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*Hume Studies* Volume 34, Number 2, (2008) pp. 267–276.

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# Reason, Morality, and Hume’s “Active Principles”: Comments on Rachel Cohon’s *Hume’s Morality: Feeling and Fabrication*

ELIZABETH S. RADCLIFFE

## Introduction

Rachel Cohon’s Hume is a moral sensing theorist, who holds both that moral qualities (virtue and vice) are mind-dependent and that there is such a thing as moral knowledge. He is an anti-rationalist about motivation, arguing that reason alone does not motivate, but allows that both beliefs and passions are motivating. (That is, some beliefs cause passions and some passions cause action.) And he is both a descriptive and a normative moral theorist who, despite having resources for putting checks on our sentimentally-based moral evaluations, does end up with a kind of a relativistic account of the virtues and vices. Professor Cohon’s arguments in *Hume’s Morality*<sup>1</sup> are tight and vigorous. Anyone working on these issues will have to grapple with her interpretations, which are sane and provocative at the same time. I focus here on the first part of her book, where Cohon offers an original response to what she describes as the common reading of Hume’s metaethics. The second part of her book deals with Hume’s theory of the virtues and the perplexities in his account of artificial virtue, but unfortunately I have no room to discuss all of these matters. At the risk of wearing out a familiar caveat: philosophers have a curious way of praising a book by disagreeing with its author’s arguments. My discussion is no exception.

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## 1. A Word about “the Common Reading” of Hume’s Metaethics

According to Cohon, “the common reading” of Hume’s metaethics comprises at least three theses:

1. Beliefs cannot by themselves move us to action.
2. Moral judgments are noncognitive.
3. Evaluative judgments cannot be inferred or deduced from purely factual premises.

While I agree that the first and third are part of a traditional reading of Hume, I think that readers and critics have offered varied readings on the issue of moral knowledge in Hume and that no one interpretation is actually standard. Non-cognitivism was a fairly typical reading of Hume in the 1970s and 80s and earlier, but even J. L. Mackie in his 1980 *Hume’s Moral Theory* found a variety of theses in Hume in this regard: that moral judgments are statements about people’s sentiments; that moral judgments may state facts and express or arouse emotions in others at the same time; that moral judgments ascribe fictitious qualities to actions and are all false.<sup>2</sup> Recent readers have also found nuances in Hume’s view of moral judgments, and attributions have ranged over emotivism or expressivism,<sup>3</sup> cognitivism,<sup>4</sup> a kind of realism,<sup>5</sup> and a complex view whereby a moral judgment is an expression of feeling while also an ascription of a quality to an action or character.<sup>6</sup> Some readers have also proposed that Hume’s theory not be classified under these contemporary categories at all. Be that as it may, I do share with Cohon the view that Hume does not eschew the possibility of moral knowledge. I find this reading of his metaethics ultimately non-problematic, as she does, despite its requiring some explanation how to reconcile it with his sentimentalism.<sup>7</sup> However, I want to focus a good part of my commentary on the first thesis Cohon attributes to the “common reading.” Here she and I have the largest differences, and her arguments present some formidable challenges to the standard interpretation of Hume on motivation. I also offer some remarks on Cohon’s reading of Hume on the nature of morality.

## 2. Hume on Reason, Belief, and Motivation

Readers agree that Hume regards reason as motivationally inert (the “Inertia of Reason Thesis,” 14)<sup>8</sup>; it does not cause passion or action on its own. On the standard reading, this thesis becomes the thesis that beliefs by themselves cannot move us to action (“Inertia of Belief,” 11).<sup>9</sup> The argument for this understanding of Hume goes: if reason causes beliefs, if beliefs cause passions, and if passions cause actions, then by transitivity of causation, reason causes actions. But this is exactly

what Hume denies. So, given that passions clearly cause actions, and assuming reason causes beliefs, it follows, according to the standard view, that beliefs do not cause passions.

Now, in her chapter 2, "The Causes of Motivating Passions," Cohon argues that there is textual evidence for reading Hume as holding that beliefs about the prospect of pleasure or pain are directly motivating on their own—that is, such beliefs produce passions like desires that can then cause actions. She argues forcefully and in detail for this thesis, fending off alternative readings of Hume's signature claim, "Tis from the prospect of pain or pleasure that the aversion or propensity arises towards any object" (T 2.3.3.3; SBN 414). (I can't discuss those arguments here.) She then goes on to maintain in chapter 3, "Reason Alone and Moral Discrimination," that beliefs about future pleasure and pain on their own produce passions, *even if* such beliefs come from reason (reasoning) alone. For, Cohon contends, transitivity of causation from procedure (reasoning) to product (passion) to effect (action) does not hold when the cause of something is a *process*, rather than an agent. She argues by way of various examples. If a manuscript is produced by typing on a computer and the manuscript falls off the desk and makes a loud noise, this doesn't mean that the typing process that produced the manuscript made a noise (74). If a statue produced by the lost-wax process creates a scandal, the process did not create a scandal (74). Likewise, if actions come from passions caused by beliefs, the reasoning process that produces beliefs should not be seen as the cause of actions. So, Hume can hold that reason alone does not motivate and yet that beliefs alone do, and the common reading has ignored this.

This is a very challenging argument. My reaction, however, is to wonder about the degree of analogy between causal processes in the world and the effects of their products, on the one hand, and the mental process of reasoning and its subsequent effects on the reasoner, on the other. In inductive reasoning, the mind moves inferentially (which is causal) from certain ideas (the premises) to another idea (the conclusion), and the fixing of the conclusion in the person's mind is a part of the reasoning process itself. The resultant belief is not separable from the description of the reasoning that takes place. (We remark: "I concluded C from A and B, etc.") In other words, when a belief is acquired by a line of reasoning, that belief is an essential component of the overall line of reasoning, or of the reasoning process.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, it's hard to see how any effect of a conclusion on the investigator is not also an effect of the reasoning by which it was derived. This point is illustrated by the fact that it would seem anomalous for a rationally-functioning person to say that a conclusion moved her, but that the evidence and reasoning on which she adopted that conclusion did not. Reason, or proper reasoning, is truth-preserving, as the mind moves from one idea to another; Hume himself defines reason as "the discovery of truth or falshood" (T 3.1.1.9; SBN 458). A belief's producing a passion is its producing an affection in the mind of the believer, in whose mind the belief

has been linked (by induction, via an imagined idea of necessity) to the evidence or reasoning that produced it. Moreover, in the case of demonstrative reasoning, the premises are necessarily connected to the conclusion; the ideas involved are not conceptually separable. It seems incomprehensible that the conclusion of a demonstration could cause an effect (such as a mathematical conclusion that helps me to build a bridge) and that effect not also be attributable to the process of my reasoning that produced the conclusion.

I will add that for at least some of Hume's targets, Samuel Clarke, for instance, talk of the causal origin of *motives* as effects of beliefs is beside the point. I'm guessing Cohon would agree. For Clarke, reason grasps "eternal" truths, not inferentially, but immediately, and reason has a practical effect via these particular cognitions, but apparently *not* causally. Truths about moral obligations *can* create volitions in the will, but Clarke denies that the will is caused, since he thinks the agent can always decide to act against the directive of a cognition. How he can in fact avoid invoking causal connections in his account is a mystery to me, since in cases where the agent chooses to act against reason, he says the will is "swayed by some unreasonable and prevailing passion."<sup>11</sup> Regardless, *Hume* thinks "motives of the will" have a causal origin, and our debate on this topic is pertinent, given Hume's discussion in T 3.1.1 (SBN 455–70) about inability of both probabilistic and demonstrative reasoning to produce moral distinctions because of their general motivational impotence.

This discussion also raises questions about how to parse mental processes in the first place. Let's say we grant that the effects of a product cannot be attributable to the process that produced it. If we opted to talk about the "process of producing motivation (action)," we might talk about *that* process as one in which reason initiates the steps (belief formation and then passion formation) that have action as the product. As far as I can tell, this way of framing it would make action the product of a rational process by itself, even if the effects of an action, such as its helping or hurting someone, could not be attributed to that process. So, it seems that how we choose to individuate processes makes a difference to how we decide what is an outcome of what; and how to individuate processes raises another knotty philosophical issue.

### 3. Hume on Moral Discrimination and Reason

Hume's trademark thesis that morality, morals, moral distinctions, or the rules of morality (he uses all of these terms) cannot be derived from reason is based upon his argument for the inertness of reason. Hence, Cohon's understanding of Hume's argument regarding morality and reason (what she calls Argument M) is plausibly recast in light of her interpretation of the Motivational Inertness of Reason Thesis. Hume presents the argument (M) twice in a single short paragraph:

Since morals, therefore, have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows, that they cannot be deriv'd from reason; and that because reason alone, as we have already prov'd, can never have any such influence. Morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions. Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular. The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason. (T 3.1.1.6; SBN 457)

Cohon's interpretation goes this way:

1. Reasoning processes alone (without another kind of process) cannot produce passions, volitions, or actions.
2. Moral discrimination (that process) can and does produce passions, volitions, and actions.
3. Therefore, our moral discriminations are not reasoning processes (alone), and are not performed by reasoning processes (alone). (82)

Cohon comments, "The inference does not require any assumption of the transitivity of causation, because its conclusion is not a causal thesis (that reason or reasoning alone does not *cause* moral discrimination) but a non-identity claim about processes: the activity of moral discrimination is not identical with, and is not carried out by, any process of reasoning" (82).

I do agree that the argument so constructed warrants a denial of an identity. My first point might seem like a quibble, but the denial that seems to be justified is not that moral discrimination is not *a* process of reasoning, but that moral discrimination and reasoning are not identical. Be that as it may, I see the rationalist as depicting reason in a different way from that assumed by this argument: as a single judgment-making faculty that has both practical and theoretical aspects to it, rather than as a faculty performing different processes. At the risk of over-generalizing upon a diversity of views, the rationalist claims that, in its practical function, reason is motivating because it produces representations of good and evil (moral or prudential), which also are motivating states, or which produce motivating states when we choose to act on them. (Descartes<sup>12</sup> and perhaps Leibniz<sup>13</sup> are examples of the former; Clarke is an example of the latter.) In its theoretical function, reason produces representations of other things, but these cognitions are not potentially motivating. Because most rationalists distinguish a representation's motivational potential from its inertness by its content, I think it important to understand Hume's arguments against moral rationalism as dealing not only with reason and moral discernment (which they do), but also with the deliverances of reason, namely particular beliefs or cognitions (vivacious representations) and the deliverances of passion, namely, particular passions.<sup>14</sup>

*A Note on Active Principles.* I do find Cohon's reconciliation of various texts in Hume with her interpretation of Argument M compelling; I simply don't see the conclusion that moral discernment is not reasoning as the only point he was pressing in the arguments of T 3.1.1 (SBN 455–70). Cohon's arguments prompt me to ask what, in general, is at the heart of Hume's claims about the source of human motivation? In T 3.1.1 (SBN 455–70), after he has offered the two brief renditions of argument M, he writes:

No one, I believe, will deny the justness of this inference; nor is there any other means of evading it, than by denying that principle, on which it is founded. As long as it is allow'd, that reason has no influence on our passions and actions, 'tis in vain to pretend, that morality is discover'd only by a deduction of reason. An active principle can never be founded on an inactive; and if reason be inactive in itself, it must remain so in all its shapes and appearances, whether it exerts itself in natural or moral subjects, whether it considers the powers of external bodies, or the actions of rational beings. (T 3.1.1.7; SBN 457)

So he says: (1) Reason is inactive in itself, no matter its subject; (2) An active principle can never be founded on an inactive; (3) Morality is active; (4) Therefore, morality is not discovered by a deduction of reason alone. Now, active principles are obviously ones that can cause action, and among active principles are passions, the natural instincts,<sup>15</sup> pleasures and pains, and "morality." Reason is clearly an inactive principle for Hume. Cohon has contended that some beliefs, even if founded on reason, are (or can be) active. But given the thesis that an active principle cannot be founded on an inactive, and given the assumptions (a) that a belief is founded upon reason and (b) that a belief is active but reason is not, it follows that: either a belief is active in itself, or the belief is founded in whole or in part on something active (as morality is for Hume).<sup>16</sup> Even though Cohon's argument opens the door to the possibility that any belief *might* produce a passion that motivates, no matter its content, I doubt she wants to hold that beliefs in all "shapes and appearances" produce passions. Her argument has been that beliefs about prospective pleasure and pain produce motives for Hume. If this is true, it seems correct to surmise that the motivating force comes not from the belief (idea), but from its being derived from felt pleasures and pains, in the way that morality gets its impetus from sentiments. Perhaps Cohon would agree. But I do think that this way of looking at the issue blunts the force of the claim that beliefs turn out, after all, to motivate for Hume, since on this account, only beliefs about prospective pleasure and pain do, and only because they somehow derive their motivating force from the impressions of pleasure and pain themselves. If a reader wants to defend the bolder claim that other beliefs are

motivating for Hume, she would have to explain from what these beliefs derive their active power.

#### 4. Hume on the Nature of Morality

In her chapter 4, "Feeling Virtue and the Reality of Moral Distinctions," Cohon attributes to Hume the "moral sensing" view, that we have direct awareness of virtue and vice through our moral sentiments in the way that we directly apprehend the redness of a ripe tomato. She argues that Hume is both a moral anti-realist, in the sense that the existence of moral properties are dependent on the reactions of observers, and a moral cognitivist, since we can form copies of those impressions, ideas which can be combined into beliefs or judgments that are true or false. Then in her chapter 5, "The Common Point of View," she takes up questions about the role of the common point of view in Hume's ethics. One question is why he insists that we place ourselves in "*steady* and *general* points of view" when we experience the sentiments that reflect moral judgments of characters. That is: since virtue and vice are not independently-existing qualities in the world, why does it matter if our particular moral evaluations vary depending on our personal situations, which determine our feelings? What kind of correction does Hume invoke when he claims that we "correct" our feelings to make moral distinctions?

Hume notes that if we did not occupy a general point of view when we make moral evaluations, we would encounter contradictions and we would be unable to converse on reasonable terms (T 3.3.1.15–16; SBN 581–82). He offers little explanation of the point, which is why readers have wondered just what the problem is supposed to be. Cohon sees no difficulty with sentimentally-based evaluative discourse: there is no misunderstanding when I call the espresso vile and you call it delicious. Even if we disagree over whether David's kindness is virtuous, we can eventually shrug it off and say "that's how it feels to me" (135–36). Cohon's rendition of the problem Hume is highlighting, instead, is this:

Whenever I judge a trait to be a virtue, I simultaneously judge it to have the power to produce pride and love. If I based my virtue judgments entirely on my present situation, I would presumably make the accompanying causal judgments from that perspective as well. . . . Without recourse to a stable point of view, as we change our distance from living people we would often discover the falsehood of our predictions, and we would have to revise our causal judgments about people's characters almost constantly. We would also get into trouble. We depend on causal knowledge about people's traits when we decide whom to trust, whom to avoid, whose friendship to cultivate. (146)

I find this an appealing account, but I admit to having doubts that it is Hume's. First, I wonder whether, when I judge a trait to be a virtue, I also *judge* it to have the power to produce pride and love (even though it does produce those passions in me, on Hume's account). Second, if we take up the common view in order to choose certain companions and friends who will make our lives better (because of their characters), are we not now committed to observer-independent moral qualities? The common point of view is the perspective in which we discern the moral dimensions of persons' traits. Hence, this reading seems to imply that it must be the *moral* qualities of others, and not just their factual qualities, that we need to get right in order to place our trust in the proper people. Since, on Cohon's interpretation, persons' moral qualities are apparently having causal effects on us, it appears they must be real properties independent of observers' reactions to them.

Finally, I want to suggest a simpler alternative. I *do* think Hume is referring to a difficulty with moral discourse grounded in individual sentiments—for we don't *treat* virtues and vices like matters of individual taste. If I say Brutus is virtuous (not just that I approve of him) and you say he is not, we take ourselves to have a genuine disagreement. Moreover, if I generalize from my sentiments about what counts as a virtue and as a vice, and you do the same, but our sentiments differ, we arrive at different conceptions of morality, and we can't shrug off the differences so easily. This situation would have important practical consequences, given Hume's allegations about the motivating force of moral distinctions and how we take pains to inculcate morality by education and exhortations.

## Conclusion

Despite my challenges to Professor Cohon's interpretation of Hume's ethical theory, I really admire her rigorous and penetrating investigation into these issues. *Hume's Morality* is one of the most organized and tightly-argued books I've ever read. The intricacies of its arguments are sure to command the attention of Hume scholars and influence the course of research on Hume's moral theory for a long time to come.

## NOTES

- 1 Rachel Cohon, *Hume's Morality: Feeling and Fabrication* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- 2 J. L. Mackie, *Hume's Moral Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), 63–74.

3 Simon Blackburn, *Ruling Passions* (Oxford and NY: Clarendon Press, 1998), 297; and Simon Blackburn, "Hume on the Mezzanine Level," *Hume Studies* 19.2 (November 1993): 273–88.

4 Nicholas L. Sturgeon, "Moral Skepticism and Moral Naturalism in Hume's *Treatise*," *Hume Studies* 27.1 (2001): 3–84.

5 David Fate Norton, *David Hume: Common Sense Moralist, Skeptical Metaphysician* (Princeton University Press, 1982).

6 Barry Stroud, *Hume* (Routledge, 1981), 184–85.

7 Elizabeth S. Radcliffe, "Moral Internalism and Moral Cognitivism in Hume's Metaethics," *Synthese* 152 (2006): 353–70.

8 Parenthetical references in the text to page numbers are to Cohon, *Hume's Morality*.

9 Given Hume's view that passions are necessary to motivation, this thesis is ambiguous between (a) beliefs cannot move us to action without passions, and (b) beliefs cannot produce passions that move us to action. It is only (b) that Cohon denies is Hume's view; she argues instead that Hume holds that beliefs about the prospect of pleasure and pain produce passions that are motivating. To argue that Hume really did not hold (a) seems to me a hard sell, although I have heard it suggested that his denial of (a) is implied by some remarks in his "Of the influence of belief." See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, v. 1, ed. David F. Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 1.3.10; SBN 118–23, 630–32. (All subsequent references to Hume's *Treatise* are to this edition, citing "T" followed by Book, Part, section and, usually, paragraph numbers, all separated by period; "SBN" and numbers following refer to the pages of the edition of the *Treatise* edited by Selby-Bigge and revised by Nidditch.) For a contrary reading, see my "Why Beliefs Alone Never Motivate: Hume on the Generation of Motives," *Hume Studies* 25.1–2 (1999): 101–22.

10 This is not to say that I cannot talk about a belief and its effects apart from talking about the way I acquired it. Rather, I cannot talk about a line of reasoning apart from the conclusion it led me to adopt.

11 Clarke explains, "[By] this understanding or knowledge of the natural and necessary relations, fitnesses, and proportions of things, the wills likewise of all intelligent beings are constantly directed," with the exception of those whose wills are "swayed by some unreasonable and prevailing passion." Samuel Clarke, "A Discourse of Natural Religion" in *British Moralists*, v. 1, ed. D. D. Raphael (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), 200.

12 René Descartes, *Passions of the Soul* (1649), ed. and trans. Stephen Voss (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1989).

13 Leibniz's descriptions of how the passions originate seems ambiguous between the notion that the passion is caused by a representation, but consists in a state separate from it, and the notion that the passion is the same as the representation that causes it. So, for instance, concupiscence may simply be the thought of the perfection of the object we are said to desire, rather than anything over and above that thought. See Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding* (1705), ed. and trans. Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), esp. 163–67.

14 This concern with the deliverances of reason and passion is prominent in Hume's discussion why passion cannot oppose reason. He says that such an opposition would have to be "contradictory to truth and reason"—that is, passions would have to be false, since "this contradiction consists in the disagreement of ideas, consider'd as copies, with those objects, which they represent" (T 2.3.3.5; SBN 415). In other words, reason and passion cannot be opposed over directing the will because particular passions do not copy impressions of objects and so they cannot be evaluated for truth and falsity in the way ideas can. Here Hume is explicitly discussing the products of reason and of passion in order to explain why passion can never be opposed to reason (the process or the faculty).

15 The natural impulses or instincts include "benevolence and resentment, the love of life, and kindness to children" (T 2.3.3.8; SBN 417); at another point Hume mentions "desire of punishment to our enemies, and of happiness to our friends; hunger, lust, and a few other bodily appetites" (T 2.3.9.8; SBN 439).

16 How can Hume formulate principles about what can cause what, such as that an active principle cannot be based on an inactive, given that causes and effects are separate and so anything can possibly cause anything? Hume formulates generalizations from observations, as any empirical philosopher does, which is the only way in which he can advance a philosophical view. His claims of this sort are, of course, not universal, but have the status of any general principles he endorses, such as that every idea must be traced to a preceding impression.