

PHIL 5983: Hume and Practical Reasoning  
Prof. Funkhouser  
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Hume, *Treatise*, 2.1.1; T 2.3.3–6; T 2.3.9–10

### 2.1.1

- Hume recalls an earlier distinction, which he now renames. The original/secondary impression distinction just is the distinction between impressions of sensation and reflection. Again, Hume tells us that he will not investigate original impressions, as that is a subject matter for the sciences (e.g., anatomy). He will study the impressions of reflection.

- Reflective impressions are further divided into the calm and the violent.

The reflective impressions may be divided into two kinds, *viz.* the *calm* and the *violent*. Of the first kind is the sense of beauty and deformity in action, composition, and external objects. Of the second are the passions of love and hatred, grief and joy, pride and humility . . . The subject of the human mind being so copious and various, I shall here take advantage of this vulgar and specious division, that I may proceed with the greater order; and having said all I thought necessary concerning our ideas, shall now explain those violent emotions or passions, their nature, origin, causes, and effects.

As we see, in this book Hume will study the violent, reflective impressions — the passions. These can be divided, yet again, into the direct and indirect.

By direct passions I understand such as arise immediately from good or evil, from pain or pleasure. By indirect such as proceed from the same principles, but by the conjunction of other qualities. This distinction I cannot at present justify or explain any farther. I can only observe in general, that under the indirect passions I comprehend pride, humility, ambition, vanity, love, hatred, envy, pity, malice, generosity, with their dependants. And under the direct passions, desire, aversion, grief, joy, hope, fear, despair and security.

### 2.3.3

- Hume denies that reason and passion can conflict when it comes to motivating action. In this section he argues for two main claims.

In order to shew the fallacy of all this philosophy, I shall endeavour 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.

- Hume reminds us of the two forms of reasoning — relations of ideas and matters of fact. He claims that neither can motivate action. This appears to be an argument by *Eliminating the Possibilities*.

- The realm of ideas is removed from the realm of realities. (!) Relations of ideas (e.g., mathematical and logical reasoning) serve a purely instrumental function.

- The prospect of pain or pleasure motivates action. Matters of fact can be useful in discovering causal relations concerning what will likely produce pain or pleasure, but again this is only reason guiding action.

- Hume argues that from the fact that reason cannot motivate action, reason cannot oppose a passion either. Here is his first argument for this claim, the *Impulse Argument*.

'Tis impossible reason cou'd have the latter effect of preventing volition, but by giving an impulse in a contrary direction to our passion; and that impulse, had it operated alone, wou'd have been able to produce volition. Nothing can oppose or retard the impulse of passion, but a contrary impulse; and if this contrary impulse ever arises from reason, that latter faculty must have an original influence on the will, and must be able to cause, as well as hinder any act of volition. But if reason has no original influence, 'tis impossible it can withstand any principle, which has such an efficacy, or ever keep the mind in suspence a moment. Thus it appears, that the principle, which opposes our passion, cannot be the same with reason, and is only call'd so in an improper sense. We speak not strictly and philosophically when we talk of the combat of passion and of reason. 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.

- Hume recognizes that this is a startling conclusion, and he offers another argument for it. Call this the *Representation Argument*.

A passion is an original existence, or, if you will, modification of existence, and contains not any representative quality, which renders it a copy of any other existence or modification. When 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. 'Tis impossible, therefore, that this passion can be oppos'd by, or be contradictory to truth and reason; since this contradiction consists in the disagreement of ideas, consider'd as copies, with those objects, which they represent.

Note the two-fold conclusion: Passions cannot be 1) “opposed by” or 2) “contradictory to” reason.

◦ Here is another way Hume puts the argument.

What may at first occur on this head, is, that as nothing can be contrary to truth or reason, except what has a reference to it, and as the judgments of our understanding only have this reference, it must follow, that passions can be contrary to reason only so far as they are *accompany'd* with some judgment or opinion.

• Hume does acknowledge two senses in which a passion can be unreasonable. First, a passion can be unreasonable in that it is founded on a mistaken belief regarding the existence of something. E.g., my fear is unreasonable if it results from my mistaken belief that the stick in front of me is a snake. Second, it is unreasonable when it chooses insufficient means to its end. And here it is pretty clear that it is not really the passion that is unreasonable, but the judgment.

• So, reason and passion cannot conflict after all.

'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger.

• Hume also points out that there are calm passions which often motivate action, and one could easily mistake such passions for the operation of reason. This is because these calm passions present no, or very limited, phenomenology.

◦ Hume claims that strength of mind consists in having our calm passions prevail over our violent passions.

#### 2.3.4

- The effect that a passion has on our actions is not proportional to its violence. On the contrary, the passions that influence us most are often settled and calm. So, do not think that a violent passion is strong nor that a calm passion is weak.

- The nearness of a good typically increases the violence of the passion for that good. The taboo or unlawful character of an action also often increases the violence of our desires for such actions. Uncertainty and secrecy have this effect, too.

### 2.3.5

- Custom (repetition) has two effects on the mind (relevant to action). First, it increases the facility with which we perform some action. Second, this makes action more desirable and increases our tendency to perform it.

### 2.3.6

- The memory or imagination of an object can increase the violence of our passion for such an object. The passion inherits some of this vivacity via the relation of resemblance (e.g., the future pleasure resembles the past pleasure).

### 2.3.9

- Notice how Hume connects the passions to both pleasure/pain and good/evil.

'Tis easy to observe, that the passions, both direct and indirect, are founded on pain and pleasure, and that in order to produce an affection of any kind, 'tis only requisite to present some good or evil. Upon the removal of pain and pleasure there immediately follows a removal of love and hatred, pride and humility, desire and aversion, and of most of our reflective or secondary impressions.

Good and evil directly correlate with pleasure and pain.

When good is certain or probable, it produces JOY. When evil is in the same situation there arises GRIEF or SORROW.

When either good or evil is uncertain, it gives rise to FEAR or HOPE, according to the degrees of uncertainty on the one side or the other.

DESIRE arises from good consider'd simply, and AVERSION is deriv'd from evil. The WILL exerts itself, when either the good

or the absence of the evil may be attain'd by any action of the mind or body.

Beside good and evil, or in other words, pain and pleasure . . .

- Hume discusses contrary passions that are: 1) caused by distinct objects, 2) caused by different aspects of the same object, and 3) due to uncertainty.

Upon the whole, contrary passions succeed each other alternately, when they arise from different objects: They mutually destroy each other, when they proceed from different parts of the same: And they subsist both of them, and mingle together, when they are deriv'd from the contrary and incompatible chances or possibilities, on which any one object depends.

- Hope and fear commonly depend on the uncertainty of pleasure and pain. Though, occasionally the imagination can generate fear even when we are certain that we are safe.

But they are not only possible evils, that cause fear, but even some allow'd to be *impossible*; as when we tremble on the brink of a precipice, tho' we know ourselves to be in perfect security, and have it in our choice whether we will advance a step farther. This proceeds from the immediate presence of the evil, which influences the imagination in the same manner as the certainty of it wou'd do . . .

Conversely, we are sometimes afraid when an outcome is certain.

- Uncertainty, in general, is frightening even when only good outcomes are anticipated.

A virgin, on her bridal-night goes to bed full of fears and apprehensions, tho' she expects nothing but pleasure of the highest kind, and what she has long wish'd for. The newness and greatness of the event, the confusion of wishes and joys, so embarrass the mind, that it knows not on what passion to fix itself; from whence arises a fluttering or unsettledness of the spirits, which being, in some degree, uneasy, very naturally degenerates into fear.

### 2.3.10

- This section is on our passion for truth. Hume reminds us of the two kinds of truths: relations of ideas and matters of fact. (Though, he here uses slightly different vocabulary.)

- We value the genius and hardwork used to arrive at truth more than the truth itself. Also, we will not have passion for a truth unless we judge it to be important.