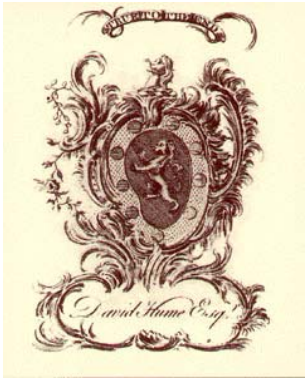

**Daniel Shaw.** ***Reason and Feeling in Hurne's Action Theory and Moral Philosophy: Hurne's Reasonable Passion***
Donald C. Ainslie
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DANIEL J. SHAW. *Reason and Feeling in Hume's Action Theory and Moral Philosophy: Hume's Reasonable Passion* (Studies in the History of Philosophy, vol. 49). Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1998. xxiv + 153. ISBN 0-7734-8282-2, $79.95, cloth.

Generally speaking, there are two ways to oppose another philosopher's view. You can argue against it—for example, by finding counterexamples, showing that it entails various unpalatable or absurd conclusions, or by raising objections to the arguments offered in its support. Or you can offer an alternative account of the issue in question. These two sorts of responses are, of course, complementary, and Hume uses both in his attempt to reveal the errors of traditional approaches to ethics. While Hume's negative arguments against rationalist moral theories—including the related attacks on the role of reason in motivation (T II iii 3) and in our moral judgments (T III i 1)—are justly famous, they have been criticized on a number of grounds. Hume has been charged with mischaracterizing the position of his rationalist opponents, with violating some of his own positions on the structure of reason and the passions, and with relying on *ad hoc* replies to objections he anticipates will be brought against his own arguments.

One strategy for interpreting these problematic negative arguments would be to read them in light of Hume's own positive view of morality. Daniel J. Shaw, however, takes the opposite approach. His monograph, *Reason and Feeling in Hume's Action Theory and Moral Philosophy: Hume's Reasonable Passion*, is devoted to understanding Hume's antirationalist arguments in almost complete isolation from his positive account. (In the final chapter, however, Shaw briefly examines what a Humean account of virtue might be, given the claim that moral judgements are feelings.) Shaw carefully considers many of the obvious objections to Hume's antirationalism, and tries to show that, for the most part, they miss their mark. This is a valiant attempt to rescue Hume from his own errors; but I cannot say that I am wholly convinced by Shaw's defense.

Shaw's most innovative move is his interpretation of the calm passions. Hume introduces these in order to explain why philosophers and nonphilosophers alike have assumed that reason could determine our conduct, even when our passions are absent or when they push us in the wrong direction. In T II iii 3, Hume argues that this is a mistaken picture of motivation, claiming, in an argument that Shaw endorses (albeit with some qualifications), that feelings are primary in the causal production of action. Even in those cases where we might think that feelings are not operative—when deliberating about whether to do our laundry today or tomorrow—we are moved by "a general appetite to good, and aversion to evil" or by some other "instinct originally implanted in our nature" (T 417), the calmness of which makes us overlook its

passional nature. We know the feeling more by its effects than "by the immediate feeling or sensation" (T 417). Shaw follows Stroud and others in worrying that Hume's introduction of the calm passions is *ad hoc*, a result of his holding on to his thesis in the face of persuasive evidence against it (58-60). Like Stroud, he worries that Hume is not entitled to the claim that we misunderstand what is at work in our minds (taking a calm passion to be an aspect of reason), given his commitment to the thesis that "we cannot be mistaken about the contents of our own minds at any given moment" (59).[1]

Shaw attempts to help Hume escape these criticisms by suggesting that the calm passions should be understood as unactualized dispositions to have desires were the person in question to think about the relevant objects and, moreover, that these dispositions can cause various kinds of behavior even when unactualized (64–75). Since these dispositions involve feelings, Hume may consistently maintain that all motivation is based on passion. And since they are recognizable by the agent when she does consider the relevant object of the desire, there is evidence in favor of their existence without their being *ad hoc* improvisations or their violating his commitment to the incorrigibility of the mental (77–79).

I think that Shaw's suggestion raises many more problems than it solves. First, Hume is famously and rightly wary of relying on dispositions in his explanations of natural phenomena (T 171). The problem is that, on Hume's view of causation, to say that an unactualized disposition causes certain kinds of behavior requires that there be a constant conjunction between the disposition and the behavior (T 171). But since the disposition is not a datable event, how do we know that the disposition is conjoined with one kind of behavior rather than another? Moreover, Hume thinks that both the cause and effect must be observable in order for our ideas of them to become associated (T 171); but then what does it mean to say that we can observe an unactualized disposition? Shaw tries to evade this complaint by suggesting that the disposition's physiological basis might be the actual cause of the relevant behavior (70). But this does not help Hume. His project is to "explain the nature and principles of the human mind," without resorting to physiology, the science of which was (and is) rather primitive (T 8). Either the disposition manifests itself perceptually, and these perceptions are the relevant objects for Hume's investigation, or it manifests itself directly in action, and Hume would treat it as an original principle of human nature.

In addition, it seems to me that Hume's original suggestion about calm passions is in a better position than Shaw and Stroud allow. Hume does not say that these passions have no feeling; rather he says that they are attended with such "little emotion in the mind" (T 417), that we do not normally pay much attention to them, and that in some cases we do not notice them at all (and hence mistake them for reason). To understand these claims we need to distinguish two different perspectives we can take on our own minds. One is the

perspective of common life. When we are immersed in the world, in the grip of whatever feelings might happen to be within us, we are not aware of the perceptions in terms of which our minds operate. By contrast, when we take up the perspective of philosophy and introspectively investigate our own minds, we "observe" (T 252) the perceptions that constitute them. Hume's commitment to the incorrigibility of the mental applies only to philosophical self-scrutiny. (Even then, since there is no difference in kind between philosophical thinking and the sorts of thinking we engage in in common life, the mental propensities we have to confuse certain kinds of experiences for one another are still operative, as in the belief in personal identity described at T I iv 6.) And so Hume's claim that calm passions motivate certain kinds of behavior seems to be based on the fact that introspection reveals the presence of passions even when in common life we might not have realized it. He is quite willing to acknowledge that, outside of philosophical contexts, we are often unsure whether a given experience (say a dream [T 2]) is an impression or an idea.

Because Shaw ignores Hume's distinction between the perspective of common life and the philosophical-introspective perspective, he runs into trouble elsewhere in his defense of Hume's theory of motivation. The deeper challenge to Hume's theory does not come from his reliance on a doctrine about the calm passions but from his assumption that reason consists only in the capacity to recognize demonstrative and probabilistic relations. Contemporary rationalists such as Christine Korsgaard,[2] Jean Hampton,[3] and Stephen Darwall[4] accuse Hume of having simply missed out on the practical role of reason. Shaw only discusses a generic version of that complaint. His response is that even when reason influences our beliefs about some course of action, unless we *care* about—have some kind of feeling towards—whether we are wasting our time (or some such thing), the change in belief will make no difference to our action. Reason's influence is mediated by desire (13-23). I think the neorationalists would find this response unsatisfactory. They need not deny that in explaining a person's behavior we appeal to various beliefs and desires to get at the cognitive and motivating elements involved in it. Their concern, however, is that this does not speak to what Korsgaard calls *the normative question* that each of us must face as agents, one version of which asks: Ought I to do what my desires attract me to?[5] This is not a question to be answered from the causal-explanatory stance Hume takes up when he introspectively examines the mind. It is a question that speaks to our conception of ourselves as agents in common life. It is a question that Hume, and Shaw, ignore.

This is not to say that they might not be right to reject the Korsgaardian normative question. But it is here that Shaw's narrow focus on the negative side of Hume's ethical project, the antirationalist arguments, lets him down. For the normative question presupposes a certain understanding of our being

in charge of our lives, of our leading them on our own terms—of autonomy. Hume, however, often seems to see our lives as happening to us, as being largely out of our control. The natural virtues, for example, are not a product of our self-conscious willings, but are instead the result of our spontaneously manifesting patterns of behavior to which others respond positively (T III ii 1); and the character traits that lie behind these patterns are largely immune to revision or radical change (T 608). Whether this portrayal of human life fits with our considered convictions, including those about what is involved in our behavior and how we fit into nature, is, it seems to me, what is at stake in the disagreements between Humeans and the rationalists of both early modern and more recent vintage.

Shaw provides careful analyses of Hume's arguments against moral rationalism and he offers some ingenious examples in their support. Nevertheless, he never takes on the admittedly difficult task of defending the larger moral world view in which Hume locates his arguments. And it is this task that needs to be done to achieve real success in a defense of an antirationalist position.

## NOTES

1. For Stroud's version of these worries, see *Hume* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), 163–165.

2. "The Normativity of Instrumental Reason," in Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut, eds., *Ethics and Practical Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 215–254.

3. "Does Hume Have an Instrumentalist Conception of Practical Reason?" *Hume Studies* 21 (1995), 57–74.

4. *The British Moralists and the Internal "Ought," 1640–1740* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

5. *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Korsgaard's primary version of the normative question asks, "Why ought I to do what morality requires?" (9–10). But she recognizes that the question emerges in other guises, such as "whether we really have reason to yield to [certain] desires" (56). She discusses the role of desire in human motivation and its relation to the normative question most fully at 238–242.

DONALD C. AINSLIE
Department of Philosophy
University of Toronto
Toronto, Ontario M5S 1A1
Canada
dainslie@chass.utoronto.ca