

Phil 104, Monday, October 4, 2010
Hume, *Treatise*, II:iii:3

The overarching idea, roughly: Our actions are not, strictly speaking, the sort of thing that can be, or fail to be, supported by reasons, i.e., justified.

¶1:

The rationalist claim: “Every rational creature, ‘tis said,

[(i)] is oblig’d to regulated his actions by reason; and

[(ii)] if any other motive or principle challenge the direction of his conduct, he ought to oppose it, ‘till it be entirely subdu’d, or at least brought to a conformity with that superior principle.”

“Reason,” here, is the name of a certain kind of mental faculty.

Hume’s response: The rationalist claim is false, because:

- (a) “reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will” and
- (b) reason “can never oppose passion in the direction of the will.”

¶2:

There are two kinds of reasoning:

- (1) reasoning about abstract relations of ideas, such as logic and mathematics, and
- (2) reasoning about causal relations, i.e., what sort of things have what sort of effects.

Logical and mathematical reasoning are relevant to action only insofar as they help to establish causal relations.

¶3:

- If we desire X, then we will want to know what causes X, i.e., what means there are to attaining X.
- But causal reasoning alone cannot motivate us. Reasoning to the conclusion that Y causes X will not motivate us to bring about Y *unless* we already desire X.
- Moreover, we engage in reasoning of this kind only because we already desire X and want to know how to bring it about.
- This establishes (a).

¶4:

- Reason could oppose passion only if it could generate desires of its own.
- But as we have just seen, it cannot.
- This establishes (b).
- In sum, “Reason 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.”

¶5:

- The conclusions of reason are supposed to represent how things are in the world.
- Thus, they *contradict* other representations that represent the world differently.
- But my desire is *not* a representation. (That is what Hume means by “original existence”: not a copy of something else.) My desire does not *say* anything about how the world is.

- So, a conclusion of reason cannot contradict a desire.

¶6:

- Since this is the case, “passions can be contrary to reason only so far as they are *accompany’d* with some judgment or opinion,”
- and “even then ‘tis not the passion, properly speaking, which is unreasonable, but the judgment.”
- This can happen in two ways:
 - i. One has a desire, because one believes that some object exists, when it does not.
 - ii. One desires some X, because one desires some Y and one believes that X is a means to Y, when in fact X is not a means to Y.
- Otherwise, passions are not contrary to reason at all, even in the loose sense.

¶7:

- Therefore, reason and passion do not conflict.
- As soon as reason reveals an error of type (i) or (ii), our passions change accordingly.

¶8:

- Why, then, have people thought that reason alone could motivate action and that reason and passion conflict?
- Because people have mistaken the “calm passions” as part of the exercise of reason, since neither involves any strong feelings.

Review questions:

1. If reason is the slave of the passions, does this mean that the only role of reason is to pursue *pleasure*?
2. Suppose I have a strong passion for, and no passion against, getting a tattoo of Dick Cheney on my chest. It’ll have his little grumbling face, and it will say: “I heart Dick Cheney.” My parents tell me that I will grow out of this. “Sure it looks like a good idea when you’re 37, but when you turn 40, you’ll regret it.” Suppose my parents are absolutely right about this. When I turn 40, I’ll have an overwhelming passion *not* to have the tattoo and *no* passion at all to have it. Does reason, as Hume understand it, then tell me not to get the tattoo?