

# Was Hume a Humean?

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When it comes to talking about practical reasoning, “Humean” is a synonym for “instrumentalist.” That is, a “Humean” view of practical reasoning is one on which only means-end reasoning directed toward satisfying antecedently given desires counts as practical reasoning at all. Witness, for instance, Michael Smith’s fairly recent paper, “The Humean Theory of Motivation,” which advances just this view; Smith, who does not discuss Hume himself, simply takes it for granted that the label “Humean” fits.<sup>1</sup> It wasn’t always this way: when Aurel Kolnai, some years back, wished to criticize instrumentalism, he described the view as Aristotle’s, an attribution that would be unlikely now.<sup>2</sup>

Why care about a name? There are two reasons. First, if any theory of practical reasoning today deserves to be called the received view, it is instrumentalism.<sup>3</sup> Calling it Hume’s not only gives it the cachet that comes of association with a distinguished member of the philosophical pantheon, but invokes in its favor the arguments—and the rhetoric—Hume produces in the *Treatise*. Arguments for instrumentalism are hard to come by, but the lack is perhaps less urgently felt than it might be because it is assumed that Hume’s arguments are already on hand. Second, the label gets in the way of reading Hume, and so obscures our vision of a characteristically ingenious and subtle philosophical mind: if we know what Humeanism is, and we consequently think we know what Hume thought, we are much less likely to see, and learn from, what he actually did think.

I am going to argue that linking Hume's name with instrumentalism is as inappropriate as linking Aristotle's: that, as a matter of textual point, the Hume of the *Treatise* is not an instrumentalist at all, and that the view of practical reasoning that he does have is incompatible with, and far more minimal than, instrumentalism. Then I will consider Hume's reasons for his view, and argue that they make sense when they are seen against the background of his semantic theory. And finally, I will try to say why it is that Hume has nonetheless been read as he has.

Nailing down Hume's views on practical reasoning is a fairly ambitious project, and if this paper is to be kept within manageable bounds, we will need to restrict its scope. With the exception of passages that duplicate parts of the argument I will discuss, I will leave the body of argument preceding the famous "is-ought" passage to another occasion. And I will not discuss the first Appendix to the second *Enquiry*; it too deserves stand-alone treatment, since, as we will see, there is reason to believe that Hume changed his mind on some of these issues as he was finishing up the *Treatise*.<sup>4</sup> That means that I will be focusing on the discussion surrounding Hume's well-known pronouncement that "[r]eason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them."<sup>5</sup>

## 1

The instrumentalist appropriation of the battle cry, "Reason is the slave of the passions," identifies Humean passions with desires, as they are conceived by the contemporary philosophical community, and understands reason's slavery to consist in its being allocated the task of finding the means to satisfy them. But a second glance at the trope should make it less than obvious that this is what the passage means. The point of practical reasoning, on the instrumentalist model, is to generate subsidiary motivations—desires or intentions—for the means to satisfy one's initial desires. Practical reasoning of this kind has a critical and coercive function: as Kant was later to point out, he who wills the end *must* will the means. (While an instrumentalist believes that *only* means-end reasoning is practical reasoning, he *does* believe that means-end reasoning is practical reasoning, and so that one is committed to the conclusions of one's means-end reasonings.) In terms of the kind of image the passage is likely to evoke, the instrumentalist's passion is not a reclining pasha who sends reason scurrying off to bring back this or that object of desire; rather, reason returns with further passions, which the initial passions *must*, on pain of irrationality, adopt. (Actually bringing back the objects of desire is a job for the agent, not one of his mental parts.) This is not at all the role of a slave, and what it has reason doing does not match what Hume says in the second half of his battle cry: that reason "can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them." The rhetorical device and the instrumentalist

construal of the passage do not fit very well together, and this should be enough to keep us open-minded about the force of these lines.

If it is not obvious what the claim that reason is the slave of the passions means, how can we determine what it does mean? The claim is presented as the conclusion of two adjacent arguments. This means that the content of the claim that reason is the slave of the passions must be whatever the conclusion of those arguments turns out to be. (This application of the principle of charity is licensed by the fact that Hume, like most philosophers, takes valid argumentation very seriously.<sup>6</sup>) To find out what the claim comes to, then, we must reconstruct the arguments for it.

Fortunately, both arguments are quite straightforward. The first has the following skeleton:

1. "The understanding exerts itself after two different ways, as it judges from demonstration or probability..." (T 413:21f). With only minimal anachronism, we can rephrase this as the claim that all reasoning is either mathematical reasoning, or empirical reasoning about matters of fact.<sup>7</sup>
2. "Abstract or demonstrative reasoning...never influences any of our actions..." (T 414:9f). That is, mathematical reasoning on its own does not produce practical conclusions.
3. Empirical reasoning on its own (or supplemented with mathematical reasoning) does not produce practical conclusions (T 414:13–34).
4. Therefore, "reason alone can never produce any action, or give rise to volition" (T 414:35f). That is, reasoning (or the understanding) does not produce practical conclusions.

The conclusion of the argument running from 413:21 to 414:36 is evidently not that all practical reasoning is instrumental, but that there is no such thing as practical reasoning at all.<sup>8</sup> The conclusion is explicitly stated, and, more importantly, if Hume's argument is to be valid, this is what the conclusion must be. So if "reason is the slave of the passions" is the conclusion of this argument, then this is what it must mean.

This conclusion is reinforced by Hume's second argument, which appears at T 415:20–33 (and is repeated at T 458:7–18). The argument runs:

1. "A passion is an original existence" (T 415:23); "original" is being contrasted with "representative," so what this means is that passions do not represent anything.
2. Since truth and falsity require representation (the agreement or "disagreement of ideas, consider'd as copies, with those objects, which they represent" [T 415:31–33]), passions cannot be true or false.

3. Reason concerns itself only with truth and falsity.
4. Therefore, a passion cannot be opposed (or, for that matter, endorsed<sup>9</sup>) by reason; practical states of mind cannot be produced by reasoning.

While the argument's structure is not as clearly highlighted as its predecessor's, it is evident that the argument has something very like the form just outlined; and if this is right, then its conclusion is tantamount to the claim that there is no such thing as practical reasoning, since if there were, reason would be able to endorse or oppose some motivational states. As before, if the argument is to be valid, its conclusion must amount to a denial of practical reasoning. And since both of the arguments for reason's slavery to the passions converge on this conclusion, this must be what "reason is the slave of the passions" means.

What this shows is that Hume is not an instrumentalist. An instrumentalist holds that there is one (but only one) kind of practical reasoning, viz., means-end reasoning. 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.<sup>10</sup> There are different ways to call someone a skeptic; this way has the skeptic about practical reasoning not merely doubting, but denying, that there is such a thing as practical reasoning, and, *a fortiori*, such a thing as instrumental practical reasoning. Korsgaard describes "a sort of being who could engage in causal reasoning and who could, therefore, engage in reasoning that would point out the means to her ends, but who was not motivated by it." On the view of the skeptic about practical reasoning, as I am proposing to use the term, this creature has got practical rationality *right*.<sup>11</sup> Hume differs from the instrumentalist in thinking that not even means-end reasoning is legitimate.

We can confirm this conclusion—and see a little more of what it comes to—by turning to the subsequent discussion in the *Treatise*. Hume acknowledges that we do sometimes describe passions as unreasonable; and he also acknowledges that passions often seem to be responsive to certain kinds of reasoning—in particular, reasoning about what is a means to what, which is perhaps why he has been so widely mistaken for an instrumentalist.<sup>12</sup> His explanation for these facts invokes the judgments that often accompany, or provoke, passions. These judgments can be true or false, they can be the conclusions of reasoning, and they can be criticized as irrational. And these judgments are causally effective in producing and removing passions:

I may desire any fruit as of an excellent relish; but whenever you convince me of my mistake, my longing ceases. I may will the performance of certain actions as means of obtaining any desir'd good; but as my willing of these actions is only secondary, and founded on the supposition, that they are causes of the propos'd effect; as soon

as I discover the falshood of that supposition, they must become indifferent to me. (T 416:36 to 417:8)

But these connections between reasoning and the passions are not enough to make the reasoning genuinely practical: Hume is careful to insist that not only must “a passion...be accompany’d with some false judgment, in order to its being unreasonable”; “even then ’tis not the passion, properly speaking, which is unreasonable, but the judgment” (T 416:25–28); or, as he puts it after his second pass over one of the arguments we have just reviewed, “[t]hese false judgments...may be said to render [the associated passions] unreasonable, *in a figurative and improper way of speaking.*”<sup>13</sup>

Suppose, to adapt the example we just quoted, I desire a persimmon because I expect it to taste delicious. I, like most people, am built so that, when I realize that the persimmon will not taste as good as I had thought—perhaps it is still unripe, and will have the chalky taste characteristic of unripe persimmons—I stop wanting the fruit. Similarly, if, desiring a persimmon, I conclude that I can get one by making a trip to the corner produce market, I am likely to acquire a desire to drop by the produce market. And I am constructed so that when I discover that the produce market will be out of ripe persimmons after all, the desire to go there fades. Because my judgments as to the flavor of persimmons and ways of getting them can be rationally arrived at, and rationally criticized, my desires are sensitive to my reasoning. And, miraculous as it may seem that I am built this way, it is, from an evolutionary standpoint not available to Hume, not all that surprising: organisms that exhibit this kind of sensitivity are likely to do better than organisms that do not.

But this sensitivity is not itself an aspect of rationality, and failure of such sensitivity does not expose one to the criticism that one is being irrational. If I realize that the persimmon is unripe, and continue to desire to eat it, there is no mistake I am making. If, after I recall that the corner produce market has no ripe persimmons, I still want or intend to make a trip there, I am not being in any way irrational.<sup>14</sup> And, conversely, if I desire the persimmon, arrive at the conclusion that I can have one by retrieving it from the top of the refrigerator, but, even when there are no competing desires, do not come to desire or intend to fetch it, I am not being irrational in that case either. In the face of these considerations, I can shrug my shoulders, and point out that none of them amounts to a reason to do, or want to do, or not do, or not want to do, *anything*—since nothing could count as such a reason.

The attribution of instrumentalism to Hume is sometimes defended by appeal to Hume’s statement that “reason alone” does not produce practical conclusions; the point of Hume’s phrasing, on this account, is that instrumental reasoning requires desires. But this way of reading Hume is confused. On the instrumental model, desires are among the *premises* of practical

reasoning, together with beliefs about what is a means to what. But if needing premises is enough to make it the case that “reason alone” is not doing the work, then nothing particular to practical reasoning can have been shown, since—with the possible exception of mathematical reasoning, which Hume may have thought did not need to be supplied with premises—all reasoning requires premises. What Hume is saying here is, rather, that once reasoning has arrived at the judgments that are its conclusions, those judgments must be supplemented with passions in order to “produce any action, or give rise to volition.” And this interaction of judgment and passion does not count as reasoning.

So much for setting the record straight regarding Hume’s alleged instrumentalism. Hume is a skeptic, not an instrumentalist: if nothing could count as a reason for action, then the considerations adduced as instrumental reasons cannot count as reasons for action either. Let us return for a moment to the figure of the slave: at their whim, the passions send reason searching for information about their objects and the ways of obtaining them. But that information, once obtained, exercises no coercive force whatsoever over the passions: the slave does not issue commands to its masters, or tell them what to do with the information it has gleaned. The passions will do whatever they like, and when they do, their slaves will not be the ones to call them to account.

## 2

Skepticism about practical reasoning is a counterintuitive position, and because one does not adopt counterintuitive views without reason, we can take it that Hume had what he took to be compelling reason to hold it. Since we know Hume to have been an intelligent and thoughtful philosopher, it is worth trying to figure out what his reasons might have been, if only in order to ask whether they are good enough for us to join him in his skepticism. Now since we have just seen his arguments for the view, we might think that his reasons must already be out on the table; another look at the arguments, however, will persuade us that they are not.

The arguments are valid: this was, after all, what made it so easy to determine what their shared conclusion was. But why did Hume believe their premises? I will not try to say whether or not the premises are true; what matters just now is that they are certainly question-begging. Consider the major premise of the first argument, that all reasoning is either mathematical or empirical. This is a terrible premise to use in an argument whose conclusion is that there is no such thing as practical reasoning: anyone who needed to be persuaded of the conclusion would be extremely unlikely to concede it. (After all, why isn’t practical reasoning a third kind of reasoning?) The other argument seems little better, although the problem with it could be located in any

of several places. Why should someone who is seriously entertaining the possibility of practical reasoning agree that “[r]eason is the discovery of truth or falshood” (T 458:6), thereby excluding the process of correctly arriving at new desires and intentions? Or why should he agree that “[a] passion is an original existence” (T 415:23), that is, not representing, and so not responsible to, further facts or states of affairs? Why can’t mental states be both world-guided and action-guiding—as, indeed, actual emotions seem to be? Some explanation is required of Hume’s willingness to accept these premises, despite their being close enough to his conclusion to deprive the arguments of most of the work they ought to be doing.

We can explain Hume’s views on practical reasoning—and, along the way, some of his psychological views—using his semantic theories. Of immediate interest is the well-known fact that Hume took content-bearing mental entities to be very much like mental pictures.<sup>15</sup> Importantly, this isn’t just naive or antiquated empirical psychology; it is, rather, an expression of the semantic view that content is carried by resemblance. A familiar way of explaining Hume’s views is to invoke his psychology (the so-called theory of ideas). But a counterintuitive and apparently unmotivated philosophical view is not explained by deriving it from a counterintuitive and apparently unmotivated psychological view. Hume’s philosophical psychology and his views on practical reasoning should not be considered two distinct bodies of doctrine, one of which can be invoked to explain the other. (If anything, Hume can only find the psychology plausible if he finds the theory of practical reasoning embedded in it plausible.) They are two sides of the same coin, and must be explained—or go unexplained—together.

Semantic theories, which I am suggesting will do the explanatory job, have to account for, first, the contents of mental items, their being *about* things, and, second, the different roles mental items play in thought: what makes the content of an attitude (propositional or otherwise) the content it is, and what makes an attitude the particular attitude *it* is. So, contemporary philosophers might explain how items with semantic properties—for example, words or sentences—have contents using theories of reference together with recursive definitions of the contents of a complex item from the contents of its components. And they might distinguish between the attitudes held towards these contents—such as believing, wanting or merely imagining—by appeal to, say, functional-role theories. Hume’s semantic theories have to cover the same territory, just because this is the territory that *any* body of semantic theory has to cover. But Hume does not have the focus on language so characteristic of the philosophy of this century. (This means that in using the term ‘semantic’, I am not assimilating Hume’s views to theories of language. Hume differs from us most interestingly in that the objects of the attitudes are not propositions—that is, idealized sentences—but something very much like pictures, that is, not linguistic items at all.) And so his theories do

the job rather differently than ours.

Hume takes the contents of mental items to be carried by resemblance, but not just resemblance to anything; like contemporary causal theories of reference, contents derive from preceding links in a causal chain leading back to an initial object. "Ideas," says Hume, "always represent the objects or impressions from which they are deriv'd."<sup>16</sup> Resemblance is the mechanism that transmits content from one link in the chain to the next. Let's call this *the causal resemblance theory of mental content*.

If the causal resemblance theory covers—to a first approximation—the territory covered by modern theories of mental content, what does Hume have to cover the area we leave to functional-role theories? It is clear that mental entities play different roles in thought (for example, imagining, believing and wanting), and that Hume must somehow distinguish these roles from one another. A thought of a golden mountain may be merely a fancy I am toying with; it may be a belief that there is a golden mountain somewhere; or it may be a desire to come by a golden mountain.

As I remarked a moment ago, one upshot of the causal resemblance theory is that content-bearing mental entities are conceived of as something very like mental pictures. Now when pictorial resemblance constitutes representational content, the pictorial features of mental entities are fully determined by their contents. Consequently, those features cannot be varied to distinguish one role from another. If you were to take an idea representing, say, a landscape, and write "belief" on the upper part of it, you would get, not a representation of the landscape serving the function of a belief, but a representation of a different landscape (one with skywriting that says "belief"), whose mental role would have been no further determined.<sup>17</sup>

What further features of a mental picture can serve to distinguish mental roles? Hume's first proposed answer is *vivacity*: roughly, the brightness of the picture.<sup>18</sup> (A vivacious idea [bright picture] of a golden mountain is the belief in a golden mountain, whereas a less vivacious idea of the same thing is a fancy that does not amount to belief.<sup>19</sup>) Vivacity varies along a single dimension: the only way to vary the vivacity of a perception is by making it *more* or *less* vivacious, just as there is only one way pictures can become dimmer or brighter.

When you wou'd any way vary the idea of a particular object, you can only encrease or diminish its force and vivacity. If you make any other change on it, it represents a different object or impression.  
(T 96:13–16)

Now if vivacity is the *only* way to distinguish representational states, Hume will have to be careful not to squander his sole available resource. Hume needs to distinguish not only imagination from belief, but belief from hallucination or sensation, and these from memory, probabilistic belief, and so



**Figure 1****Vivacity or forcefulness distinguishes different types of representational mental states**


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impressions  
 memories  
 beliefs  
 probability judgments  
 poetical near-beliefs  
 imaginings

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on. The way he does it is to assign bands on the vivacity spectrum to the different content-bearing mental states. In descending order of vivacity, these are: impressions, memories,<sup>20</sup> beliefs, judgments of probability,<sup>21</sup> poetical near-beliefs,<sup>22</sup> and imaginings.

However, simply because it varies along a single dimension, vivacity *alone* will not suffice to tell beliefs, desires and imaginings apart. Believing must be more vivid than imagining; given this, where on the scale of vivacity can we locate desire? Desire is also, one would think, more vivid than mere imagining, which leaves us two choices: either desire is more vivid than belief, or it falls somewhere between imagining and belief. But it is implausible that desire is more vivid than belief, since you cannot transform a belief into a desire by making it more vivid (say, by increasing the evidence for it).<sup>23</sup> Similarly, you cannot transform a desire into a belief by making it less vivid. And the alternative, that desire is more vivid than imagining but less vivid than belief, is hardly better: making imagination vivid need not transform it into desire, making a desire more vivid does not transform it into a belief, and, finally, making a belief less vivid does not transform it into a desire—even if occasional cases of daydreaming or wishful thinking appear to fit some of these descriptions.<sup>24</sup>

Types of representational mental states are distinguishable only by vivacity, but vivacity cannot be used to distinguish beliefs and imaginings from desires. There is only one way out: desires cannot be representational. There is another way to make this point. Think of whether a mental state is representational or not as a stable property: its *representationality*.<sup>25</sup> The problem, recall, was to distinguish types of mental states from each other; and it turned out that vivacity was not enough to do the job. Representationality is a further feature that can be used to distinguish types of mental states from each other; in Hume's scheme of things, passions are *identified as such* in part by being non-representational.

Humean passions differ from the contemporary philosopher's notion of desire in being multitudinous and qualitatively varied. So Hume needs not

only to be able to tell passions from beliefs; he must be able to tell passions from each other. But once passions are non-representational, this is no longer a difficulty. The problem that vivacity was needed to solve was that of distinguishing *representational* mental states; Hume was forced into using vivacity because the pictorial features of a representational perception are all controlled by the content, leaving nothing to mark what *kind* of mental state it is. But once we turn to impressions of reflection, we are leaving representation behind. So Hume can distinguish one kind of non-representational impression from another by its “peculiar” feeling, rather than by its vivacity.<sup>26</sup>

We are now in a position to explain why the premises of Hume’s arguments seemed so natural to him. These premises have to be seen against the background of Hume’s semantic theory—a theory in which, while writing the *Treatise*, Hume must have been entirely immersed.<sup>27</sup> The semantic theory makes more or less inevitable, in the manner just outlined, a philosophical psychology in which mental states either have contents or motivational force, but not both. (The view is a precursor of contemporary belief-desire psychology, but is more radical in that Humean passions cannot have the analog of the propositional objects allowed desires; the intentionality of the passions must be simulated by causally linking a passion with a content-bearing judgment.<sup>28</sup>) Once motivating mental states, or passions, are understood not to bear contents, that passions are not the objects of reason should cease to be surprising: reasoning manipulates only mental states with contents.

Let’s return briefly to the premises of Hume’s two arguments. Recall that the causal resemblance theory of mental content gives rise to a way of thinking on which mental contents are rather like mental pictures. What mental operations on such contents might count as forms of reasoning? Evidently, one can highlight structural features of one’s mental pictures (i.e., trace out what Hume calls “relations of ideas”), or one can investigate the ways in which one idea gives rise to another (here, only the patterns that track causal connections are candidates for the honorific term ‘reasoning’). So, against this background, the first premise of Hume’s first argument is quite natural: reasoning will either regard “the abstract relations of ideas” (i.e., be mathematical), or the relations of the objects that the ideas represent, and which are responsible for the ways in which the ideas succeed one another—that is, “those relations of objects, of which experience only gives us information” (T 413:23f).

Hume’s second argument falls into place against this background picture as well; in fact, it is almost a direct expression of it. We have explained why passions are “original existences,” and it is now also clear why reasoning is responsible only to the agreement or “disagreement of ideas, consider’d as copies, with those objects, which they represent” (T 415:31–33): given what the contents of mental entities are like, on the background semantic theory,

there is nothing else for reasoning to be responsible to.<sup>29</sup>

Let us quickly take stock of our location in the argument. Hume is not an instrumentalist but a skeptic about practical reasoning. And now that we are in a position to see what drives Hume's skepticism, it is clear that the very considerations that would require him to abandon all but instrumentalist reasons for action require him to abandon those reasons as well. Hume does not arrive at his skepticism on a case-by-case basis, rejecting one type of putative practical reasoning after another until none are left. The semantic theory that is the engine of his views is unable to distinguish between types of reason for action, and so when it is put into gear, it makes a clean sweep of all of them. The motivating 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. Hume's skepticism about practical reasoning is by no means an independent dogma, but is generated by the semantic views that shape so many of the arguments in the *Treatise*.

That said, it needs to be qualified; I will do that by considering a pair of problems with the story I have just sketched. Practical reasoning is not possible, on Hume's view, because passions cannot be representative states. And we saw that this was inevitable because they could not be accommodated in the ladder of vivacity used to distinguish representational mental states from one another. But this might have been avoided by allowing different kinds of vivacity: one for motivation, one for belief, and so on. The first problem, then, is the objection that Hume in fact did allow for different kinds of vivacity.<sup>30</sup> Assuming this objection can be met, the second problem is that of explaining why Hume did not help himself to different kinds of vivacity.

The objection that Hume actually did allow for different kinds of vivacity is supported by lists like "more vivid, lively, forcible, firm, steady conception of an object" (EHU 49); the objection has it that the point of such lists is not to compensate for linguistic imprecision but to express the disjunctive context-dependent character of the denoted quality. But there are, I think, passages that make it clear that the vocabulary is meant to express a single notion for which there is no good single term, rather than to list many notions: for example, "the same quality, call it *firmness*, or *solidity*, or *force*, or *vivacity*."<sup>31</sup>

What is interesting is that Hume later recanted this position, acknowledging it to be an "error," albeit one "of less importance" than the incompatibility of his views on causation and personal identity. The relevant passage is to be found in the Appendix to the *Treatise*, where Hume is in the process of changing his mind about various things (T 636:25–31);<sup>32</sup> the passage it refers to shows that in the *Treatise* proper, 'vivacity' is univocal (T 96:13–16; quoted above). This is why Hume's arguments in the second *Enquiry* do not include successors to the arguments I have construed as depending on this view about vivacity.<sup>33</sup> Hume's change of mind on this topic goes some distance toward explaining the fifth argument in the first Appendix

to the *Enquiry*, which has a distinctly instrumentalist cast:<sup>34</sup> perhaps, as the background semantic view became more flexible, Hume found himself able to admit instrumentalist patterns of practical reasoning into the fold.<sup>35</sup> That Hume abandoned the arguments surrounding the “slavery” passage upon abandoning the view about vivacity is strong circumstantial evidence in favor of an interpretation that takes this view of vivacity to be essential to those arguments.

Why did Hume take vivacity to be univocal and unidimensional when he was writing the *Treatise*? It is, of course, possible that the alternative simply had not occurred to him, perhaps due to the controlling power of a metaphor or analogy: real pictures have only one kind of brightness. Still, why doesn't Hume appeal to the fact that different physical representations of the same object can have different looks and feels, in the way that oil paintings, drawings, and photographs *look* different, even when they have the same subject?

If Hume found the option unappealing, perhaps the reason is that the difference in look would have to *explain* why one perception was motivating and another was not. If the different looks were, say, the watercolor look and the oil-painting look, an image of a soufflé with the watercolor look would have to be mere imagining of or belief about a soufflé, while the oil-painting-like mental image would—just *in virtue* of its being an oil-like image—have to *motivate* me to go for the soufflé (regardless of what the soufflé was pictured as being like). And it is implausible that this kind of difference in look could explain motivation.<sup>36</sup>

### 3

I began by noting that “Humean” is often used as a synonym for “instrumentalist.” But if Hume is a skeptic rather than an instrumentalist about practical reasoning, this usage calls for explanation. It is not as though the passages I have adduced have been other than in plain view, and it is too much to suppose that they have gone entirely unnoticed by Hume's readers. If they suffice to show Hume to have been a skeptic about practical reasoning, why has anyone ever thought otherwise? If Hume's skepticism is as obvious as I have made it out to be, why don't other readers read Hume the way I do? Some, of course, have and do. But an explanation is still needed for the majority who do not. By way of concluding, I will sketch two possible explanations, and draw a moral from each.

The first is that Hume's readers have not seen why Hume *had* to be a skeptic about practical reasoning. The considerations laid out in section 2, which make Hume's skepticism inevitable, have been overlooked for two contrasting sets of reasons: they were, in Hume's day, too obvious, and, in our own, too obscure. They turn on a semantic theory that once receded into the background because it was taken for granted, and that now is so alien, and so

thoroughly discredited, that when connections that rely on it are not explicitly drawn, they simply fail to be noticed. I have argued that Hume was committed to his view about practical reasoning by his semantic theory, which we no longer share; this means that Hume had grounds for taking his skepticism seriously even if he found it to be counterintuitive. It also means that, while there is much to be learned from examining Hume's arguments, we should not, so long as we reject the semantic theory that is their starting point, expect to be able to appropriate those arguments ourselves. If I am right, instrumentalists err in invoking Hume's authority not just because they are mistaken in thinking that Hume shares their view, but in that they suppose that Hume's arguments, perhaps slightly modified, can be adapted to the uses of a contemporary philosopher. They cannot.

A second, and, I am inclined to think, more important explanation for the invisibility of Hume's skepticism is best introduced by example, and for this purpose I will use a widely circulated, although as yet unpublished, paper by Nicholas Sturgeon.<sup>37</sup> Sturgeon finds three distinct models of practical reasoning in the *Treatise*; one of these is what I am calling skepticism about practical reasoning.<sup>38</sup> Of Hume's skepticism about practical reasoning, Sturgeon says:

His 'strict and philosophical' account of reasonableness and unreasonableness...is not worth taking seriously, and properly receives almost no attention at all....It is a measure of my respect for Hume's intellect that I find it hard to believe that he took it seriously either.

If Sturgeon is not atypical—and I do not think that he is—then Hume has not been read as a skeptic about practical reasoning because, even when the passages that support such a reading have been noticed, it has been thought uncharitable to construe Hume in this way.

There are two points to be made here, regarding method and content, respectively. First, the so-called principle of charity, when taken as the principle that interpretation should make its text out to be as far as possible correct, has its dangers. In particular, it prevents one from learning from those whose views are very different from one's own. The greater the difference between views, the more wrong-headed the contrasting view is likely to seem; and the more wrong-headed it seems, the less likely a charitable interpreter will be to hear the "wrong-headed" view at all, as opposed to a reconstruction conforming to his own sense of what is plausible. But the greater the difference in views, the more interesting the contrasting view: we will learn more from listening to those who disagree with us than from those who repeat to us that of which we are already convinced. The principle of charity, understood as an injunction to maximize truth in interpretation (rather than, for instance, tightness of argument), tends to become a way of filtering out

precisely those philosophical views that are most interesting and most important. The reception of Hume's skepticism regarding practical reasoning is a case in point,<sup>39</sup> and the problem does not just arise in reading Hume. It often seems that the more interesting the philosopher, the less commentators are willing to take him at his word. When this happens, nobody is doing anybody any favors, charitable intentions notwithstanding.

And—proceeding now to content—skepticism about practical reasoning is philosophically interesting and important. Skepticism should be a reference point in the discussion of practical reasoning: the always-present null hypothesis against which other accounts must vindicate themselves. It is not an artificial or unconvincing hypothesis. One is either extremely fortunate or unfortunately complacent if one has not had bleak mornings during which it seems suddenly clear that purported reasoning about action is nothing more than empty posturing, the attempt to proceed under the comforting but unsupported notion that actions or decisions, or the mental activities leading up to them, might be right or wrong, because rational or irrational.

## NOTES

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1 Michael Smith, "The Humean Theory of Motivation," *Mind* 96 (1987): 36–61. This is not at all an isolated case. By way of further example, David Lewis, "Desire as Belief," *Mind* 97 (1988): 323–332, begins by describing instrumentalism as a "Humean thesis about motivation."

2 Aurel Kolnai, "Deliberation Is of Ends," *Ethics, Value and Reality: Selected Papers of Aurel Kolnai*, edited by Francis Dunlop and Brian Klug (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978).

3 For further discussion of instrumentalism, see Elijah Millgram, "Williams' Argument against External Reasons," *Noûs*, forthcoming.

4 David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed. revised by P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975); hereafter cited as EHU or EPM by page and line number.

5 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. revised by P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 415:18f; hereafter cited as T by page and line number.

6 Hume's enthusiasm for tight argument may be even greater than the philosophical run of the mill: there is an almost erotic tone to his description, at T 30:10, of an argument as "very strong and beautiful"; and his subsequent

tirade against philosophers who won't accept the force of a conclusive argument (T 31:27–36) is an indication of the weight Hume himself put on such arguments. I will return to the principle of charity in section 3 below.

7 The element of anachronism has to do with the ways in which Hume's conception of mathematical reasoning differs from our own. As far as the argument at hand goes, it is worth noting that recasting the dichotomy as between deductive and inductive reasoning would not do; it should not be at all obvious that deductive reasoning cannot produce practical conclusions. It is also worth remarking that Hume's well-known arguments elsewhere about the workings of reasoning about causation—the empirical reasoning he has foremost in mind here—complicate the contrast being drawn now: given Hume's views there, do we want to allow that causal inferences deserve the (for us) honorific title 'reasoning'? I'll leave these qualms to one side for the present.

8 This is to understand practical reasoning as reasoning that terminates in a practical conclusion such as an intention. If one were to call "practical" reasoning lying in the causal history of an intention (or, alternatively, reasoning that makes a difference to what intentions are formed), then one would need to redescribe Hume's conclusion as the claim that reasoning, while perhaps practical, cannot terminate in a practical conclusion. (I am grateful to Wayne Waxman and Justin Broackes for pressing me on this point.)

However, there are reasons not to use 'practical' this way. First, it will not help defend the attribution of instrumentalism to Hume. An instrumentalist is someone who believes that all practical reasoning is means-end reasoning. On the alternative use of 'practical' that we are now examining, the claim that Hume was an instrumentalist would amount to the claim that *only* reasoning about what is a means to what makes a difference to what intentions get formed, and what actions get performed: that only instrumental reasoning could have effects on our actions. But what has an effect on what, Hume famously held to be a contingent matter; and he in fact argued that forms of reasoning other than instrumental reasoning create passions and cause actions. (See n. 12 below.) So, on this use of the word 'practical', Hume was not an instrumentalist either, since many kinds of reasoning other than means-end reasoning make a difference to action.

Second, we can now see that using 'practical' this way is the waste of a good word: there is no point in drawing a distinction when nothing lies beyond the line being drawn. *Any* reasoning can causally influence subsequent action; so if reasoning is practical when it could lie in the causal history of a practical attitude such as an intention, then all reasoning is practical. Better to use the term to invoke the responsiveness to logical canons that distinguishes intelligent thought from free association: to show that reasoning is practical would then be to show that actions and motivating attitudes are governed by the same logical canons that control the sequences of thoughts that make up intelligent thinking; and *this*, I hold, is what Hume is concerned to contest.

9 Hume provides a quick argument, at T 414:35 to 415:13, to the effect that reason's inability to produce what we might call "positive" practical conclusions—for example, decisions to do something that one had not already

been inclined to do—entails its inability to produce “negative” conclusions, that is, decisions *not* to do something one was already on one’s way to doing. Although Hume does not say this, if the argument works, it works in the other direction as well—as, on my reading of Hume, it ought to. So I am going to shorten the exposition by describing Hume’s conclusion as covering both “positive” and “negative” practical reasoning.

10 Christine Korsgaard, “Skepticism about Practical Reasoning,” *Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1986): 5–25.

11 Korsgaard, 13. My use of the word ‘skeptic’ is of course not continuous with Hume’s, and it also diverges from that of Korsgaard, who presents an instrumentalist reading of Hume as the “classical formulation” of skepticism about practical reasoning (6). My excuses for assuming the risks of confusion involved in shifting the use of the term are that this is the best term for the job, and that this is the cleanest way to cut up the territory. Note that, on my use of the term, and on the reading of Hume for which I am arguing, Korsgaard comes out right: the passages in question *are* the classical formulation of skepticism about practical reasoning after all.

12 There are, in fact, other types of reasoning to which Hume takes the passions to be responsive. Some are obliquely related to instrumental reasoning. For instance, “we are no sooner acquainted with the impossibility of satisfying any desire, than the desire itself vanishes” (T xviii: 5–6). Or again, instrumental reasoning can seem to work in reverse, as when our hunger is diminished by “whatever inclines us to set our victuals at a distance” (T 394:29 to 395:6; cf. T 536:3–4). But not all responsiveness of passion to reasoning is a response to reasoning about what would bring about what; the most prominent case of this is sympathy, in which the inferred belief as to another’s feelings gives rise to qualitatively similar feelings.

13 T 459:26–29, my emphasis; nearby, he describes this attribution of the properties of a judgment to the action with which it is associated as “an abusive way of speaking, which philosophy will scarce allow of” (T 459:6–7).

14 Which Hume actually thinks is not unlikely to happen, if I am already on my way (T 451:16–19; cf. also 452:5–11). This should count as a qualification to the just-quoted “as soon as I discover the falshood of that supposition, they must become indifferent to me”; they—the actions I had supposed would attain my goal—may well not.

15 Of course, this description needs to be complicated, for instance, to accommodate the variety of sensory modalities; for our purposes, these complications will not matter. The picture-in-the-head metaphor, however, is not just an expository convenience; while Hume does not rely on it explicitly, it does seem to shape his thinking. Cf., for example, T 20:11, where he describes an (abstract) idea as an “image in the mind.”

16 T 37:29–31; also see, for example, T 157:30f; 161:9f; 233:1–3; at T 163:14 he describes the claim as “our fundamental principle.”

17 Cf. T 94:32 to 95:3.



18 Cf., for example, T 96; EHU 47ff; 58:31–34. Just what vivacity comes to in the *Treatise* is a much-disputed question, but one that, fortunately, we do not need to settle here. For a recent discussion (one somewhat at odds with the view I am developing), see Wayne Waxman, *Hume's Theory of Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

19 Cf., for example, T 116:25–27; 119:34–120:1; 120:16–20.

20 Cf. T 85:15–18; 86:1–9; 8:26 to 9:11; 371n.

21 T 129–131. Cf. T 143:9–12, where Hume describes “the shading of these colors, under which [an impression] appears to the memory or senses”; the problem is that remoteness imitates the effect of probabilistic judgment. For our purposes, the passage is useful in that it shows that a probabilistic judgment is a matter of “the shading of those colors.” (It is also a nice illustration of the way in which Hume thought in terms of mental pictures.)

22 Cf., for example, T 123:30–32; 630:24–27.

23 There is, according to Hume, an interesting class of exceptions: beliefs about desires or passions, which figure most prominently in Hume’s discussion of sympathy. Hume’s account of sympathy deserves more extended treatment than I can give it here; for now, it suffices that, if only because not all beliefs are beliefs about passions or desires, the special case does not solve the general problem of distinguishing belief from desire.

24 For simplicity of presentation, I am ignoring the further just-mentioned uses to which vivacity is put. The reader may experiment with fitting desire between adjacent bands of the full spectrum to verify that these further uses do not affect the present point.

25 This stability might be contested: surely modifying the functional role can make a representational state non-representational. (Candace Vogler has instanced a seventies artist who blew photographs up into non-representational abstracts.) But that is to allow representation to be determined by functional role, rather than by causation and representation alone. The appeal to functional role may be the right appeal to make, but it is not in Hume’s bag of tricks; if it were, and were thought through with Hume’s accustomed rigor, the qualitative resemblance of ideas to impressions would have quickly proved to be a superfluous part of the account.

26 T 472; compare also T 617:28–30, where Hume concedes that this way of doing things is not all that illuminating: “[t]here is something very inexplicable in this variation in our feelings.”

27 This is not the place to amass evidence for this claim; suffice it for now that the *Treatise* begins with an exposition of the basis of the theory, and the semantic theory is appealed to in the course of argument after argument.

28 By contrast with belief, “*will* and *desire* are annex’d to particular conceptions of good and pleasure” (T 625:3–9). For an example of how propositional objects are simulated, see T 278, where Hume describes the “object of [the] passions of [pride and humility]” as “that to which they direct their view, when excited”; “that passion, when excited, *turns our view* to another idea” (my emphasis). The objects of the passions are a contingent matter, “determin’d by an original and natural instinct, and...from the

primary constitution of the mind" (T 286:5–7; compare EPM 213n). Cf. also T 287:9–11 and 15–17 (note the use of the word "produce"); T 367f (contingency of the objects of love and hatred); and T 399 (definition of the will as an internal impression, picked out not by its logically necessary object but by the circumstances in which it normally arises).

29 Annette C. Baier, in *A Progress of Sentiments* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), has recently dismissed this argument as a "very silly paragraph," "deplorably" (160) inserted into the *Treatise*. Baier's grounds are, first, that Hume elsewhere extensively discusses the passions, in a way that seems to allow them intentional objects; second, that the *Enquiry* does not repeat this argument; and third, Hume's insistence that the passions are causally influenced by beliefs arrived at by reasoning. On the first point, Baier is right that Hume is quite sensitive to the way emotions work, but mistaken to think that Hume regards what we would think of as their intentional objects as a logical component of the passions, or as individuating them. (See n. 28 above for examples of causal locutions used where the modern reader would expect logical or constitutive ones.) I will shortly present a better explanation for the argument's absence in the second *Enquiry*, and for now note that the suggestion that the argument is a momentary oversight conflicts both with Hume's willingness to repeat it, more or less verbatim, some 43 pages later, and with the convergence of its conclusion with that of the argument on the immediately preceding pages. Finally, the appearance of reasoning in the causal history of a passion is irrelevant to whether the passions fall under the aegis of reason; on this point, see n. 8 above. Baier seems to take Hume's insistence on the nearly ubiquitous causal role of beliefs in the formation of impressions of reflexion as the view that passions "incorporate the influence of reason...[and] presuppose beliefs" (159); but the argument we are considering gives us every reason to think that Hume did not make the mistake of confusing causal with logical influence. For a helpful discussion of Baier's views, see Rachel Cohon, "On an Unorthodox Account of Hume's Moral Psychology," *Hume Studies* 20 (2): 179–194.

30 The objections considered in the remainder of this section are due to Steve Engstrom; I am grateful to him for his thoughtful comments.

31 T 106:9f; cf. also T 628:28–629:14; EHU 48f.

32 Actually, what Hume says is not that vivacity can be multidimensional, but that there are some differences in feeling over and above differences in vivacity that can be varied without changing the content of an idea. For our purposes, the distinction between these is terminological only: the question of interest is, is there more than one parameter that can be varied to distinguish ideas with the same content?

33 They do include recast descendants of some of the arguments preceding the famous "is-ought" passage.

It might be suggested that there is a simpler explanation for the omission of these arguments from the *Enquiry*: in hopes of popularizing his views, Hume left out the counterintuitive and hard-to-assimilate material. But even if this is a correct account of what went into the second *Enquiry* proper, it quite evidently does not apply to its first appendix, which contains arguments as

difficult to swallow, and whose conclusions are entirely as radical, as anything in the *Treatise*.

34 As does EPM 277:2–6.

35 This is not, of course, anything like a sufficient account. For one thing, it fails to explain how the fifth argument can be compatible with the first four. In any case, reconstructing the arguments of the second *Enquiry* is a project that would require a paper to itself.

36 But how can vivacity do any more explanatory work than looking like an oil painting? Vivacity is not meant to be quite the brightness of a picture (which would, after all, amount to a picture of a bright object), but the forcefulness with which the picture strikes you. And there, Hume thinks, explanation may be allowed to stop: “it will not be very necessary to employ many words in explaining this distinction. Every one of himself will readily perceive the difference betwixt feeling and thinking” (T 1:14 to 2:2). It is interesting, however, that this forcefulness is inseparable from the picture with its particular contents—plausible for the brightness of a picture, but also for the forcefulness of belief: you cannot have the forcefulness without an object. By contrast, we are all familiar with desire without an object: that yearning without a name (“I want *something*, I just can’t figure out what”) that often expresses itself as unfocused restlessness, or repeated searching through the kitchen cupboards. So construing belief as inseparable vivacity and desire as separable passion is faithful to experience, as Hume claims it is (T 625:26 to 626:17).

37 Nicholas Sturgeon, “Hume on Reason and Passion,” 1990. I am grateful to Professor Sturgeon for permission to quote.

38 I will not here discuss Sturgeon’s claims regarding the richer forms of practical reasoning he believes he has discovered in Hume.

39 So, too, I think, is the insufficient attention accorded Hume’s sentimentalist account of morality. Hume’s remarkable achievement, the reconstruction of our moral lives using the apparatus of feeling rather than practical reasoning, can only be fully appreciated when it is seen against the background of the skepticism that made practical reasoning unavailable, and the restriction to sentiment necessary.

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