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Hume, Blackburn, and Korsgaard on the Sensible Knave

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Oral Presentation O4.1

HUME, BLACKBURN, AND KORSGAARD ON THE SENSIBLE KNAVE

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In "Ruling Passions," Simon Blackburn advances an ethical theory that welds Blackburn's quasi-realism to a Humean-Smithian theory of moral sentiments. This paper concerns the latter Humean side of Blackburn's theory, specifically Blackburn's treatment of Hume's famous problem of the sensible knave.

I have two tasks. My first task is to examine Hume's original formulation of, and reply to, the problem posed by the sensible knave. Also, I will deal with two complexities in Hume's picture: a prima facie circularity problem, and the threat posed by a variation or descendant of the original sensible knave.

My more ambitious second task is an examination of the knave-related contemporary controversy between Blackburn and Christine Korsgaard. Blackburn's Humean defense consists especially in his repudiation of criticism levelled against Humean theories by Korsgaard in "The Sources of Normativity." I hope to show that Blackburn fails to escape Korsgaard's argument that Humean theories generally fail, in the case of the knave, to fulfill a requirement of transparency.