

Phil 104, October 6, 2010
Hume, *Treatise*, III:i:1–2

III:i:1: The negative argument

The motivational part of the argument

- (1) Our judgments that people are vicious or virtuous motivate us *by themselves*.
- (2) As we saw earlier, conclusions of reason *do not* motivate us *by themselves*.
- (3) Therefore, our judgment that people are vicious or virtuous cannot be conclusions of reason.

Questions about (2), i.e. the argument from last time:

First argument:

- (A) Reasoning is either logical/mathematical, or causal.
- (B) So-called “reasoning” about what we ought to desire as an end is neither logical/mathematical, or causal.
- (C) Therefore, it is not really reasoning.

Second argument:

- (A) Desires are “original existences”: desires don’t represent the world, say how it is.
- (B) Conclusions of reason do represent the world, say how it is.
- (C) Therefore, desires can neither contradict, nor agree with conclusions of reason.

Questions about (1):

Why *must* moral judgments motivate us? Argument: Suppose a rich man says: “Giving to charity is virtuous,” but never gives to charity himself. We might think that he is either (i) insincere, or (ii) ignorant of what “virtuous” means.

The epistemological part of the argument

In the rest of the chapter, Hume puts aside the problem of how moral evaluations could motivate action, if they were conclusions of reason, and asks instead how moral evaluations could be conclusions of reason at all.

- (1) If moral evaluations are conclusions of reason, then they must either be conclusions about relations of ideas, like the conclusions of logic and mathematics, or conclusions about matters of fact.
- (2) Moral evaluations cannot be conclusions about recognized relations of ideas.
 - (i) The only relations are “resemblance, contrariety, degrees in quality, and proportions in quantity and number.”
 - (ii) Inanimate objects can stand in these relations just as well as persons.
 - (iii) Inanimate objects can’t be virtuous or vicious.
- (3) Moral evaluations cannot be conclusions about hitherto unrecognized relation of ideas.
 - (i) The relation in question would have to be between and only between states of mind and external circumstances. Moral good and evil consist in having certain intentions in certain situations.
 - (ii) But it is difficult to imagine any relation that might obtain between states of mind and circumstances that could not also obtain between two states of mind or two situations.

- (i) This relation would have to be “*obligatory* on every rational mind” (465).
 - (ii) This is a *causal* claim, about the effects of this relation on rational minds. (?)
 - (iii) Causal claims are matters of fact, not claims about relations of ideas.
- (4) Moral evaluations cannot be conclusions about matters of fact.
- (i) Just try for yourself to find it!

Hume’s famous conclusion: You cannot deduce an “ought” from an “is.”

III:i:2: The positive argument:

If our moral evaluations are not beliefs about vice and virtue, then what are they?

1. Dispositionalism:

“X is virtuous” means “X causes a certain feeling in me”

“[W]hen you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it” (469).

2. Expressivism:

“X is virtuous” means “Hooray X!” where this just expresses a certain feeling about X.

“To 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” (471).

3. Projectivism:

“X is virtuous” means “X has a certain quality,” where the quality is in fact a certain feeling that I have and that I have, unwittingly, projected onto X.

The mind “spreads” itself onto objects, “gilding and staining” them with colors borrowed from internal sentiment.

Review Questions:

1. If Hume is interpreted as a “dispositionalist,” does he deny that moral judgments (e.g., “Willful murder is vicious”) can be true or false? What about if he is interpreted as an “expressivist”?
2. With remarkable regularity, we hear about preachers and politicians who have spoken of the immorality of homosexuality, adultery, or the exploitation of women, but who have turned out to be engaged in homosexual, adulterous, or exploitative relations themselves. Why might such characters be thought to pose a problem for the following argument of Hume’s?

“Since morals, therefore, have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows, that they cannot be deriv’d from reason; and that because reason alone, as we have already prov’d, can never have such influence. 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 reason.”

How might Hume defend his argument in the face of such examples?