

Reason and Sentiment in Hume's Moral Theory

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abstract My main goal in this paper is to vindicate Hume's belief that morality is exclusively a matter of sentiment, when it is apparent that the reflective or general perspective necessary to making a moral judgment requires reason. My solution to the supposed inconsistency is to show that reason is understood in two ways: in the preliminary understanding, reason is opposed to sentiment; in the final understanding, reason is actually reduced to sentiment, or explained away in favor of it. In this final sense, when reason affects morality, it consists in bringing to the mind imaginary sensations and sentiments to which we react sympathetically.

keywords Hume – sentiments – reason – Moral

1

This paper addresses Hume's contrast of reason and sentiment in morals, a contrast forcefully expressed at the very opening of Book 3 of the *Treatise*, and many times recalled throughout the development of Hume's moral theory. In the *Treatise* Hume questions whether the foundations of morals rest on reason or on sentiment. His straightforward answer unambiguously elects sentiment¹.

However, a steady part is conceded for reason to play in morals, a part that doesn't seem to be at all negligible. If the distinction between what *founds* morals and what *contributes* to shaping moral experience could be kept neatly apart, the recognition of reason's contributions wouldn't be of consequence. But the truth is that they cannot, and that the concessions

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progressively made to reason's procedural role may compromise Hume's initial view of the foundation of morals as being solely sentimental. Now if it is the case that foundations and procedures cannot indeed be disentangled, then the discrepancy between Hume's explicit dismissal and subsequent readmission of reason into morals poses a puzzle not unworthy of the attention of his interpreters.

It is my intention to propose a solution to this apparent inconsistency in Hume's thought. In other words, I propose to investigate the question of how to evaluate Hume's dismissive rhetoric against reason in the light of his more sober depiction of the manifold involvement of reason in moral experience, of which the *Treatise* itself gives numerous examples. In the conclusion, I argue in favor of a revision in the concept of reason itself as applied to morals, which represents, I hope, a plausible way out of the afore-mentioned difficulties of interpretation.

2

I begin with a brief review of Hume's most forceful rhetoric. In *Treatise* 2.3.3 Hume draws a robust distinction between reason and passion. In *Treatise* 3.1.1 a distinction also holds between reason and sentiment, with moral implications. Hume makes the claim that passion, not reason, moves the will and motivates human actions. Subsequently, he claims moral distinctions to be based on sentiment, not on reason.

The upshot is that Hume sides with passion and sentiment, taking position in an ongoing debate that he describes as the “*combat* of passion and reason.” The issue at stake is whether reason can “*oppose* passion in the direction of the will” and the concomitant moral question of whether, in case of there being opposition, reason should be given preference, and humans considered to be “only so far virtuous as they conform themselves to its dictates” (HUME, 2000, p. 265; italics added). Against the many who defend one form or another of this view, Hume affirms that (i) there is no such combat, for (ii) since passion alone motivates human action, then (iii) it is not an option to give preference to reason, and to associate virtue with it.

In his own words, he aims to prove “*first*, that reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will; and *secondly*, that it can never oppose passion in the direction of the will” (*ibidem*). The direct consequence to moral theory of this point in the theory of mind is that it lays the ground for holding that moral distinctions are not founded on reason, and that the rules of morals are not conclusions of reason, i.e. they are not discovered by demonstrative *a priori* reasoning, nor by probable *a posteriori* reasoning. In “Of the Passions” Hume says: “Since reason alone can never produce any action, or give rise to volition, I infer, that the same faculty is as incapable of preventing volition, or of disputing the preference with any passion or emotion” (*idem*, p. 266).

In “Of Morals,” Hume is recalling precisely this point when he affirms that: “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” (*idem*, p. 294). And that: “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” (*ibidem*).

But, to be exact, Hume’s commitment to a side in the debate has a twist to it, since his choice is not to give acceptance to the opposition, thence to proceed and cast his vote on passion. Actually, he begins by squarely refusing the lines along which the dispute is posited, diagnosing the opposition itself as a category mistake, and consequently also diagnosing as false the moral problems aroused by it, problems such as whether all motives ought to be subdued or made conformable to reason, or whether reason is a superior principle against the passions, for example.

Hume does not say it in as many words, but I find no difficulty in accepting that when he employs the phrase “a failure to ‘speak philosophically’” he is referring to nothing but this category mistake itself. In his words: “We speak not strictly and philosophically when we talk of the combat of passion and of reason” (*idem*, p. 266). Hume might have added, we don’t speak strictly and philosophically simply because passion/sentiment and reason do not belong in the same category, they are not the same sort of thing. Each, so to speak, constitutes a category in itself. Therefore, they can’t possibly lock in combat.

His argument is quite straightforward. According to Hume, a passion is an original existence. In his phrasing, “[w]hen I am angry, I am actually possest with the passion, and in that emotion have no more a reference to any other object, than when I am thirsty, or sick, or more than five foot high” (*ibidem*).

Now to say that passions are original realities goes for classifying them as impressions, against copies or representations, i.e. ideas. If passions are not representations, then they cannot be true or false, since truth is the agreement of an idea with the object it represents or, more exactly: “[t]ruth or falshood consists in an agreement or disagreement either to the *real* relations of ideas, or to *real* existence and matter of fact” (*idem*, p. 295). But reason is defined as “the discovery of truth or falshood.” Hence neither reason as demonstration, when it compares ideas, nor reason as probability, when it infers matters of fact, can deal with passion².

In conclusion, the nature, origin, causes and effects, and other principles of association of passions constitute an autonomous domain, just as does the domain of ideas and their principles of association, with the only difference that passions pertain to human action, and consequently to morals, whereas ideas pertain to human reason, and consequently to knowledge.

These two domains appear to be incommensurable. Sensations of pleasure and pain are the ultimate building blocks of morals. They give rise to passions of desire and aversion, and these move the will directly causing action, and indirectly causing the appreciation of action and character. The gradation of intensity in sensations of pleasure and pain, which depends on their source’s proximity or distance in space and time, and immediate or mediate relation to self and others, accounts for the variety of passions and sentiments, as well as for the distinction between the sentiments that are said to be moral and those that are not. Moral evaluation, no less than motivation, seems to be a matter of sentiment alone.

In Hume’s picture, “[t]o have the sense of virtue is nothing but to *feel* a satisfaction of a particular kind from the contemplation of a character. The very *feeling* constitutes our praise or admiration” (*idem*, p. 303).

A character may cause either an agreeable or a disagreeable impression, and to approve or disapprove of it, calling it virtuous or vicious, is to

give expression to this sentiment (*idem*, p. 301). Reason and reasoning are excluded in the precise sense that the move from feeling pleasure to judging of virtue is not akin to the making of an inference. Hume emphasizes that “[w]e do not infer a character to be virtuous, because it pleases: But in feeling that it pleases after such a particular manner, we in effect feel that it is virtuous” (*idem*, p. 303).

3

But “pleasure” is a name that stands for very diverse sensations, and the particular kind of pleasure and pain with which we associate virtue and vice is the kind that leads to praise or blame. According to Hume, its specific difference is in that “‘Tis only when a character is considered in general, without reference to our particular interest, that it causes such a feeling or sentiment, as denominates it morally good or evil” (*ibidem*). For example, the sentiment of hatred – which is not moral – and the sentiment of disapprobation of vice – which is – are distinct in that the former has self-interest in the forefront whereas the latter does not.

It is precisely at this juncture that I believe reason reenters, in a significant way, the picture out of which it had been previously excluded. The utterance of a moral judgment is equal to giving expression to certain feelings. Nevertheless, it may be the case that, if it weren’t for the exercise of reason, one wouldn’t be placed in the position that allows for that unique sort of feeling that is avowedly moral.

The question emerges here as to whether the achievement of the moral standpoint is an activity of reason, and reason alone. If it is indeed, then morals can be said to be, in a very essential way, a matter of reason as much as it is a matter of sentiment. And the stark contrast pictured at the beginning in the *Treatise* will call for revision, or at least one will have to admit that “founding” is a word of equivocal meaning, applying both to what moral distinctions are based on, in which case sentiments alone found morals, and to what is an unalienable constituent of moral experience, in which sense reason too founds morals.

Hume’s approach to this problem is many-layered, to say the least. Its various fronts, each improving on its antecedent’s shortcomings include:

(i) initial allotment to reason of influence on a limited number of cases³, (ii) casting of a widespread doubt on the effectiveness of reason, and (iii) recasting in non-cognitive terms of some of the so-called rational procedures. The *Treatise* explores all the aforementioned possibilities. Next, I will review them, with the intent to show how they fail to secure an exclusively sentimental foundation to morals, with the exception of number (iii), which I consider to be successful. But I believe its success depends on the translation into non-cognitive descriptions of the rational procedures that claim to a bearing on morals.

Initially, Hume allots reason only a restricted margin or a narrow range of operation, which results in downplaying the significance of its influence. It amounts to saying: reason has room, not much though, for it affects only a limited number of cases. Hume seems to take this approach when he classifies the cases in which judgment and understanding play an essential role in morals as somehow special, not standard ones, as implied by the suggestive label “artificial” that he attaches to them.

But it doesn't take much reading beyond the *Treatise's* discussion of the artificial virtues to see how doubtful it is that so sharp a line can successfully be drawn. After all, reason's range might be indeterminate, or it might exceed the limits previously set. It might even be the case that reason's intervention is necessary always, and not just exceptionally. Hume admits that there are times when our natural sympathy and our moral sentiments do not coincide. We are much less sympathetic to strangers living at a distance from us in time and space than to acquaintances living close by. Despite this variance in sympathy, our moral concern is or should be the same in all cases as a result precisely of reason being able to position us in the moral “steady and general point of view” that neutralizes our partiality (*idem*, sec. 3.3.1). Considering how constantly our situation changes, Hume argues, it is good that reason can operate this correction on our sentiments, for otherwise we wouldn't ever hold onto any steady position and would frequently, perhaps incorrigibly, be very partial.

Actually, Hume continues, reason operates along the very same lines in morals as it does in knowledge and criticism, when it effects constant corrections and adjustments in the perceptions of our senses and in our

judgments regarding beauty (*idem*, p. 371-372). Don't we, for example, routinely correct by reflection our judgment about the sizes of distant objects? The same goes for our appreciation of characters seen at a distance: our sensitivity to their moral beauty or deformity would be diminished if it weren't for the routine corrective operation of judgment and reflection.

But then, the neat, restrictive distinction between the cases that necessitate the contribution of reason and the ones that don't loses a great deal of its sharpness. The boundary is somewhat blurred, and it seems that nothing can in principle be trusted infallibly to circumscribe the reach of reason, for if the correction of our natural sympathy is conducted by reason, and if this correction happens as a rule, then the limit set by the notion of artificial virtues, for example, has been trespassed. It is conceivable, and it remains an empirical matter to be ascertained, as Hume's text suggests, that reason operates in at least some cases of moral appreciation of the so-called natural virtues and vices. One cannot determine, with much assurance, where reason enters and where it doesn't. Thus suddenly one finds oneself more or less at a loss over what to say with definiteness about the foundations of morals.

4

At the same time, in a skeptical frame of mind, Hume observes that neither is the mechanism by which reason conduces to a moral standpoint "altogether efficacious, nor do our passions often correspond entirely to the present theory," *i. e.* he notes that "reason requires such an impartial conduct, but that 'tis seldom we can bring ourselves to it... [since] our passions do not readily follow the determination of our judgment" (*idem*, p. 372).

In the same skeptical frame of mind, and relying on the argument from relativity, Hume also, on several occasions, observes that: "So little are men govern'd by reason in their sentiments and opinions, that they always judge more of objects by comparison than from their intrinsic worth and value" (*idem*, p. 240). Finally, he repeatedly recalls that notwithstanding the influence of reason "[r]esemblance and proximity

always produce a relation of ideas" (*idem*, p. 243), in morals just as in all other sorts of human experience, and that there isn't really a way to be rid of this tendency or to be immunized against its force. The conclusion is that human nature at worst runs counter to, and at best minimizes, the efficacy of reason's influence in morals.

With the skeptical arguments above, Hume appears to be arguing that although an indeterminate, perhaps even wide, potential reach may have to be conceded to reason, yet in actuality reason's effectiveness is dubious. This way, the role reason had just been given is somehow subverted: reason may be wide reaching in possibility, but it is, in practice, mostly ineffective. Even so, indeterminacy is not final; it can be dealt with. Although the situation evidently calls for remedial measures, these may well be within our reach, and we must make it our goal to guarantee, whenever possible, conditions favorable to the unimpeded activity of reason in those many cases in which, without it, we couldn't properly be considered moral.

Or perhaps, if Hume's skeptical appeal to human nature signals that the moral malfunctioning of humans is irremediable, yet it could be held that, if not at all times when one is moral, at least a significant part of one's moral experience occurs when reason succeeds in carrying one's view onto the general level, countering particularly interested passion. The acknowledgement that *if* and *when* one achieves a general moral stance it is due to the corrective effect of reason on the person's spontaneous sentiments suffices to reinstall reason at the center stage of morals. The message here is that at such times, infrequent and scarce as they may be, one is moral owing to one's being rational.

Reason thus persists as an essential factor in morals, and, what is more important, no less foundational in quality than sentiment itself, for the conclusion seems to be that without reason there is no morals, at least not morals as we know it⁴. The want of reason would have a costly, limiting effect on our moral experiences, both with regard to their success and to their compass. Hence a closer approach not only seems to soften the contrast, but also tends to grant reason the upper hand in morals. Paradoxical as it may sound, given the initial premises of Hume's account, the fact may well be that morality calls for very high cognitive capabilities, just the sort that humans alone possess.

Many animals besides us *are* sentient and *do* obtain knowledge of causes, for example. Hume credits non-human as well as human animals with the possession of reason and passion, and knowledge of matter of fact. He does not however attribute knowledge of relations of ideas, nor perhaps morality either, to non-humans. Could it be so because such are cases that require very powerfully exercised and finely tuned cognitive abilities, found only in human subjects? If this is the case, the general standpoint that makes morals possible would parallel the abstract standpoint necessary for the knowledge of relations of ideas, requiring of those who achieve it that they be able to hold steadily and consistently in mind complex notions and relations, of self and others, and also that they be able to perform minute spatiotemporal adjustments in their views.

5

Such a conclusion has to be approached with caution though, on account of some mitigating factors, the most marked of which I believe would be conceptual clarification. In Book 2 of the *Treatise*, the combat of reason and passion was dismissed on conceptual grounds. The “struggle of reason and passion” was cast anew not simply by reason being shown not to have influence on the will, but also by cases being examined that, although in appearance instances of such struggle, were in reality cases of a struggle between calm and violent passions. The conclusion was that at times we improperly take for reason what in truth is calm passion. In Hume’s words: “What we commonly understand by *passion* is a violent and sensible emotion of mind, when any good or evil is presented, or any object, which, by the original formation of our faculties, is fitted to excite an appetite. By *reason*, we mean affections of the very same kind with the former; but such as operate more calmly, and cause no disorder in the temper” (*idem*, p. 280).

Against our common view and way of speaking, Hume, in this context, affirms that calm desires and tendencies are passions too, but productive of little, hardly noticeable emotion in the mind. They “are more known by their effects than by the immediate feeling or sensation” (*idem*, p. 268). But reason raises no emotion, no pleasure, and no uneasi-

ness at all. Therein lies its fundamental difference. Only this difference is “not immediately distinguishable to the feeling and perception.” And that’s how reason and calm passion get to be confounded (*idem*, p. 267).

This finding extends to morals in the following manner: because reflection brings us up to a general and disinterested point of view that is destitute of strong emotional charge, and has the appearance of being entirely devoid of emotion, it gets confounded with reason as well. Likewise, contrary to first appearances, the agent placed in such a standpoint is in a sentimental state, although a state constituted by calm, not violent passions. As Hume points out: “*reason*, which is able to oppose our passion... [is] nothing but a general calm determination of the passions, formed on some distant view or reflexion” (*idem*, p. 372-373).

But there is nothing new in the statement that the *effects*, if they are moral, of one’s being positioned in a general point of view, are sentimental. It amounts to no more than a restatement of the principle that moral stance is sentimental, and that moral judgment is expression of sentiment, albeit sometimes sentiment in disguise. But can reflection in like manner be explained in such terms?

To the lingering question of whether reflection, or the *cause* of certain sentimental moral states, is synonymous with reason, the answer, I believe, is no. This is not an obvious answer though, for the overcoming of self and diminution of personal involvement, on the one hand, and broad view and general perspective, on the other, seem to be features of typical rational behavior. After all, detachment and generality, disinterest and neutrality do make up a set of properties we commonly attribute to rationality. Hume chooses to call it reflection, but it does not seem clear, at first sight, what could prevent it from being called by the name of reason.

For Hume, to hold a reflective point of view, in one sense, amounts to the following: “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. This gives rise to what in an improper sense we call *reason*, which is a principle, that is often contradictory to those propensities that display themselves upon the approach of the object. In reflecting on any action,

which I am to perform a twelve-month hence, I always resolve to prefer the greater good, whether at that time it will be more contiguous or more remote; nor does any difference in that particular make a difference in my present intentions and resolutions. My distance from the final determination makes all those minute differences vanish, nor am I affected by anything, but the general and more discernable qualities of good and evil” (*idem*, p. 343-344).

I find this passage revealing. Taking distance from oneself ensures the moral appreciation of other agents’ actions and characters. Equally relevant to morals is a distancing from one’s own immediate prospects, which encourages moral excellence in the agent’s own choices. Both kinds are similar, and similarly relevant. Now what I find remarkable here is Hume’s seeming suggestion that a limitation and “infirmity” of human nature, namely the lack of minute discrimination in our perception of objects viewed at a distance, is cause of our being inclined to the greater good, namely of our becoming better discriminating moral agents; and that this is what the reflective positioning of ourselves, or the gaining distance from immediate pleasure, comes to. I believe the same can be said of the reflective distancing that makes for good moral appreciation of others.

At this juncture, what characterizes the moral outlook does not, not even by the utmost effort, fit the description of what would generally be accepted to be an operation of reason, or a cognitive achievement. Neutrality and generality are indeed attributes of reflection, but reflection, in this case, *literally* translates into sentiment – the reflective point of view is *synonymous* with a state of calm passion stimulation. One valuable move, as I said, is realizing, on a closer look, that there is passion and sentiment to be found in situations where apparently there isn’t any, and the discovery of subdued emotions, calm passions, gentle sentiments where there seemed to be none. An altogether different move is to take hold of things most typically identifiable with rationality, explaining them away as belonging in the sensory/sentimental category. I believe Hume goes thus far in his account of reflection, leaving his reader to wonder: if generality is not to be identified with reason, what then⁵?

It is a necessary condition for the existence of morality that one perceive oneself and others as similar but distinct identities; and also that one envisage oneself in circumstances that go beyond here and now. These perceptions are possible only because one can imaginarily feel passions and sentiments in broader-reaching and more inclusive ways. Thus sentimentally speaking a general or remote view is nothing like a lesser view, as would be the case if it were phrased cognitively. It is rather a state of sentiments of a particular sort, in fact *the* state requisite for an experience to qualify as moral.

When the moral general standpoint is explained not negatively, as a sort of sensory deprivation, but positively, as procuring sympathy and extended sympathy, it likewise does not require reference to reason, when conditions that *might* be cast in terms of rational behavior are instead preferably displayed in sensory and imaginative terms, which once again are ultimately reducible to passional and sentimental terms, averse to cognitive phrasing.

Hume's theory of mind shows that a vivid impression naturally brings to mind and communicates its vivacity to any associated idea; as a result, the mind, or imagination, moves with ease from one to the other. Because we humans are so similar, each of us can very easily have a share in the sentiments of others, for it is quite easy to endow the idea we have of them with a share of the vivacity pertaining to ideas we have of ourselves (*idem*, sec. 2.1.11). To sympathize is precisely "the conversion of an idea into an impression by the force of imagination" (*idem*, p. 273). And, to use Hume's phrase, what is taking place in such a conversion is nothing other than a "communication of passions" (*idem*, p. 255). Its morality resides in its making our sensibility not limited to our own pleasure and pain, sensuous or social, real or imaginary, by making us sensitive too to the pleasure and pain of any other being with whom we happen to be imaginatively associated.

The closer a thing is to us, the more vivid become the ideas of its features, to the point, in some cases, where they feel like impressions. Whenever we imaginatively perceive the pleasant and painful circumstances of other beings, they'll no longer be indifferent to us, for when we imagine, we feel too, and tend towards or against, and, if we are able

to, we'll seek or avoid that which thus moves us. Our sympathy can expand to reaches that go well beyond our most proximate surroundings, and embrace distant human and perhaps even non-human communities and individuals⁶. This is precisely "extended sympathy" – an imaginative sort of reaching out which enables us to turn outwards more extensively the natural benevolence that, under different conditions, would remain narrowly restricted. It applies to those cases when sentiments get expanded owing to the fact that their bearer is at the time contemplating broader imaginary horizons of pleasure and pain, which pertain to an also broader population of sentient beings. To them one relates sympathetically as one who "anticipate[s] by the force of imagination" their pleasures and pains (*idem*, p. 248).

All cases of sympathy, restricted or extended, consist of imaginative display of sentimental states, and so do morals. The standard of moral taste itself is established by what Hume calls an "intercourse of sentiments," attested by the passage in the *Treatise* that reads: "In like manner, tho' sympathy be much fainter than our concern for ourselves, and a sympathy with persons remote from us much fainter than that with persons near and contiguous; yet we neglect all these differences in our calm judgments concerning the characters of men. Besides, that we ourselves often change our situation in this particular, we every day meet with persons, who are in a different situation from ourselves, and who cou'd never converse with us on any reasonable terms, were we to remain constantly in that situation, which is peculiar to us. *The intercourse of sentiments, therefore, in society and conversation, makes us form some general inalterable standard, by which we may approve or disapprove of characters and manners*" (*idem*, p. 385; italics added).

Sentiments and their expression account not only for moral judgment, but also for the standards that guide judgments, as well as for reflection, by means of which standards are achieved. Reflection, as we have seen, is an imaginative positioning of oneself in another place or time, so as to have a glimpse of the sentiments one would feel in that position. In those occasions sentiments may be faint, but imagination suffices to direct our inclination, for: "Sentiments must touch the heart, to make them controul our passions; But they need not extend beyond the imagination, to make them influence our taste" (*idem*, p. 374).

In short, for a situation to be considered moral, not only one's attention has to be directed to its sentimental qualities, but also the whole of the situation, and not just aspects of it, has to be envisaged as sentimental. All that is empirical or factual, and likewise all that is normative, is actually rendered, and perceived, or felt, as a state of sentiments.

7

Having agreed that moral experience *as such* is sentimental, my final question is then: won't there always be a non-sentimental residue to all accounts of morals? Indeed there remains one basic residual level, where reason and cognition do influence the process and outcome of the combat of passions.

What I have in mind is first, the mere fact that a necessary condition for a passion to be aroused is the preceding belief in the existence of its object, a cognitive precedent. As Hume observes, a sense in which a passion can be diagnosed as unreasonable applies when it "is founded on the supposition of the existence of objects, which really do not exist" (*idem*, p. 267). And secondly, the fact that human action involves the activity of reason as it judges probabilities, either in referring action to character, or in fitting means to ends, or yet in pointing out causal relations between objects, and thus enabling transmission of propensity or aversion from objects that immediately give pleasure and pain to their mediate associates.

Judgment and belief precede and accompany the passions, and they make a difference to the arrangements of passions that develop into action and into moral evaluation (*idem*, p. 267, 295-296). In numerous cases, the arousal of affections is caused by "the imagination, according to the light in which it places its object" (*idem*, p. 245), and "a double relation of ideas and impressions" causes the transition of passions (*idem*, p. 248). The mutual influence of ideas and affections translates into complete reciprocal dependency of passion and reason, both in the arousal and in the transition of passions.

This point is best illustrated by the *Treatise's* analyses of the indirect passions of pride and humility, love and hate, where associated ideas give to

impressions of pleasure and pain the precise turn that results in one specific passion being felt. But with regard to the direct passions as well, the pleasure or pain, propensity or aversion, that specifically determines each one of them, is itself determined by its appearing to us probable or improbable, certain or uncertain, in or out of our power. Any particular passion cannot be taken apart from, and would not even be what it is without its empirical circumstances and the way they are perceived. The 'light in which an object is placed' is the result of a cognitive evaluation of its status.

Now when the passional basis itself of human behavior is so mixed with reason, so will naturally be the whole edifice of morals. It seems that when one attempts to account for the mutual influence of reason and passion, one soon finds them to be so very entangled that to set them apart is almost impossible. When their disentanglement proves to be possible, it seems almost to be vain.

In the *Treatise*, Hume points out that moral philosophers take the "liberty" to consider "any motion as compounded and consisting of two parts separate from each other, tho' at the same time they acknowledge it to be in itself uncompounded and inseparable" (*idem*, p. 317). If Hume's insight is correct, human action likewise is "in itself uncompounded and inseparable," and the distinction that Hume makes between a part belonging to the affections and a part belonging to the understanding strictly is an expository device in the study of morals. But I also believe that of the two categories, sentiment is the one that is ever bound to prevail. However much the coarse-grained description of human action and morals may make use of the instrumental distinction between reason and sentiment, the fine-grained description of the same phenomena is conducive to its ultimate dismissal, and to the conclusion that whereas reason may be explained away in terms of sentiment, sentiment itself is original and irreducible.

It is always possible to analyze the whole moral domain, including its cognitive components, into clusters of impressions of pleasure and pain, at times highly complex clusters, comparable to a field of forces. In this picture, moral phenomena would constitute a setting where impressions and ideas, vivid or faint, are but gradations of pleasure and pain, desire and aversion. Thus when we contemplate the prospect of a determinate pleasure as probable, probable in this case stands for something like "a

pleasure felt to a certain degree.” This exact degree qualifies it as imagined, not actual, and imagined as probable, not certain.

Ultimately, reason operating in moral reasoning is more properly imagination at work on sketches of possible situations, bringing close or taking away in time and space sources of pleasure and pain, for us and others, and thus exerting an influence on our inclinations, especially insofar as it promotes a new equilibrium among violent and calm passions, measures greater and lesser goods against one another, ascertains general and particular, close and remote points of view, so that, in consequence, moral choice takes place in conditions that reach, in many cases, far beyond the agent’s most immediate circumstances.

In other words, reason is a name we apply to certain psychological processes we observe in big brained beings, such as humans, who are endowed with a relatively broad scope of memory and imagination, and who are capable to bring to mind various imaginary scenarios other than the scenario they perceive, or rather *feel*, presently. This imaginative exercise can take place at the very moment in which, under the effect of certain current stimuli, they are being inclined towards a proximate pleasure or away from a proximate pain, thus affecting their inclinations at that moment. Obviously, as a result, their choices and moral evaluations may shift.

The “reason” to which Hume in so many passages allows a part to play is more exactly an “expansion or broadening of sentiments.” Annette Baier (1991) has given a close and very insightful analysis of this phenomenon. In her view, Hume widens the concept of reason, and conceives of reflection as an enriched exercise of reason, which is passionate and social. She views Humean passions themselves as having beliefs both for their causes and components, therefore as entities with cognitive content. Contrarily to Baier, it seems to me that, for Hume, reason in morals equals impressions *felt* in a certain manner. Concomitantly, in the moral sphere, belief itself turns to be just another way of feeling.

8

To conclude, this paper began with the idea that reason and sentiment would constitute for Hume two independent domains, the latter alone

having any essential bearing on morals. In what I'd call the stark or robust distinction, Hume would single out passion and sentiment alone as determining and founding human action and morality, to the exclusion of reason.

The paper then probed several ways in which Hume accedes or might accede to reason's contribution to morals: from reason as an antecedent, to reason as an integral part of moral experience; and from reason as a necessary condition, to reason as an auxiliary tool. These possibilities would suggest a more mitigated view of the mutual exclusion of reason and passion/sentiment, so that human moral psychology would appear at least as a mixed breed that integrates both kinds.

The paper finally proposed a view in which reason itself was defined anew, wholly in terms of imaginative functioning of the mind, the raw material of which would be passions and sentiments. Due to such reduction, or "explaining away" of reason, morals thus appear, in a new sense, but still wholly, as a matter of sentiment.

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² A cautionary note: that reason and passion cannot affect each other at all is but a provisory notion in the *Treatise*, soon to be abandoned. The *Treatise* as a whole, as will be noted later in this paper, corrects it, at the same time as it invites the question of how is it that reason, or whatever it is that the term stands for, by working on the passions, can indeed produce action or a new passion.

³ At first, Hume assigns different domains of inquiry to each reason and passion: passion as sentiment makes moral distinctions (HUME, 2000, sec. 3.1.1, 3.3), and establishes the natural virtues (*idem*, sec. 3.3), whereas reason actuates in establishing the artificial virtues (*idem*, sec. 3.2.1).

⁴ It suffices to say that without the general point of view and sympathy human moral experience would be sensibly impoverished. Another question, about which I'd rather suspend judgment for the moment, is whether either is essential to morals. For a sustained discussion, see Årdal (1966, ch. 5).

⁵ Moreover, I believe the passage above also signals that if rational or cognitive standards were

to apply to an account of the general, removed, or reflective standpoint of morals, we would be led into the quasi-paradoxical acceptance that a view that we would declare to be poor, according to those standards, is precisely the sort that allows for a moral stance that we tend, rightly, to consider rich and supple; in short, that epistemic minuses make for moral pluses. I take this threat of paradox as further warning against the danger of applying cognitive parameters in the casting of moral phenomena.

⁶ In principle any being, if sentient, could be accorded moral consideration, notwithstanding its not being human, or not being very close to us. Ultimately, it all depends on the scope of our own imagination.

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