

PHIL 5983: Action Theory Seminar

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Hume, "Of the Influencing Motives of the Will"

- It is natural to talk of conflicts between reason and passion, and to claim that reason should be given preference in such conflicts. But Hume objects to this in two ways:

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. (413)

- There are 2 types of reasoning: demonstrative (certain and *a priori*) and probabilistic (probable and *a posteriori*).
 - The former concerns only relations of ideas, and obviously cannot provide a motive to action — the world of ideas is separate from the world of action ("realities"). The former category concerns mathematical and logical thought, and such thoughts cannot provide reasons for action (though, they can help direct our actions).
 - We are motivated by the prospects of pain or pleasure. And, probabilistic (*a posteriori*) reasoning can tell us about these prospects. But this is reason directing our actions, not motivating (or originating) them.
- Since reason cannot give rise to volition (i.e., provide a motive for action), it cannot provide a check on volition either. Here is the main 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. (415)

Carefully examine this argument.

- Another argument for the motivational inefficacy of reason:

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 possess'd 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. (415)

This argument emphasizes the representational character of reasoning. Also note the two-fold conclusion: passions cannot be i) "opposed by" or ii) "contradictory to" reason.

Another way of putting it:

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. (415–416)

◦ Hume then claims that there are only 2 ways in which our will can be said to be unreasonable: 1) When we have a desire for something based on a false belief, or 2) We choose inappropriate means to our desired end.

- 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. (416)

- Note: There are calm desires, though, which one could confuse with reason. These calm desires present no, or very limited, phenomenology. (417–418)