to production of motives, because belief is the variable that determines exactly which object is the focus of a passion.

Before concluding this discussion, I want to address briefly two questions my interpretation might raise. The first concerns the relation between pleasure

and desire on the account I have attributed to Hume. Someone might charge that all my interpretation needs as an explanation of the origin of motivating passions is this: Because we always desire pleasure and are averse to pain, we form passions for or against particular objects we find pleasurable or painful. The appeal to an individual's emotional dispositions really does no work, then, and all motives originate from either desire for pleasure or aversion to pain.

My answer is that if Hume thinks there is a desire for pleasure, rather than separate desires for pleasant objects, then he would have to agree that the desire for pleasure is universal in human nature. But invoking such a general principal as this cannot explain how individual's passions are produced, if their passions are as peculiar to them as they seem to be. The coward and the hero both desire pleasure and are averse to pain. So, some other principle must be introduced to explain why, in the same circumstances, one would develop a passion to flee or to fight. Of course, many aspects of our constitutions are shared: Who, for example, doesn't feel grief at the loss of a beloved? But the explanation is not that, because we all desire to be free of pain and all find the loss of a loved one painful, we feel grief. Rather, the explanation is that most of us are social beings with attachments to particular other people; when we find ourselves comprehending that someone close to us is gone, we feel grief. Hume thus accounts for a complexity in our motivational repertoire. Fear doesn't move me away from an object because fear is a manifestation of the desire to avoid pain; rather, the emotion of fear is itself the result of an association of pain with a particular object, and fear itself is motivating with regard to that object.²⁹

A second question I need to address is whether Hume is entitled to appeal to dispositions as a way of explaining a feature of our motivational psychology, when disposition talk is typically translated into conditionals about events. To say the sugar is soluble just means that the sugar would dissolve when put in liquid (or that it always has); it explains nothing about why the sugar dissolves. Analogously, it looks as though a proper treatment of emotional dispositions is to see them as a way of referring to the fact that someone has regularly behaved in a certain way. So, if a disposition is merely an indication of the way someone routinely acts, then reference to it cannot constitute an explanation for any of one's motives.

But Hume refers to dispositions throughout the *Treatise*, and in many instances, he uses reference to them to explain aspects of human nature. For example, in explaining how two sets of habits can be opposed to each other in causal reasoning, Hume writes: "Sometimes the one, sometimes the other prevails, according to the disposition and character of the person. The vulgar are commonly guided by the first, and wise men by the second" (T 149). Of the effects of sympathy versus natural dispositions, he says: "Hatred, resentment, esteem, love, courage, mirth, and melancholy; all these passions I feel more

from communication, than from my own natural temper and disposition" (T 316). And of the explanatory power of character, he writes:

In general we may observe that both these principles [the calm and the violent passions] operate on the will; and where they are contrary, that either of them prevails, according to the *general* character or *present* disposition of the person. What we call strength of mind, implies the prevalence of the calm passions above the violent. (T 418)

Our ideas of dispositions, including ideas of virtues and vices, must be abstract ideas we derive from observation of behavior; they constitute for Hume our ways of thinking about those features that explain human responses to various stimuli.

Emotional dispositions do have explanatory power when the motives they explain are narrower than the evidence that leads us to posit the dispositions. That sugar is soluble doesn't explain why it dissolves, but its having certain properties (which themselves are dispositions, as all properties are) in common with other soluble things adds something to our understanding. Hume's arguing that no properties are known to be necessarily connected is not important here; he still allows that science proceeds by generalization and cause-and-effect reasoning, despite such skepticism, and so does empirical psychology. My disposition to be fearful of flying doesn't really explain why I am afraid to fly; but my being a risk-averse person (who believes flying is risky behavior) adds something to the understanding of my fear at the thought of this trip, even though being risk-averse is itself reducible to other desires and passions. That I am disposed to be grief-stricken at the loss of a loved one does little to explain my current grief, but that I am disposed to form close relationship ties with others does.

So, in brief: Is Hume a Humean about motivation? If motivational Humeanism is defined as the view that a belief requires the contribution of a passion to produce action, then Hume definitely *is* a Humean. But I want to emphasize that Hume's Humeanism is more complex than the contemporary Humean view; the contemporary view merely notes the necessity of a belief-desire pair to produce motivation, but provides no account of the origin of the underlying passions upon which individual desires are founded. My primary conclusion here is that Hume's theory of motive formation has it that the affective constitution of the agent is a necessary component in the generation of motivating passions. The motivational rationalist will argue that, at least in prudential cases, such as the belief that regular exercise is in my long-term interest, no such contribution is needed. The rationalist holds that the mere belief that something is in a person's long-range interest necessarily gives a rational being a motive toward it. Hume's view on prudential motives is complicated by the fact that he sees them as virtues. Consequently, whether he

thinks everyone has such motives depends on whether he thinks our perception of the virtues gives us motives to cultivate them—that is, on whether he is a moral internalist. This is a point of much debate beyond the limits of this paper. But either way, the fact remains that the generation of even prudential motives for Hume depends on a contribution from the affections:³⁰ either in the form of moral disapproval of one's lack of them, or in the form of a disposition to prefer the long term over the short.

NOTES

A shorter version of this paper was presented at the Twenty-Fifth International Hume Conference, University of Stirling, Scotland, 1998, and a section was presented at the Eastern Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Boston, Mass., December 1997. I would like to thank the following persons for comments and discussion: Rachel Cohon, John Corvino, Richard Dees, Eugene Heath, Robert Johnson, Richard McCarty, William Prior, Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, Calvin Stewart, and two anonymous referees for this journal. I am grateful for support for this work provided by a 1996–1997 Fellowship for College Teachers from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

1. Leibniz and Wolff are among rationalists prior to Hume who might have held the view that beliefs acquired by reason cause motivating states that in turn cause actions, rather than that beliefs just are motivating states. But their positions are unclear on this. They seem to hold the latter view when they say that every time I act, I choose the option that I believe to be the best. On the other hand, they see pleasure as motivating and treat desiring as taking pleasure in something. At one point Wolff writes, “the sensory desires as well as the will arise from (*entspringen aus*) ideas of the good. Because we are pleased by the good when we represent it to ourselves, the soul is thereby determined to endeavor (*bemuehen*) to bring about the experience of it . . . and this endeavor consists in inclination, which is sometimes called sensory desire, and sometimes the will” (*Vernünfte Gedanken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dinge überhaupt* [*Reasonable Thoughts about God, the World, and the Human Soul*] [1720], ed. Charles A. Corr [Hildesheim 1983], para. 878; translation provided me by Richard McCarty). Here it sounds as though ideas of the good give rise to endeavors, or motives, that are sometimes called desire and sometimes the will. Yet desiring and willing are also judgments of a thing's goodness, on their views, with desiring being an obscure judgment and willing being a clear one. (See Christian Wolff, *Reasonable Thoughts About the Actions of Men, for the Promotion of their Happiness* [1720], paras. 190, 192, and 372–375, trans. J. B. Schneewind, in Schneewind, ed., *Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990]. See also J. B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], ch. 12, “Leibniz: Counterrevolutionary Perfectionism,” and ch. 20, “Perfection and Will: Wolff and Crusius.”) Furthermore, on some contemporary interpretations of Kant, it is the case that reason produces (rational) feelings, which then produce actions. But readers split on this score, since many also maintain that Kant's view has it that

rationally justified beliefs are motives to action. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that it is a logically coherent position for a rationalist to hold that beliefs, cognitive states, are not themselves conative, but give rise to conative states.

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

3. See, e.g., Jonathan Harrison, *Hume's Moral Epistemology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 5–6; J. L. Mackie, *Hume's Moral Theory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 47; Michael Smith, "The Humean Theory of Motivation," *Mind* 96 (1987): 36–61, and *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), ch. 4; Francis Snare, *Morals, Motivation, and Convention: Hume's Influential Doctrines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 65–144.

4. Rachel Cohon, "Is Hume a Noncognitivist in the Motivation Argument?" *Philosophical Studies* 85 (1997): 251–266 (see esp. 256–259); Ingmar Persson, "Hume—Not a 'Humean' About Motivation," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 14 (1997): 189–206; and Nicholas Sturgeon, "Hume on Reason and Passion" (unpublished). Only the second explicitly denies that Hume is a Humean; the others are committed to it by implication. Barry Stroud also indicates that the phenomenal character of belief, on Hume's description of it, gives it the status of a passion, although he does not impute to Hume the view that some beliefs might motivate. In fact, Stroud thinks that Hume was unaware that his characterization of belief poses problems for his own argument that reason cannot oppose passion. I discuss Stroud's interpretation and critique of Hume later in this article. See Barry Stroud, *Hume* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), 157–167.

5. There is at least a third way to understand how reason might influence motivation: Reason might have some effect in changing existing passions and desires into motives. This is not a view I want to discuss here, since I think Hume was not specifically addressing it, although I think his arguments have interesting implications for it as well. To treat those implications is not within the scope of the present discussion. (I thank a reviewer for this journal for pointing out this option to me.)

6. See n. 1.

7. John Corvino, ch. 3 of *Hume: A Kind of Moral Realist* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), and Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, "Hume's Representation Argument Against Rationalism" (unpublished manuscript, first presented as a commentary on R. Cohon and D. Owen, "Hume on Representation, Reason, and Motivation," 1996 Hume Conference, University of Nottingham, England).

8. This example is borrowed from Sayre-McCord's discussion (see n. 7).

9. Hume defines reason as "the discovery of truth and falshood" (T 458), but that is not a description he can come to by first identifying reason and then correlating it with its various activities. Rather, differentiating characteristic activities is what enables an empiricist like Hume to distinguish the various faculties of the mind, which can only be manifested to us in their operations. This is why Hume gives reason a functional definition. The motivational faculty at work, on the other hand, is identified by its production of actions or motives. To ask whether reason in some capacity other than discernment of truth and falsity ("contradicting or approving") might be motivating makes no sense, then. To infer from Hume's observation that

reason in its belief-producing capacity doesn't motivate, but that reason in another, like its pain-producing capacity, might, misunderstands his approach to moral psychology.

One might charge that the Humean methodology as I describe here it begs the question whether reason motivates. But surely the methods of inquiry we adopt must affect the conclusions we draw in any case. Our methods are a reflection of our basic commitments. For instance, if one believes that no informative conclusions can be gotten without experience, a basic tenet of empiricism, then one is thereby committed to deny certain metaphysical possibilities. Anyone who wants to argue that reason is motivating simply cannot hold the same suppositions as the strict empiricist does, but that isn't big news.

10. See Cohon, "Is Hume a Noncognitivist?"; Sturgeon, "Hume on Reason and Passion." Persson ("Hume—Not a 'Humean'") also maintains that beliefs motivate for Hume, but *not* because they are not products of reason. He argues that Hume's view allows that the "manifestations" of reason—namely, ideas—can cause motives, but that Hume's point about the impotence of reason is that the faculty of reason cannot immediately produce motives, since to do so would be to *infer* them.

11. I do not mean to say that each author cited offers all of these considerations as part of his or her argument. These factors constitute a summary of the concerns from which their individual arguments are constructed.

12. See, e.g., Persson, "Hume—Not a 'Humean'," 191–194.

13. Sturgeon discusses this evidence at length in "Hume on Reason and Passion."

14. Annette Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 159; Cohon and Sturgeon have each made this observation. Rachael Kydd also asks how beliefs about pleasure and pain can be motivating even though reason doesn't motivate, in *Reason and Conduct in Hume's Treatise* (London: Oxford University Press, 1946). There, she offers a reply compatible with the one I offer later in this paper, but she does not discuss the mutual interaction of passions and beliefs that I think is at the heart of Hume's account. See her ch. IV, "Empirical Reason and Conduct," 99–139.

15. It is tempting to think that there might be non-inferential *moral* beliefs, for Hume, but I think there is good reason to reject that interpretation as well. This, however, is a contentious matter for another discussion.

16. See also David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (hereafter EHU) ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd. ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), IV i.

17. Strictly speaking, belief in the world of independent and enduring objects cannot depend on *causal* reasoning, since we cannot correlate our impressions of objects with external objects themselves in the way causal reasoning requires. So Hume recounts an even more complicated inferential process underlying these beliefs (T I iv 2). I will not attempt to detail that process here, but the point is that belief in the continued existence of objects, which is presupposed by even our simple quality attributions, requires an application of reason.

18. At first glance, the following from Hume seems to run contrary to my argument:

however that object, which is present to my senses, and that other, whose existence I infer by reasoning, may be thought to influence each other by their particular powers or qualities; yet as the phaenomenon of belief, which we at present examine, is merely internal, these powers and qualities, being entirely unknown, can have no hand in producing it. 'Tis the present impression, which is to be consider'd as the true and real cause of the idea, and of the belief which attends it. (T 102)

Hume's point here is not that belief formation does not involve belief in the existence of objects, but rather than the "real" qualities (powers) of physical objects cannot be considered the causes of our beliefs. In other words, the process of belief formation is a mental one, and our explanation of it must be in such terms, rather than in terms of mind-body (object) interaction. This has no bearing on the issue whether existence beliefs underlie our attributions of qualities and whether beliefs are the offspring of reason. Furthermore, his saying that the present impression is the true cause of the belief cannot be construed as a denial that reason produces beliefs. As I go on to discuss next, understanding Hume's view on this point requires understanding what causal reasoning involves.

19. Among Hume's targets are John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) and *Essays on the Law of Nature* (written shortly after 1660; first printed in 1954); Samuel Clarke, *A Discourse Concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion, and the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Revelation* (The Boyle Lectures, 1705); William Wollaston, *The Nature of Religion Delineated* (privately printed 1722; first public ed., corrected, 1724); and Ralph Cudworth, *A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality* (1731).

20. See Stroud, *Hume*, ch. VII, "Action, Reason, Passion," 141–170.

21. *Ibid.* 158–161.

22. *Ibid.* 161–162.

23. *Ibid.* 163–167.

24. Don Garrett usefully analyzes Hume's discussion of miracles from the first *Enquiry* in such a way as to emphasize the "passionate mechanisms" that incline us to belief and to action; among them is "the direct tendency of the pleasant feelings of surprise and wonder associated with miracles to encourage belief in them" (*Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1997], 149). In the context of his discussion, Hume remarks how "the spirit of religion"—certainly a description of a type of passionate nature—can lead to loss of common sense and the discarding of human testimony that otherwise would have produced more credible beliefs (EHU X ii).

25. This schema does not imply that desires or passions are only for existent objects. The point is, rather, that one has to have beliefs about the way things are in order for one to develop passions at all. We acquire a passion for a future possible object or state of affairs by our aversion to a present existing object or state of affairs. My dissatisfaction with the present prompts me to try to change it.

26. My interpretation of Hume echoes a view defended by Bernard Williams in his "Internal and External Reasons," in Ross Harrison, ed., *Rational Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 17–28. While Williams says that the account he defends there is Hume's, his article is not presented as a textual analysis or interpretation of Hume. He takes it for granted that the impossibility of there being external reasons for action—reasons that do not appeal to something in the agent's "subjective motivational set"—is Hume's view, but Williams's project is one of defending his own position. Furthermore, Williams sees himself as presenting an argument concerning what counts as a reason for an action, or what makes an action rational; whereas, Hume (in my view) does not see himself as presenting a theory of reasons for actions, since he doesn't think actions are either rational or irrational. The account I have attributed to Hume here is about what motivates action, rather than about what makes it rational.

27. I have argued that the existence belief here is a product of reason alone. This raises the question what really counts as "reason alone," given that Hume also allows that the emotional dispositions of the agent may affect what she believes about an object and how readily she believes it exists. If "reason alone" consists of causal reasoning without the influence of any emotional elements, then there is no such thing; "reason alone" would be exercised in demonstration only. Causal reasoning always involves an emotive element, namely, the sentiment that prompts us to suppose the necessary connection between our experiences. In people of a certain bent in certain circumstances, the amount of evidence needed to prompt this feeling is more or less than in people of a different bent (e.g., the cowardly person believes there is danger more readily than does the courageous). There is no basis on which to say that the one is relying on reason alone, however, while the other is not. It is surely the case that some people engage matter-of-fact reasoning in better and worse ways, as Hume himself admits, but it would be an implausible view to hold that only a causal connection made on the basis of a certain "proper" number of experiences counts as the work of reason alone. As I have noted earlier, Hume himself treats causal reasoning as a manifestation of reason alone when he argues that morality is not derived from reason. If reason is the discovery of truth and falsity—a description of it Hume shares with the rationalists—then it appears that whatever enters into the process of coming to believe a statement true or false is part of the reasoning process.

28. Granted, there is no substantial difference between this belief and the belief that this object is pleasurable or displeasurable; I just mean to indicate that, technically, beliefs presuppose existence beliefs.

29. This view may sound somewhat surprising, but I also prepared to argue for this account in a discussion of motivating moral sentiments and show how it makes sense of Hume's theory there. I do not have space to take on that task here, however.

30. A point of interest: This view is supported by Derek Parfit in the remarks he makes about what he calls the "Present-Aim Theory," the theory that I should do what is now in my self-interest. See ch. 6 of his *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).