



Review of Sophie Botros. *Hume, Reason and Morality: A Legacy of Contradiction*

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Sophie Botros. *Hume, Reason and Morality: A Legacy of Contradiction*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006. Pp. 253. ISBN 0-415-33180-3, Cloth, \$140.

Sophie Botros claims that there is a contradiction in one of Hume's famous arguments for the superiority of his sentimental conception of morality over moral rationalism. The argument, formulated in part 1 of Book 3 of the *Treatise of Human Nature*, and known in the recent secondary literature as the *influence argument*, is intended to show that "moral distinctions [are] not derived from reason" because reason is unable to account for the practicality of morality.

Botros's main thesis is that the contradiction lies in the second premise of the argument. She claims that Hume gives different formulations of that premise—"no less than nine" (1) according to the author—revealing the presence of two contradictory lines in his thought on this topic. On the one hand, Hume holds that reason can, and does, influence action, though only alongside an independent desire; on the other, he holds that reason has no, and couldn't have, any motivational role: reason is a "wholly inactive" and "perfectly inert" (6) faculty. Botros aims to clarify this "universally ignored" (1) contradiction in a way which provides not only a better understanding of Hume's *Treatise*, but also an adequate schema to evaluate, and eventually solve, many recent meta-ethical debates on moral motivation that have the influence argument's contradiction as their main source of inspiration. I shall concentrate on those parts of the book directly dealing with Hume's work.

Botros's strategy is to explore the supposed contradiction by considering the practicality argument "*as if* there were compressed within its apparent unitary structure" (1) two different arguments, depending on which of the contradictory readings of the second premise is assumed. She argues that locating Hume's discussion in its proper historical context, reveals that Hume had two different targets, the moral rationalists like Clarke and Cudworth and the moral sense theory defended by Francis Hutcheson. This supposedly explains the different formulations of the influence argument.

Botros's hypothesis is fascinating, innovative, and she moves comfortably through history of philosophy, moral philosophy, and metaethics. But she starts from a questionable assumption, namely that there are radical differences among the formulations of the so-called second premise of the influence argument, differences so great that the only way to avoid contradiction in Hume's theory of motivation is to suppose that the influence argument is addressed to two different kinds of opponent, that is Francis Hutcheson and the moral rationalists, such as Cudworth and Clarke. However, despite all the arguments

Botros offers in favour of her interpretation, we have reason to be skeptical about her conclusion.

Botros finds the most prominent example of the two conflicting strands in T 2.3.3. The first strand comprises two movements: first, that the “proper province” of demonstrative reason’s is “the world of ideas” whereas “the will always places us in that of realities”, thus demonstration and volition “seem . . . to be totally removed from each other” [T 2.3.3.2]; second, that passions do not contain “any representative quality,” and so cannot “be oppos’d by, or be contradictory to truth and reason” [T 2.3.3.5]. Botros claims these two passages point in the same direction: passions and belief belong to totally different worlds and “between these two worlds even causal interaction seemed inconceivable” (25). This implies that beliefs cannot have any influence on our conduct. This line of argument, Botros argues, stands in direct conflict with the second strand, namely that reason *can* have a causal influence on action. Reason and passion contribute differently to the causal processes leading to action: reason provides information on how best to satisfy passions, which themselves determine practical ends. Although these causal contributions of the two are different, the second line of reasoning stresses, contrary to the first, that reason and desire are “equally important causal partners” (11).

I find Botros’s interpretation unconvincing. When Hume says in T. 2.3.3 that reason is inert because its proper province is the world of ideas or that reason is inactive because it deals with copies rather than “original existences,” he doesn’t want to say that reason cannot have *any* influence on passions and actions. His point is rather that it cannot have an *original influence* on them. Hume’s denial of the practical influence of reason must be read in the light of the broader context of the questions addressed in T. 2.3.3 which regard the *ultimate source* of the impulses that are motives for the will. This thesis is not inconsistent with other passages in T 2.3.3 where Hume argues that causal belief can influence particular desires. Take, for instance, Hume’s example of the belief that the fruit before me has a delicious relish, causally associated with the desire to eat it. Here Hume doesn’t say that the content of this belief is the original cause of my interest in the fruit. That is an antecedent impulse. The belief can only direct this original inclination and thus, strictly speaking, cannot originate the concern for the fruit. Contrary to Botros’s hypothesis, it seems to me that T 2.3.3 does not show that Hume has two different and mutually exclusive theories of motivation, one stating reason’s inertia and the other stressing its causal power. Its main thesis merely stresses the distinction between what constitutes an original propensity or aversion and what directs these passions. The motivational asymmetry between reason and passions is nothing but this.

The most important discussion of motivation in Book 2 reveals no ambiguity regarding the role of reason in the complex process that causes human actions. The main thesis is that there is an asymmetry between reason and passions because, while the passions or dispositions of an agent can be original sources of motivation, reason cannot. Reason only points out the causes and the effects of the objects, but they are of no concern if we have no prior impulse from the passionate source of human nature. Contrary to Botros, Book 2 does not seem to give much support to the idea that Hume has two different and contradictory theories on the role of reason in motivation, and it seems to me that we have no good reason to interpret the influence argument in the way Botros suggests.

How should we interpret it? The point Hume stresses is simply that because, as experience teaches us, moral distinctions can have an *original influence* on our passions and conduct, while reason can't, morality must be located directly in the passions. As Hume argues in the T 3.1.2, they are peculiar pleasures or pains that we feel when we contemplate our or others' character in an unbiased way. How should we explain the practicality of moral sentiments? Botros argues that we can formulate three different hypotheses: 1) moral sentiments are causally sufficient for motivation; 2) moral judgments have a conceptual link with motivation; 3) moral judgments determine us to behave morally. I cannot discuss in detail every argument Botros advances when dealing with these interpretations. Anyway, it seems to me that the general problem of her discussion is that it is too much influenced by what has been called the "Humean theory of motivation." According to this theory desire is the only motivating passion. Hume's depiction of motivating passions and his interest in their genesis, however, yields a richer and more complex account of our motivational psychology than the contemporary Humean theory of motivation allows.

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