



Rachel Cohon. Hume's Morality: Feeling and Fabrication

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Hume Studies Volume 34, Number 2, (2008) pp. 289–292.

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Book Reviews

Rachel Cohon. *Hume's Morality: Feeling and Fabrication*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. Pp. x + 285. ISBN 978-0-19-926844-3, cloth \$75.00.

Hume's project, in Book 3 of the *Treatise*, of showing that virtue and vice are discerned by feeling, not reason, is notorious for its contradictions. Armies of Humean scholars have fought valiantly, ingeniously, but unsuccessfully, to resolve them, and in the first half of *Hume's Morality*, Cohon shows herself an admirably doughty follower in their footsteps. The second half concerns Hume's division between natural and artificial virtues. We learn how self-interest is redirected, and moral sentiment strengthened to provide artificial virtues with the motives they lack naturally, so as to enable them to facilitate impersonal co-operation, though a particular virtuous act may benefit no-one. The author explains why, for Hume, their real nature as prosthetic virtues compensating for our human deficiencies must be hidden, and the paradoxes thereby raised. Part 2 is less controversial, and I shall concentrate on the meta-ethical arguments of Part 1 about which I have a number of critical reservations.

Cohon's subject in the first three chapters is Hume's argument from morality's link with action to the conclusion that it cannot be grounded in reason. A major challenge, as she sees it, is to render the other premise—that reason is inert—compatible with Hume's claims elsewhere that beliefs can, without help from independent passions, influence passion and action. She suggests (66, 68)

that reason is for Hume distinct from belief. The former always signifies a process of reasoning and is causally inert, the latter an outcome, whether of reasoning or an irrational process, and is causally efficacious. It does not follow, she argues, from the fact that reasoning can result in beliefs, and that beliefs can alone produce passion and action, that reasoning itself can do so. This would only follow if reason caused the belief which caused the passion, and only assuming “a transitivity of causes” (for which she sees no evidence in the *Treatise*). For “there is no [parallel] transitivity of process” (74).

Having assured us that, once moral discrimination is also treated as a process the motivational argument is valid, she moves to Hume’s positive phase. A second potential inconsistency arises from her interpretation of Hume as both a moral anti-realist, holding that vice and virtue do not exist independently of human psychological responses, and a moral cognitivist (100). The positions can, she believes, be reconciled, within a “moral sensing view” which likens moral attributions to those of secondary qualities. We form true beliefs about an object’s colour though we do not suppose that its colour inheres in it, but is a relational property existing between us and the object. She endorses, on Hume’s behalf, moral impressions which are felt sentiments, and moral ideas which copy them. This tiered approach is used to explain how Hume can consistently hold that moral discriminations are feelings, and yet accord a major role to inferential reasoning in the adoption of that steady general standpoint distinctive of morality.

Cohon is right that, for Hume, beliefs alone produce passions and action. But this is not novel. Thirty years ago, Penelhum (1975; since followed by this reviewer among others) scorned those who sought to prevent a conflict between this claim and the characterization of reason as inert by inventing a pre-existing free-floating desire to explain why just believing that there was within reach a ripe fruit could, according to Hume, generate a desire for it.

Her attempt to resolve the contradiction is more novel but less obviously right. Of course, Hume sometimes means by “reason,” the process of reasoning, just as we do when the context demands it. But he plainly attributes to it the causal force she denies. At *Treatise* 3.1.1.16 (SBN 462–63), he states: “Reason . . . may . . . be the mediate cause of an action, by prompting . . . a passion.” Here, as at 3.1.1.12 (SBN 459–60) (cited by Cohon) where Hume asserts that “reason . . . can have an influence on our conduct” through the beliefs that it engenders, he equally plainly embraces a “transitivity of causes” between reason and action. The contradiction remains unresolved.

Cohon’s recasting of the motivational argument in terms of processes hardly enhances its acceptability. It runs (82):

1. Reasoning processes alone cannot produce passions, volitions or actions.

2. Moral discrimination 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).

“Discrimination” can signify either a process (often singular) or an outcome (often plural). Now the process of “discriminating good from evil” (82) would seem to be completed as soon as one’s uncertainty is ended, and is replaced by, say, steady approval. It is surely only moral discriminations, construed as *outcomes* of the process of discriminating, which, on her interpretation, causally generate passion, volition or action. It is not clear then why the original process, as distinct from the outcome, cannot (without begging the question) be rational. After all, she admits that beliefs can be the outcome of a rational process (76, 77) and yet causally produce passion and action.

Cohon is silent on why belief, even when the outcome of supposedly inert reasoning, is active. Does Hume not state (*Treatise* 3.1.1.10; SBN 458) that “a wholly inactive [principle] . . . can never be the source of [an] active [one]”? The answer of Book 1 is that the causal reasoning of which belief is an outcome is *not* inert. Like the belief, this reasoning involves vivification, and is (1.3.8.12; SBN 103) “a species of sensation.” It is only by invoking vivification that Hume feels he can explain (1.3.7.3–4; SBN 95–96) how we come to believe, for example, that Caesar died in his bed as opposed merely to entertaining this possibility. The problem for which vivification is a solution does not arise with propositions proved by intuition or demonstrated since we cannot imagine their contradictories. Cohon, eliding the two kinds of reason, confusedly invokes (66, 79) vivification here too. An acknowledgement that in Book 1 Hume (later changing his mind) places demonstrative reason in “our cogitative natures,” and contrasts it with both causal reasoning and belief as belonging in “our sensitive natures,” would however destroy the neat, but rigid, dichotomy on which her reinterpretation of the motivational argument rests. Her assertion (68) that the concept of reasoning of Book 1 is “further develop[ed]” in later Books also misleads, unless “development” can encompass the rupture with his earlier thought. Hume’s quandary goes unacknowledged as to how belief could (through vivification) resemble an impression, which being self-authenticating (*Treatise* 1.4.2.7; SBN 190) excludes mistake, yet retain the representative dimension linking it with truth and justification.

Cohon claims that, for Hume, moral properties resemble secondary ones in not being “in the object.” But she has to admit that, on a rare occasion when Hume does compare them (*Treatise* 3.1.1.26; SBN 468–69), he may not actually believe they are similar, only that they would be, were “the modern philosophy” right in denying that secondary qualities are “in the object.” It is disconcerting to find Cohon struggling to rescue a claim, erected as the cornerstone of her “moral

sensing” interpretation, by suggesting that it is at least consistent with Hume’s arguable rejection of “the modern philosophy.” Cohon has still to make good the claim that, though moral properties are not “in the object,” attributions of them are “truth-apt.” But Hume also denies (*Treatise* 1.3.14.21; SBN 165) that causal necessity is “in objects”: we are “deceived” (1.3.14.11; SBN 160–61) by “the mind’s great propensity to spread itself on external objects.” Commentators have plausibly taken such remarks, together with that in the *Second Enquiry* about taste’s “productive faculty . . . gilding or staining all natural objects with the colours borrowed from internal sentiment,” to indicate that for Hume morality involves a similarly erroneous projection.

In Chapter 5, Cohon asks how, when we adopt the general standpoint, actual feelings can still be present to motivate us. She posits two “species” of moral feelings, corrected and uncorrected, one calm, the other possibly violent (141–42). But Hume stipulates that moral sentiments are distinctively calm. The puzzle (which Cohon does not mention) remains why Hume, in the motivational argument, credits these sentiments with such an active role, when this is at odds with almost everything he says elsewhere about their peripheral relation to action. There is a principle of scholarship at stake. Rather than trying vainly to fit Hume to the Procrustean bed of our analyses, unsure whether to stretch him out, or cut off his legs, let us contemplate his inconsistencies steadily, alert to the deeper insights this may bring.

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