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*Hume Studies* Volume 34, Number 2, (2008) pp. 189–208.

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# Practical Reasoning and Practical Reasons in Hume

KARL SCHAFER

*Abstract:* Hume's discussion of the role of reason in the practical sphere is often read to imply two broad, negative claims: first, that passions and actions can (at most) only be regarded as responsive to reasons in so far as they are either in agreement with or contrary to the instrumental implications of other passions or desires. And second, that there is no properly practical form of inference or reasoning. I argue that Hume's general understanding of practical reason does not support either of these claims. Rather, Hume's explicit discussion of these issues—like his discussion of the nature of probable inference—is intended to lay the foundation for a naturalist account of practical thought that we would today regard as embodying a substantive, non-instrumentalist theory of practical rationality. This account will, indeed, make reason the “slave of the passions,” but in a very different sense than the one familiar from most contemporary discussions of Hume.

Can desires and actions be evaluated as responsive or unresponsive to reasons, in ways that extend beyond the instrumental implications of one's (other) desires? And does there exist any form of inference or reasoning that is practical in nature? Hume is generally supposed to have given an unambiguously negative reply to both of these questions. In particular, he is often taken to have held that no desire, passion, or action may ever be said to be opposed to reasons, except (perhaps) in so far as it is based on a false belief or confused piece of means-ends reasoning.

And he is generally taken to have held that the existence of some sort of peculiarly practical form of inference or reasoning is fundamentally incompatible with the nature of the human mind.

These two theses, *the rejection of non-instrumental reasons for action* and *the rejection of practical inference*, have come to be so closely associated with Hume that they are often taken to constitute the essence of his moral psychology. But I will argue that neither offers an accurate representation of Hume's understanding of these issues. Hume never sought to deny that desires, passions, and actions can be criticized from a normative perspective even when they involve no failure of instrumental rationality. And while Hume did equate our inferential faculties with our faculties for demonstrative and probable reasoning, it is far from clear that his actual account of probable reasoning gives us any reason to limit our conception of inference so that every form of practical thought is excluded from its scope. Thus, far from being a great opponent of practical reason, Hume is best understood as developing a naturalistic understanding of the mind that leaves room for the attribution to human beings of a quite substantial and philosophically interesting sort of practical rationality.<sup>1</sup>

In considering these questions, I will proceed as follows. First, I will identify three main senses in which we might speak of reason as a mental faculty, and will begin to explain which of them I take to have been the target of Hume's discussion of reason and its limits. Second, I will discuss Hume's famous argument that "'tis not contrary to reason" to have any passion or desire, and will argue that this argument—properly understood—is intended by Hume to establish a conclusion quite different from the instrumentalism about practical reason that is often attributed to him. Third, I will criticize a popular alternative reading of Hume that attributes to him a sort of generalized skepticism about practical reason in the contemporary sense of this term. And, finally, I will present my preferred reading of Hume on these issues—a reading that shows the way in which Hume's views are in fact compatible with what we today would regard as a quite robust form of practical reason.

### (1) Three Conceptions of Reason

Of course, Hume does argue vigorously against the existence of practical reason in several important senses of the term. So to argue against the traditional way of understanding Hume, we must first distinguish the conception of reason that interests the historical Hume in his engagements with the rationalism of his time from the conception of reason relevant to contemporary debates about practical reason. Three conceptions of reason or rationality are particularly relevant here:

- 1) *Reason as Demonstrative and Probable Inference*: according to this conception of reason, reason is defined simply as the faculty of demonstrative and probable inference.

- 2) *Reason as Inference in General*: according to this conception of reason, reason is defined as the faculty of making inferences of all kinds.<sup>2</sup>
- 3) *Reason as a Responsiveness to Reasons*: according to this conception of reason, reason is defined as the capability to respond appropriately to reasons, whatever form such responsiveness takes.<sup>3</sup> With respect to this last conception of reason, we may say that someone is unresponsive to reasons when they fail to be appropriately responsive to considerations we take to have the force of reasons in some area.<sup>4</sup>

Obviously, these three notions of “reason” characterize the faculty or capacity of “reason” in quite different ways. For example, while the third of these notions of reason is plainly normative in character, the first is primarily psychological—although it may have normative implications. The status of the second notion, on the other hand, will depend a good deal on how one thinks of the category of “inference.” For some philosophers, this will be a purely psychological category. But for others, to call a transition in thought an instance of inference will be to say something normative about it.<sup>5</sup>

Nonetheless one thing that is common to all of these conceptions of reason is the idea that reason is a mental faculty or capacity. And to some readers this may already suggest a view of reason at odds with Hume’s own. For Hume’s understanding of psychology is often interpreted so as to involve a general opposition to talk of mental faculties of any sort.

There is no doubt that there are passages in Hume that make this reading a natural one. For example, Hume does criticize those who “say, that any phenomenon which puzzles them arises from a faculty or an occult quality, and there [find] an end of all dispute and enquiry upon the matter” (T 1.4.3.10; SBN 224). But it should be relatively clear that in making such comments Hume is not criticizing the very idea of a mental faculty in general—for in fact, Hume constantly refers to mental faculties of various sorts throughout the *Treatise*. Rather, what Hume is criticizing in such passages is the attempt to make the idea of a faculty carry real explanatory weight. In particular, for Hume, the only idea of a faculty that we can make good sense of is the idea of a power to produce certain processes or events. Thus, the only idea of a mental faculty we have available to us is the idea of a power to produce certain mental processes—for example, the power to produce instances of demonstrative and probable reasoning.<sup>6</sup> Hume has no complaint about the idea of a faculty in this minimal sense; all he wants to insist on is that an appeal to faculties *in this sense* cannot do any robust explanatory work, since there is nothing more to the idea of a faculty for A’ing over and above the idea of a power to A. Thus, while Hume does object to the *use* that the notion of faculty is put to in certain traditional accounts of the mind—as Hume reads them, at least—he has no objection to attribution of

various mental faculties to the mind, provided these faculties are understood in the minimal way just outlined.

For these reasons, there is nothing misleading about reading Hume's references to reason as references to a mental faculty in this broad sense. But which of the three notions of reason *qua* faculty does Hume have in mind when he uses the term?

Whatever Hume means by "reason" (in its "proper" sense), he takes it to be coextensive with the first of these definitions—Reason1.<sup>7</sup> For example, he repeatedly argues that certain ideas cannot be derived from reason alone by arguing that they can be derived from neither demonstrative nor probable reasoning. Thus, at the very least, there can be no doubt that Hume was interested in arguing against a certain conception of moral or practical reason, namely that variety of rationalism which claims that the discovery of moral or practical reasons or distinctions proceeds via purely demonstrative reasoning of the sort familiar from mathematics or logic.<sup>8</sup> But while such a conception of practical reasoning was certainly very much in the philosophical air in Hume's day (in, for example, the writings of Clarke and arguably Locke), it is hardly what most modern proponents of a robust conception of practical reason have in mind in their debates with later-day Humeans.<sup>9</sup> And so, it would be a mistake to infer a commitment to a "Humean," *purely* instrumentalist view of practical reason in the sense of Reason3 from Hume's rejection of a form of Reason1 that is properly practical in nature.<sup>10</sup>

What, then, of the other two notions of reason noted above. With respect to the first of these—Reason2—the *Treatise* indicates that Hume also means his references to "reason" to pick out all and only those faculties that are inferential in nature.<sup>11</sup> Thus Hume appears to believe that the only forms of inference available to human beings are those falling under the heading of Reason1: namely, demonstrative and probable inference. In so equating Reason1 with Reason2, Hume is, for the most part, breaking no new philosophical ground. And so it is not surprising that Hume says rather little in the *Treatise* in defense of this conception of the limits of our inferential faculties.

Nonetheless the claim that these are the only forms of inference available to us is controversial. And, in fact, given the manner in which Hume characterizes probable inference, he is in a much weaker position than many philosophers to claim that there is any deep distinction between probable inference and certain patterns of mental association that are practical in nature. I discuss this issue in more detail elsewhere, but let me say a few words about it here before moving on.

From Hume's perspective, the activity of reasoning or drawing inferences is just one way in which perceptions may be caused by one another within the human mind. Thus to understand the limits of our inferential faculties, we must identify those sequences of mental association which deserve to be regarded as instances of inference. Thinking about the scope of "inference" in this way is

important, because Hume often stresses the ways in which probable inference is similar to certain patterns of association between *passions*. For example, consider the association of passions with other passions that occurs, according to Hume, whenever we experience one of the indirect passions such as pride or humility.<sup>12</sup> In this case, we come to associate the pleasure or pain that is associated with some object or quality related to ourselves with a further pleasurable or painful passion (of pride or humility) that is itself associated with ourselves. Thus, much like probable reasoning, experiencing an indirect passion, according to Hume, involves a regular disposition to associate certain perceptions with each other. And, just as in the case of probable reasoning, Hume believes that we should correct our innate disposition to make these associations via the application of general rules that are derived (at least in part) from the demand that these dispositions not vary from agent to agent (or from perspective to perspective) in a manner that would make inter-subjective agreement in our reactions impossible. Finally Hume stresses the fact that the associations involved in probable reasoning are not based in further reasoning of any sort, just as is also true of the associations involved in experiencing an indirect passion.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, for Hume, probable inference shares many important characteristics with certain patterns of passionate response—something that leads Hume to repeatedly stress the analogies between his account of probable reasoning and his account of these passionate responses. For example:

To illustrate this hypothesis [concerning the nature of pride and humility], we may compare it to that, by which I have already explain'd the belief attending the judgments, which we form from causation. . . . There is evidently a great analogy betwixt that hypothesis, and our present one of an impression and idea, that transfuse themselves into another impression and idea by means of their double relation. (T 2.1.5.11; SBN 289–90)

But if the account that Hume provides of the nature of probable reasoning is really so *very* similar to the account he gives of the nature of the associations between passions involved in the indirect passions, is there enough of a difference between these two cases to warrant our calling one, but not the other, a sort of inference?

Hume's reason for restricting his use of "inference" in this way is that he takes it as obvious that whatever inferences are, their conclusion can only involve assenting to an idea—as opposed to forming a new impression (either of sensation or of reflection).<sup>14</sup> And of course the distinction between ideas and impressions is, in many ways, the most basic in Hume's philosophy. So I don't want to suggest here that Hume has no reason to limit his talk of inference in the manner he does.<sup>15</sup> All that I do want to suggest is that this distinction is, in many ways, less deep for Hume than it might at first appear—something that fits well with the suggestion,

developed below, that the distinction between inferential forms of mental association and non-inferential forms of association does not have the sort of normative significance for Hume that it does for some other philosophers.<sup>16</sup>

**(2) “’Tis not contrary to reason . . . .”**

This brings us to Hume’s attitude towards the existence of practical reason in the third sense mentioned above—that is, to practical reason *qua* responsiveness to reasons for action, i.e., Reason3. Now, as I noted above, Hume is often taken to have denied that desires, passions, and actions may be contrary to reasons in any sense that extends beyond the various forms of instrumental irrationality.<sup>17</sup> But, in fact, Hume’s discussion of these issues—when understood properly—does not support the attribution to him of this instrumentalist view of practical responsiveness to reasons. And his general discussion of how we may evaluate desires, passions, and actions from a normative perspective makes it clear that his understanding of these issues allows for the normative evaluation of passions on grounds that extend beyond any sort of instrumental inconsistency. Thus, far from being an instrumentalist about the nature of reasons for action, Hume was very willing to allow for the existence of reasons for action of a non-instrumental sort.

With respect to these issues, the key passage is generally taken to be the following:

What may first occur on this head, is, that as nothing can be contrary to truth or reason, except what has a reference to it, and as the judgments of our understanding only have this reference, it must follow, that passions can be contrary to reason only so far as they are *accompany’d* with some judgment or opinion. According to this principle, which is so obvious and natural, ’tis only in two senses that any affection can be called unreasonable. *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 choose means insufficient for the design’d end, and deceive ourselves in our judgment of causes and effects. Where a passion is neither founded on false suppositions, nor chooses means insufficient for the end, the understanding can neither justify nor condemn it. ’Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger. (T 2.3.3.6; SBN 415–16)

Hume continues here with dramatic examples of this sort, and it is certainly easy to be misled by the florid rhetoric he conjures up in this passage and those that

follow it. But while this passage is often taken to involve the denial that passions are responsive to non-instrumental reasons for action in a normative sense, and despite the reference to when they may be called “unreasonable,” what is at issue here—as is the case throughout the *Treatise’s* discussions of these issues—is *not* whether or not passions can be approved of or contrary to *reasons* in a normative sense, but rather the more restricted question of whether desires, passions, and actions may be approved of or contrary to *reason* or the understanding understood as a mental faculty. In other words, Hume’s concern here is solely with the question of whether the Humean *faculty* of reason can approve of or be contrary to some desire, passion, or action. And so, given Hume’s understanding of reason as the faculty of making demonstrative and probable inferences, the passage quoted here is meant by Hume only to establish the thesis that desires, passions, and actions may only be opposed to demonstrative or inductive reasoning when they are based on false beliefs or involve an insufficient choice of means.<sup>18</sup>

Of course, this interpretation of Hume’s use of “reason” in passages such as this one is far from uncontroversial. But there is a growing consensus among Hume scholars that Hume’s usage of this term—and, in particular, his discussions of whether various forms of thought or association should be regarded as “determin’d by reason”—should be read to consistently refer to reason in the facultistic sense under discussion here. Now, it is important to stress here that there are a number of ways of fleshing out this basic idea. For example, one might try to understand Hume’s use of “reason” to refer to some sort of limited (more or less Lockean) faculty for *intermediate* inference.<sup>19</sup> Or one might, as I have been doing here, understand his usage of “reason” to refer to a general faculty for demonstrative and probable inference of all sorts.<sup>20</sup> But whichever of these readings one prefers, reading Hume’s discussion of the relationship between reason and the passions in light of the general interpretative point common to both these views makes it clear that his target in these passages is not any sort of general claim about the normative status of desires, passions, and actions—but rather a much narrower claim about the relationship between passions (etc) and a particular faculty of the human mind.<sup>21</sup>

Hume makes this particularly clear when he asks whether the “understanding” can justify or condemn any particular passion. Hume sometimes uses this term to refer to the faculty of reason, as seems to me to be the case here, and sometimes to refer to our cognitive faculties in general—including the senses, memory, and so on, in addition to reason. But, in both cases, he always uses it to pick out a mental faculty.<sup>22</sup> Thus, as is in general true of Hume’s claims about reason in the *Treatise*, the claim Hume is arguing for in these passages is not a normative claim, but rather a *causal* claim about a particular mental faculty—in this case, that the faculty of making demonstrative or probable inferences cannot cause desires, passions, and actions *by approving of or opposing them*. Or, perhaps better, that the transition from an idea to a passion is never itself an *instance* of demonstrative or probable

inference.<sup>23</sup> And this claim, unless we are tempted by a rationalism of Clarke's sort, should not be terribly controversial today—although it was controversial at the time Hume was writing. In particular, what Hume is arguing for here in no way implies that desires, passions, and actions cannot be contrary to non-instrumental considerations that have the status of reasons—only that we cannot become aware of such reasons through demonstrative or probable reasoning alone.

Much the same is true of the passages in which Hume claims that passions and actions can never be deemed unreasonable on non-instrumental grounds. For it is important to note that Hume generally uses terms like “reasonable” within the *Treatise* to refer to something other than the responsiveness to normative reasons of a passion or other mental state.<sup>24</sup> Rather, Hume generally uses this term in a more restricted sense according to which something is unreasonable just when it is contrary to the *faculty* of Humean reason—something that should hardly be surprising given the proper interpretation of Hume's use of the term “reason.”

Thus, when Hume attacks the idea that actions may be called reasonable or unreasonable, his intention is *not* to attack the notion that actions may be contrary to what we today would call “reasons for action”—rather, his aim is solely to make a point about the relationship between action and reason *qua* the faculty for making demonstrative and probable inferences. For example, consider the following passage:

For it proves directly, that actions do not derive their merit from a conformity to reason, nor their blame from a contrariety to it; and it proves the same truth more indirectly, by showing us, that as reason can never immediately prevent or produce any action by contradicting or approving it, it cannot be the source of the distinction betwixt moral good and evil. Actions may be laudable or blameable; but they cannot be reasonable or unreasonable: Laudable or blameable, therefore, are not the same with reasonable or unreasonable. (T 3.1.1.10; SBN 458)

If unreasonable were meant here in the normative sense of being contrary to reasons, then this passage would certainly pose grave difficulties for the interpretation I am defending. But as the beginning of this quote makes very clear, what is at issue here is not this, but instead the familiar issue of whether or not actions may be contrary to Humean *faculty of reason*. And Hume's claims about *this* issue do not have any direct bearing on the question of whether actions may be contrary to certain sorts of *reasons* in a normative sense. Thus passages like the one just quoted leave it entirely open whether desires can be thought of as responsive to reasons for action in the contemporary sense of the term.

Finally, consider Hume's famous discussion of reason and sentiment in Appendix 1 to the second *Enquiry*. There he writes:

It appears evident, that the ultimate ends of human actions can never, in any case, be accounted for by *reason*, but recommend themselves entirely to the sentiments and affections of mankind, without any dependence on the intellectual faculties. Ask a man, *why he uses exercise*; he will answer, *because he desires to keep his health*. If you enquire, *why he desires health*, he will readily reply, *because sickness is painful*. If you push your enquiries farther, and desire a reason, *why he hates pain*, it is impossible that he can ever give any. This is an ultimate end, and is never referred to any other object. (EPM App 1.18; SBN 293)

As above, it is not unnatural to read this passage as an endorsement of an instrumentalist account of reasons for action. But once again, Hume's primary focus in this passage is not this question, but rather the question of whether it is the Humean faculty of reason, as opposed to sentiment, that determines the ultimate ends we accept. On this question, Hume comes down clearly on the side of sentiment—but doing so is compatible with any number of views about the relationship between *normative* reasons and sentiment.

In fact, what Hume goes on to say about ultimate ends in this passage actually speaks against the attribution to him of instrumentalism. For while Hume does claim here that what we *take* to be our ultimate ends is determined by our passions, he goes on to describe one of these ultimate ends—pleasure—as something that is “desirable on its own account” (EPM App. 1.19; SBN 293). And saying that something is desirable simply *on its own account* and not for any *further* reason is very different from saying either that there is *no* reason why pleasure is desirable or that pleasure is desirable *because it is (directly or indirectly) desired*. Thus, Hume's view here seems to be that certain ends, e.g., pleasure, are desirable simply as such, which, at least *prima facie*, sits awkwardly with an instrumentalist account of their desirability.<sup>25</sup>

In this way, when we read the passages in which Hume discusses the relationship between reason and the passions carefully against the background of Hume's general usage of these terms, it becomes clear that Hume's intention in these passages was never to argue for the sort of instrumentalism that contemporary Humeans about practical rationality endorse. For these passages are not meant by Hume to say anything *directly* about practical rationality in the sense of responsiveness to normative reasons.

### (3) Global Skepticism about Practical Reason in Hume

In a moment, I will go beyond this purely negative point to argue that Hume did accept that reasons for action of a non-instrumental sort (in the contemporary sense of these terms) exist. Thus, far from being any sort of instrumentalist about

practical reason *qua* responsiveness to reasons, Hume is best understood as endorsing a conception of the nature of reasons for action according to which our actions or desires can be unresponsive to such reasons even when they are perfectly consistent with our other desires and passions.

Before I argue for this claim, though, I want to first say a few words about an alternative reading of Hume that has become increasingly popular in recent years. This reading agrees with me that Hume is not any sort of instrumentalist about practical reason, but it does so for very different reasons than the ones I will be endorsing below. For this reading understands his attacks on practical reasoning as having *global* validity. In other words, according to this reading, Hume is not an instrumentalist about practical reason because he is in fact a *skeptic* about practical reason in *all its forms*.

Now, as should already be clear, there is a sense in which this claim is compatible with my interpretation of Hume. For there is a sense of “reason” with respect to which Hume does deny that there is anything corresponding to the idea of practical reason—namely the sense of reason in which this just *is* the faculty of demonstrative and probable inference. But this sort of “skepticism” about practical rationality is neither particularly controversial nor particularly interesting as a philosophical position today. And there is at least one further sense of “reason” with respect to which I intend to argue that Hume does accept the existence of practical reason in a quite robust sense—namely practical reason *qua* a responsiveness to reasons for action.

This is a claim that *is* at odds with the attribution to Hume of a thoroughgoing skepticism about practical reason. So before moving on to present my reading of Hume on these issues, I want to say something about why such a reading of Hume seems to me to be mistaken. The reading of Hume that I have in mind here is best represented by Elijah Millgram’s excellent essay, “Was Hume a Humean?”<sup>26</sup> Much as I have done here, Millgram answers this question negatively, but he then goes on to attribute to Hume a thoroughgoing skepticism about all forms of practical rationality that is deeply at odds with my interpretation. For instance, Millgram writes that “Hume holds the rather more minimalist view that there are no legitimate forms of practical reasoning: he is, to adapt a phrase of Christine Korsgaard’s, a skeptic about practical reasoning” (Millgram, 79). And this, for Millgram, is not just a point about reason in the limited sense of demonstrative or probable inference. Rather, Millgram argues that whenever and however our passions and desires are sensitive to changes in our beliefs, “this sensitivity is not itself an aspect of rationality, and a failure of such sensitivity does not expose one to the criticism that one is being irrational” (Millgram, 81).

One of my primary aims throughout this essay is to argue for exactly the opposite reading of Hume. For, as I just discussed, I believe that Hume’s arguments against the possibility of practical reason only apply to reason in the *narrow* sense

of the faculty for demonstrative and probable inference, and, as I will discuss in a moment, I also believe that Hume *implicitly* accepts a broader conception of practical rationality according to which it is perfectly possible for the way in which one's passions are sensitive to changes in one's beliefs to be irrational *in the sense of being unresponsive to reasons*. Thus if my views on these issues are to be defended, it is plain that I must say something here about why Millgram's reading, despite all of its merits, misses the mark.

Not surprisingly, part of the problem here lies in the manner in which Hume makes use of the term "reason," and the ways in which this use is at odds with the contemporary use of this term.<sup>27</sup> For if the interpretation of Hume's use of this term that I am defending is correct, much of the apparent evidence for Millgram's interpretation evaporates. But there is another problem with Millgram's reading of Hume that is relevant and which deserves more detailed consideration: namely, the relationship between Hume's conception of practical rationality and his semantic theory.

In his essay, Millgram suggests that Hume's understanding of representation and mental content is closely connected to his theory of practical rationality. This seems to me entirely correct. But, of course, if we are to draw the correct conclusions about Hume's theory of practical rationality from his semantic theory, we must get his semantic theory right. And here Millgram makes a common but important mistake.

Millgram's understanding of Hume's semantic theory begins and ends with what he calls "the causal resemblance theory of mental content," a theory which claims that the content of mental representations is a matter of the way in which they *resemble* the "objects or impressions from which they are deriv'd" (Millgram, 83). But while there can be little doubt that such causal resemblance is of particular importance for Hume's semantic theory, such resemblance does not exhaust the resources of his account. Rather, as Hume's theory of abstract ideas makes clear, two ideas may differ in their representational qualities for Hume despite being perfectly alike in terms of what they resemble *and* despite both being derived from the same original impression. For example, I may copy the impression of a coffee cup in front me and, by associating the resulting idea with different "revival sets" of further ideas, generate two abstract ideas—say, one of cuphood and the other of whiteness—that have different semantic properties despite having identical relations of resemblance and identical origins (in terms of the impression from which they are derived).<sup>28</sup>

What this means is that Hume's account of the intentional content of a given mental state is considerably more complex than Millgram's discussion suggests. And this point is directly relevant to Millgram's argument that Hume's account of intentional content forces him to be a skeptic about practical reasoning in all its forms.

For Millgram, the key point is that Hume's semantic theory (as he understands it) makes it impossible for Hume to attribute *any* sort of intentional content to the mental states that Hume believes to be capable of directly motivating us to action (e.g., passions and desires). Thus, Millgram writes, "the semantic theory that is the engine of his [Hume's] views is unable to distinguish between types of reasons for action, and so when it is put into gear, it makes a clean sweep of all of them. The motivational states that are the only candidates for reasons for action turn out to have no contents. And content-free mental states cannot be reasons, instrumental or otherwise" (Millgram, 87). This last point is far from uncontroversial. But even if we accept it, once we broaden our understanding of Hume's semantic theory to include the additional elements Millgram neglects, there is no reason to claim that passions and desires are free from intentional content *of all kinds*.

In fact, Hume is quite clear that passions do possess an important sort of intentional content, corresponding roughly to the idea that passions and desires possess objects with a *conative* direction of fit. For Humean passions possess either *objects* (in the case of indirect passions) or *ends* (in the case of direct passions such as desire and aversion). In both these cases, a passion possesses this sort of intentional content because it is causally associated in systematic ways with either the idea of its object or the idea of its end (depending on the case)—which is another important way in which the associations between some perception and other perceptions may contribute to the first perception's intentional content.<sup>29</sup> But for our purposes here, the crucial point is that because Humean passions do possess this sort of intentional content, Millgram's argument that Hume's semantic theory forces skepticism about practical reason upon him should be resisted.<sup>30</sup> For if the objects and ends of Humean passions give them a sort of conative intentional content, then the possibility remains that this sort of content allows us to think of them as rational or irrational in just the sense Millgram's Hume denies.

#### (4) Reasons for Action in Hume

What this means, *contra* Millgram, is that Hume's semantic theory gives him no particular reason to be a skeptic about practical reason in the third sense noted above. Moreover, as I've discussed above, once we recognize the deep parallels between Hume's account of our disposition to engage in probable reasoning and his account of our disposition to respond to the world through certain passions, *and* once this is combined with a careful attempt to understand how Hume uses terms like "reason" in the *Treatise*, we can see that Hume's intention in his discussion of these issues was never to argue for either an instrumentalist or a skeptical account of practical rationality.

In fact, we can see from Hume's discussion of these issues, and in particular his discussion of morality, that Hume does accept that we may intelligibly speak

about what we *today* would call the responsiveness to non-instrumental reasons of desires and passions—for he has no desire to dismiss the practice of articulating considerations that count for or against the desirability of some state of affairs *simply as such*. And whenever we have such a consideration—that is, whenever we have a consideration that one’s desires *ought* to be (directly) responsive to—we have something that has the essential properties of what we refer to *today* as a *reason* for action.<sup>31</sup>

Some might question this last point. For there are those who will want to interpret talk about reasons for action as involving a commitment to something more robust than the mere existence of considerations that count for and against the desirability of some state of affairs. But it is difficult to see what more than this is involved in our ordinary concept of a reason. And, from his discussion of similar issues in the *Treatise*, it should be clear that Hume would have little patience with attempts to inject new and more extensive metaphysical commitments into our understanding of this concept. So, for the purposes of this essay, and setting some complications aside, I will take it that some consideration C is a reason to A just in case C is something that one’s A’ing ought to be (directly) responsive to.<sup>32</sup>

Now, of course, Hume himself does *not* make use of the idea of a “reason for action” in *this* sense.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the task facing us here is to understand how to *translate* Hume’s views about the normative evaluation of passions into a contemporary idiom that gives the talk of “reasons” pride of place. But, given what he says about these issues in the *Treatise*, it seems quite clear that Hume would accept the existence of reasons for action in the sense just laid out.

This aspect of Hume’s thought is particularly clear in his discussion of the moral evaluation of passions and actions. Of course, here we must keep in mind that Hume’s focus throughout the *Treatise* is on giving *causal explanations* for and generalizations of observed phenomena relating to human nature. Thus, even though Hume’s account of morality supports the practice of giving moral reasons for and against desires simply as such, we should not expect Hume in the *Treatise* to argue for the virtue of various sorts of desires at any great length. That would, as Hume says, be the work of the “painter,” and not the “anatomist” that Hume, at least in the *Treatise*, takes himself to be (T 3.3.6.6; SBN 620–21).

This having been said, as Hume makes clear immediately after making this distinction, nothing in the *Treatise* is meant to undermine the practice of what Hume calls “practical morality.” And when it comes to this *normative* branch of philosophy, it is quite clear that Hume *does* believe that moral considerations can count for or against desires and passions that are virtuous or vicious in a way that goes beyond any sort of purely instrumental responsiveness to reasons. That is, Hume plainly accepts that the desires and passions of individuals *ought* to be responsive to moral considerations in ways that go beyond any sort of responsiveness to instrumental considerations. After all, as Hume himself notes, the moral sense

cannot itself be (plausibly) accounted for through any appeal to such considerations (EPM 6.23–25; SBN 244–45). And yet we are willing to judge that those who are not responsive to moral considerations are deficient in an important practical respect. Thus, and this is key here, the pattern of normative evaluations that Hume himself endorses does not vary with the preferences of the *subject being evaluated* in the manner one would expect if Hume endorsed an instrumentalist understanding of the nature of reasons for action. For Hume, the absence of certain moral responses counts against one practically *whatever one's background set of desires and preferences*. And so, while it may be not contrary to *Humean reason* (in the sense of demonstrative and probable inference) “to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger,” there certainly are *good reasons* not to do so—reasons we may expect that all men who are fully rational *in the sense of being responsive to reasons* will accept.

Now of course people will only be fully responsive to moral considerations *as reasons* in so far as they are possessed of a moral sense, but Hume's account of these matters allows us to treat *all those* who lack this sense as being deficient with respect to the way in which they respond practically to their surroundings. Not only can we say that someone lacking the moral sense is unresponsive to certain factors that we *happen* to find to be of great significance, we may also judge that he *ought* to be responsive to these factors, and thus that these factors are a species of reasons for action to which anyone fully responsive to such reasons will be responsive.<sup>34</sup>

Of course, as I noted before, Hume seldom makes normative claims of this sort within his major philosophical works. But this should not be surprising given his focus in these works on questions of a causal-explanatory sort. After all, we would hardly expect to encounter repeated normative moral claims within a scientific consideration of the origins of moral judgments in the human mind. But as Hume's remarks at the close of Book 3 of the *Treatise* make clear, his intention in discussing the causal origins of moral distinctions is in no way to undermine the significance that these distinctions generally have in guiding our conduct. And so, in the contemporary idiom, his intent is *not* to suggest that these (fundamentally non-instrumental) considerations should have no significance for us in our normative evaluation of others—for, in fact, Hume expects his discussion of these issues to strengthen our pre-theoretical commitment to this (non-instrumental) pattern of evaluation.

If this is right, then Hume is far from the opponent of practical rationality *qua* responsiveness to reasons for action that he is often made out to be. For in fact he is happy to acknowledge the possibility that desires and other passions may be evaluated as responsive or contrary to what we would call non-instrumental reasons for action.

Of course, there is a great deal more to say about exactly how Hume understands the sorts of considerations to which our passions and beliefs ought to be

responsive in this way. But the essence of how Hume understands this seems to be relatively clear—both in the epistemic and in the practical case. In short, I believe that for Hume a consideration is something that a passion or belief ought to be responsive to just in case *the disposition to be responsive in this way consistently elicits a passionate and lively response from us given a certain reflective point of view*.<sup>35</sup> Thus, while Hume is not an instrumentalist about reasons for action, he does ultimately give an account of such reasons, according to which they depend on our passionate responses. This idea is most explicit, of course, in Hume’s discussion of morality in the latter stages of the *Treatise*. But I believe that similar considerations can be detected behind Hume’s discussion of when a consideration should produce belief in us at the end of Book 1 as well. Unfortunately there is no space here to discuss this issue in detail.<sup>36</sup> But, at the very least, I hope to have said enough in the pages above to make it plausible that Hume’s conception of practical reason is very far from either the instrumentalist or the skeptical alternatives that are often attributed to him. Thus, I hope at least to have said enough to make it clear that there is a great deal more to be said about how Hume actually did think of what we today would call “reasons for action” and “reasons for belief.”

## NOTES

This essay has benefited from the help of many readers. First and foremost, I owe a special debt of gratitude to Don Garrett, whose influence can be seen throughout the best parts of this paper. In addition, I would like to thank Michael Gill, Béatrice Longuenesse, Tom Nagel, David Owen, Derek Parfit, Kieran Setiya, Sharon Street, David Velleman, and several anonymous referees for their assistance.

1 Throughout what follows I will refer to the citations from the *Treatise* as “T” followed by a paragraph number from the Clarendon Edition of the Works of David Hume (David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature Volume 1: Texts* (Clarendon Edition of the Works of David Hume), ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)), then a semicolon and a page number from the Selby-Bigge edition. References to the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* will be indicated by EPM, followed by the paragraph number from the Clarendon Edition (David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Clarendon Edition of the Works of David Hume), ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)), then a semicolon and a page number from the Selby-Bigge edition.

2 This is roughly how Kant conceives of reason.

3 In the contemporary philosophical literature, it is now standard to distinguish between two ways in which a consideration might be a “reason for a desire.” First, the consideration might be something that makes the object of a desire *desirable*. And, second, it might be something that makes the desire *itself* (as a mental state) good to *have*. To be clear, when I speak of reasons for action here and in what follows, I mean to

refer to the first of these two sorts of reason. So when we evaluate whether someone's desires are responsive to reasons for action, we will be evaluating whether they are responsive to the considerations that make things desirable or undesirable.

4 Hume also identifies a fourth sense in which philosophers have chosen to speak of a faculty of reason—namely, “a general calm determination of the passions, founded on some distant view or reflection” (T 3.3.1.18; SBN 583–84). See also T 2.3.9.13, 3.2.7.5 (SBN 441, 526–27). For the most part, in the discussion to follow, I will avoid referring to reason in this, rather deflationary, sense—although it is important to note here that a disposition to feel such calm passions is often for Hume one way in which we are responsive to reasons (in the sense of Reason3) in a non-inferential manner.

5 David Phillips, in his “Hume on Practical Reason: Normativity and Psychology in *Treatise* 2.3.3,” *Hume Studies* 31(2005): 299–316, nicely distinguishes between a psychological and a normative reading of Hume's comments about reason and the passions, although he does not draw the tripartite distinction I am drawing here.

6 For a very helpful discussion of Hume's understanding of the faculty of reason, see chapter 3 of Rachel Cohon's *Hume's Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Cohon seems to me to go too far in *identifying* the faculty of reason with the activity of reasoning: “It would not be amiss to substitute the gerund ‘reasoning’ almost everywhere Hume says ‘reason’” (66). But I agree with her that the faculty of reason for Hume is simply the power to engage in these activities. For another helpful discussion of this issue, see Don Garrett's essay “Hume's Conclusions” in *The Blackwell Guide to Hume's Treatise*, ed. Saul Traiger (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 155–76.

7 See, for example, T 2.3.3.2, 3.1.1.18 (SBN 413–14, 463).

8 On this compare EPM 6.12–14 (SBN 238–39).

9 Some contemporary ethical intuitionists do draw comparisons between their own work and that of Clarke. And many think that the analogy between mathematics and morality can help us understand certain aspects of practical rationality. But nonetheless, very few of these authors would seriously endorse the idea that moral reasoning proceeds solely via demonstrative or inductive reasoning of the sort described by Hume.

10 It is worth making two caveats to this point before continuing. First, in saying that Hume does not endorse a purely instrumental conception of reasons for action, I do not mean to suggest that Hume does not endorse many forms of what we would regard as means-ends reasoning. After all, for Hume, instances of “means-end reasoning” simply consist in instances of ordinary probable reasoning together with the responsiveness of our passions to the conclusions of such reasoning. (For a clear indication of this connection between means and ends and probable reasoning see 1.3.16 of the *Treatise*.) And of course Hume endorses many instances of both of these patterns of mental association. Nonetheless, it is not the case that Hume endorses *every* instance of “means-ends-reasoning” in this sense. For in fact, as Book 1, part 4 of the *Treatise* makes clear, Hume does not endorse every instance of probable reasoning in general—so he certainly would not endorse every possible instance of “means-ends-reasoning” in this sense. And, more importantly for my purposes, when he does endorse such “reasoning” he does not do so simply because it is an instance of “means-ends-reasoning,” but rather he endorses it because of the manner in which it is approved of upon a certain sort of passionate reflection. The second

important caveat to make here is that Hume does ultimately give a broadly response-dependent account of the nature of reasons for action. Thus, there is a sense in which such reasons are, for Hume, based in the passions. But the manner in which they are so-based is not what the simple instrumentalist conception of practical rationality suggests is the case. For more on this issue, see below and my “Hume’s Passionate Epistemology” (forthcoming).

11 Particularly with respect to Hume’s treatment of induction, some scholars have argued that Hume’s use of “reason” shifts throughout the course of the *Treatise*. In reading Hume’s use of “reason” to refer consistently throughout the *Treatise* to the faculty of drawing inferences (both demonstrative and probable), I am drawing on Don Garrett’s discussion of these issues in chapter 4 of his *Cognition and Commitment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

12 It is important to recognize that the case of the associations between passions involved in the indirect passions is only one of several examples possible here. For there are a variety of other passionate responses that receive similar consideration from Hume. First of all, there are the passionate responses we all experience from a self-interested perspective, particularly as these are moderated by certain sorts of general rules and by the relationship between means and ends. Secondly, there is the complex of passions that Hume identifies with curiosity or a love of truth, and that Hume discusses at the close of Book 2 of the *Treatise*. And finally, there are our aesthetic and moral responses to objects around us.

13 “Reason can never show us the connexion of one object with another, tho’ aided by experience, and the observation of their constant conjunction in all past instances. When the mind, therefore, passes from the idea or impression of one object to the idea or belief in another, it is not determin’d by reason but by certain principles, which associate together the ideas of these objects, and unite them in the imagination” (T 1.3.6.12; SBN 92).

14 For example, he writes that, “All men have ever allow’d reasoning to be merely an operation of our thoughts or ideas; and however those ideas may be vary’d to the feeling, there is nothing ever enters into our *conclusions* but ideas, or our fainter conceptions” (T App. 4; SBN 625–26).

15 The two distinctions between impressions and ideas that may be relevant here are, of course, their relative force and vivacity and their representational qualities. So Hume might insist here that it is the faintness of ideas, as opposed to impressions, that makes them eligible to be the “conclusion” of a piece of inference, while impressions are not. Or he might insist that the passions are not eligible for this status because they do not possess the *sort* of intentional content that a conclusion to a piece of inference must possess. I discuss both of these options in more detail elsewhere.

16 This is not to say that it has no normative significance. After all, insofar as reason can be identified (for Hume) with the discovery of truth or falsity and insofar as truth has normative significance, there will be truth-related normative assessments that we can apply to instances of reasoning but not to instances of mental association between, say, passions.

17 For some examples of this reading of Hume, see (arguably) Bernard Williams, “Internal and External Reasons” in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

1981); David Sobel, "Subjective Accounts of Reasons for Action," in *Ethics* 111 (2001): 461–92; John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); and Stephen Darwall, *British Moralists and the Internal'Ought' 1640–1740* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

18 In chapter 3 of her *Hume's Morality*, Rachel Cohon offers a reading of these passages that also focuses on whether a new passion can ever be generated through a process of reasoning (as Hume understands it)—although her main focus is on the proper application of these ideas to Hume's arguments concerning morals, as opposed to the interpretation of Hume's views concerning practical reason *per se*. For an important related discussion of these issues, see Mikael Karlsson's "The Influencing Motives of the Will" in Traiger, *Blackwell Guide to Hume's Treatise*, 235–55. Also see David Phillips's "Hume on Practical Reason: Normativity and Psychology in *Treatise* 2.3.3" for another argument in favor of a psychological reading of these passages. Although Phillips and I agree on the psychological (as opposed to normative) character of Hume's claims in these passages, we disagree about the precise psychological view Hume is arguing for here. Phillips takes Hume to be arguing for a form of what Michael Smith calls "the Humean theory of motivation," whereas to my mind the conclusion he is interested in is simply that the exercise of the faculty of reason can never generate new passions or actions. For more on this, see below.

19 For a particularly impressive presentation of this point of view, see David Owen, *Hume's Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

20 This is the reading that is suggested by Garrett's discussion of these issues in his "Replies," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 62 (2001): 205–15.

21 Once again, it is crucial to read my references to mental faculties here to refer to faculties in the weak sense outlined above.

22 Obviously, the exact significance of the passage under discussion will depend somewhat on which of these two alternative ways of reading "understanding" one chooses, but either reading fits naturally with the general line of interpretation I offer above. In particular, if one does choose to read his references to the "understanding" in this passage to refer to our cognitive faculty in general, then the comments made above about the target of the passage's argument will simply have to be modified to make this faculty their target. But this is wholly compatible with the general point I am making above.

23 It is clear throughout Hume's discussion of the "influencing motives of the will" and origins of morals that his focus in these sections is the question of whether *chains of reasoning* can terminate in the generation of new passions or volitions. See, for example, the discussion at T 2.3.3.4, 3.1.1.6 (SBN 414–15, 457).

24 There are some possible exceptions to this usage. See, for example: "One that has a real design of harming us, proceeding not from hatred and ill-will, but from justice and equity, draws not upon him our anger, if we be in any degree reasonable; notwithstanding he is both the cause, and the knowing cause of our sufferings" (T 2.2.4.7; SBN 354). But even here it is possible to interpret Hume as using these terms in the narrower manner he generally does. One place where Hume does discuss something close to reasonableness in a normative sense is his discussion of the virtue of "strength of mind" towards the end of 2.3.3. This consists in a general tendency for the calm passions to prevail motivationally over their violent counterparts. Thus, when someone

displays strength of mind in this sense, they also display strength of “reason” in the fourth “improper” sense noted above. Hume generally approves of this sort of strength of mind—hence its status as a virtue—but this should not be taken to mean that he believes that the calm passions ought to always prevail over the violent ones. Rather, it is simply that he endorses a general tendency for “reason” in this sense (the calm passions) to move one to act in opposition to the violent passions.

25 Again, it is important to stress that Hume ultimately will give an account of the normative significance of such ends that is based on the passionate responses of properly constituted human beings. But this broadly response-dependent account of the value of these ends, while controversial, should not be confused with an instrumentalist account of practical reasons which tries to reduce the sorts of considerations to which we should be responsive to the instrumental consequences of our desires.

26 Elijah Millgram, “Was Hume a Humean?” *Hume Studies* 21 (1995): 75–93. Jean Hampton also argues for a similar reading of Hume in her “Does Hume Have an Instrumental Conception of Practical Reason,” *Hume Studies* 21 (1995): 57–74.

27 Something of which Millgram, of course, is well aware.

28 Compare Hume’s discussion of the “globe of white marble” (T 1.1.7.18; SBN 25). The term “revival set” is derived from Garrett’s discussion of these issues.

29 For the central discussion of indirect passions and their objects see sections 2.1.2–5 of the *Treatise*. For Hume’s main discussion of direct passions and their associated ideas, see section 2.3.9 of the same.

30 For a different criticism of this reading of Hume see Elizabeth Radcliffe’s “Kantian Tunes on a Humean Instrument: Why Hume is not Really a Skeptic About Practical Reason,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 27 (1997): 247–70. Although I agree with Radcliffe about this issue, for reasons discussed above and in the following section, I disagree with her about Hume’s positive views about the nature of practical reason and practical reasoning. In particular, it seems to me that Hume’s views allow for the existence of practical reason in an even more robust sense than she is inclined to admit.

31 The reference to what a desire ought to be *directly* responsive to is required in order to distinguish between considerations that make the object of a desire desirable and considerations that make that desire itself (as a state) good to have. In general, our desires ought to be directly responsive only to the first of these two sorts of considerations—i.e., to what I am here calling reasons for action.

32 Of course, to say this is to say nothing about the nature of Hume’s metaethical understanding of discourse about normative reasons. Since Hume never explicitly discusses this issue, it seems best to leave it to the side here. Still, it seems a relatively safe bet that Hume would treat discourse about normative reasons along the same lines as his treatment of moral discourse. And so, given Hume’s account of the latter, it seems likely that Hume would want to understand claims about normative reasons in broadly response-dependent terms.

33 Nor does he make use of the corresponding notion of a “reason for belief.”

34 Compare T3.3.6.3–3.3.6.6 (SBN 619–21). A similar example may be found in Hume’s discussion of the sources of political allegiance. There Hume writes that, “When we

consider any objects at a distance, all their minute distinctions vanish, and we always give the preference to whatever is in itself preferable, without considering its situation and circumstances” (T 3.2.7.5; SBN 536–37). What is crucial here is Hume’s reference to “whatever is itself preferable.” For to distinguish this from that which we *find* preferable at a particular moment in time in the manner that Hume does here requires that we view our preferences as being responsive to reasons for desire of a non-instrumental sort. In particular, it requires that we distinguish between preferences that accurately represent the real (e.g., considered) value of objects from those that represent a distorted perspective on their value. And this implies that certain facts about the objects of our desires may give us reasons to increase or decrease our level of desire for them in ways that go far beyond the effects of merely instrumental reasoning.

35 Again this does mean that reasons for action will be dependent on sentiment for Hume, just not in the manner the standard forms of instrumentalism suggest.

36 For more on this, see my “Hume’s Passionate Epistemology.”