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Hume's robust theory of practical reason¹

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Introduction

Hume never uses the phrase “practical reason.” This is no surprise, given his commitment to revealing the unfounded pretensions of those who appealed to “reason” as an all-purpose safe haven for their preferred views of theology, science, or morality.

Yet Hume clearly has a great deal to say about practical reason. In light of what he says, Hume is regularly read as either an outright skeptic about practical reason or as an advocate of unadorned instrumentalism. According to the skeptical reading, Hume rejects the idea that reason could be practical at all. According to the instrumental reading, he embraces reason as practical yet sees its role as being entirely a matter of figuring out efficient ways to satisfy one's desires or achieve one's ends.² The instrumentalist interpretation has become so widespread that

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² Defenses of the skeptical interpretation include Christine Korsgaard (1986), Jean Hampton (1995), and Elijah Millgram (1995). Elizabeth Radcliffe (1997), in contrast, defends an instrumentalist interpretation. See Kieren Setiya (2004) and Karl Schafer (2015) for important exceptions to the rule that people see Hume as either a skeptic or an instrumentalist.

instrumentalism is often labeled ‘Humeanism’ (though, in a nod to the plausibility of the skeptical reading, people often say that it is unclear whether Hume is a “Humean.”)³

Not surprisingly, support for both interpretations is easy to find. So, for instance, when it comes to the case for the skeptical interpretation, people point to Hume’s claim that “reason is perfectly inert, and can never either prevent or produce any action or affection” (T 3.1.1.8, SBN 457–458), which seems an unambiguous assertion of the skeptical view. Meanwhile, those interpreting Hume as an instrumentalist point to Hume’s assertion that “Where a passion is neither founded on false suppositions, nor chooses means insufficient for the end, the understanding can neither justify nor condemn it” (T 2.3.3.6, SBN 415–6), which seems almost as clearly to highlight explicitly just what an instrumentalist would identify as practical reason’s role – to ensure that our desires are informed and that we choose effective means to their satisfaction.

The details of the arguments offered for these interpretations vary, with some appealing to Hume’s theory of action, others to his rejection of reason as the source of moral distinctions, and still others to his theory of meaning. In each case, I will be arguing, these interpretations end up missing the subtle, detailed, and plausible theory of practical reason that Hume develops. My aim here is to bring out that robust theory.

Elements of a theory of practical reason

Any non-skeptical theory of practical reason needs to do at least three things:

³ For example, see Michael Smith (1987) and David Lewis (1988).

First, it must give an account of the *activity* of practical deliberation – of what is involved in facing a situation, canvassing options, weighing considerations that one takes to count in favor or against various options, and then successfully acting in light of, and on the basis of, what one sees the balance of the considerations as supporting.

Second, it must identify the *capacities* one must have in order in order to engage in that activity, specifying what faculties, capacities, or abilities are required in order to be able to engage in practical deliberation.

Third, it must articulate and defend the *standards* to which those engaging in the activity are properly subject, in light of which they count as practically rational (or not), the considerations count as reasons (or not), and the conclusion they reach as justified (or not).

Hume, I will argue, does all three. Before turning to that argument, though, it is important to note that those who read Hume as a skeptic themselves need to say enough about one or another of these three aspects of practical reason in order to make the case that Hume was a skeptic about (that aspect of) practical reason.

Some argue that Hume's skepticism lies in his leaving no room, in fact, for people to think of various considerations as counting in favor (or against) various options and so no room for people to act in one way or another on the basis of the conclusions such thoughts would support. On this view, Hume holds that while we have all sorts of beliefs about various things that might – and often do – result in our behaving in various ways, we neither do nor can have beliefs to the effect that these considerations count in favor or against different courses of actions, so we can never act as we do for what we take to be reasons.

Others hold that Hume's skepticism lies in rejecting the idea that reason could possibly cause actions, which they take to be a *sine qua non* of *practical* reason. On this view, Hume's account of our capacities, and specifically his understanding of reason's powers, commit him to rejecting the idea that reason (and so deliberation about one's options) could cause, or stand in the way of, action. This ensures, they argue, that reason, as Hume understands it, cannot possibly be practical.

Still others maintain that Hume was a skeptic about there being any standards in light of which our deliberations, choices, and actions might appropriately be judged as rational (or not) and no standard in light of which some considerations and not others are properly seen as reasons for or against doing various things. How else, they ask, are we to explain Hume's assertion that "'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger" (T 2.3.3.6, SBN 415–6)? On this view, whether or not we engage in practical deliberation, and whether or not we have the capacities required for deliberation to be effective, there are no standards, on Hume's view, for our preferences, choices, deliberations, or actions: "Actions may be laudable or blameable," Hume notes, but "they cannot be reasonable or unreasonable" (T 3.1.1.10, SBN 458).

Those who interpret Hume as an instrumentalist join me in rejecting the skeptical alternative. Together we credit Hume with an account of the activity of practical deliberation and the capacities that activity requires and also credit him with an account of the standards in light of which the activity, and the resulting actions, might appropriately be judged rational (or not). Where we part company is in our understandings of the accounts Hume offers. I will be arguing, in what follows, that in all crucial respects, Hume is not an instrumentalist. Hume does of course allow that the recognition that some course of action would satisfy one's desires, or would be a

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means to achieving one's ends, often gives one reason to perform the action and serves to make the action (if performed for that reason) practically rational – though, as I mentioned previously, he does not use that language. Yet Hume rejects both the idea that all reasons for action are found in the action's role in satisfying desires or achieving ends, and the idea that the only normative standards are instrumental. Like Kant, he recognizes a central role for instrumental reasoning while situating it within an account of when and why various desires and ends do – and when they do not – underwrite reasons for acting in ways that will satisfy or achieve them.

To make the case, I will take the three elements of a theory of practical reason – an account (i) of the *activity* of practical deliberation, (ii) of the *capacities* the activity requires, and (iii) of the *standards* that apply to those engaging in the activity – in reverse order.

Hume on the *standards* for practical deliberation

The first thing to say here is that Hume is unmistakably a skeptic about *rationalist* defenses of various standards for practical deliberation. In the *Treatise*, he argues at length that moral distinctions – between virtue and vice, right and wrong – are not “discern'd merely by ideas, and by their juxta-position and comparison” and so (he concludes) not derived by reason alone.

These arguments play out against the view that reason's domain is restricted to canvassing and comparing ideas, to discovering relations that might stand between those ideas and their object, and to using demonstrative and probable reasoning in order to judge various ideas true or false.⁴ When only reason is involved, the judgments of truth and falsehood it

⁴ In doing this, Hume is following Locke, who wrote that reason is “the discovery of the certainty or probability of such propositions or truths which the mind arrives at by deduction made from such ideas, which it has got by the use of its natural faculties; viz. by sensation or reflection” (Locke 1689), iv 18.2. He is not introducing some unfamiliar or unmotivated constraint on reason, though he notes that “reason” is often used loosely, to the detriment of

supports depend entirely on demonstrative reasoning and what it can establish without appeal to experience. To show that moral distinctions are not based solely on reason, Hume moves through what he takes to be the only strategies that demonstrative and probable reasoning would make available, arguing that each fails to generate the sort of substantive standards that are evidently involved in distinguishing virtue from vice and right from wrong.

In his critique of rationalism and his subsequent development of an alternative account of the standards of practical deliberation, Hume does not consider views of the sort Kant defends, according to which it is an analytic truth that “Whoever wills the end, also wills (insofar as reason has decisive influence on his actions) the means that are indispensably necessary to it that are in his control.”⁵ If such a claim is analytic, it is just the sort of thing reason alone is, on Hume’s view, able to discover.

So, it is worth noting that Hume could, without any problem, grant the truth of Kant’s claim. For a certain understanding of ‘reason’, and of what it is for reason (so understood) “to have a decisive influence” on one’s actions, it may well be “discern’d merely by ideas, and by their juxta-position and comparison” that, when reason has decisive influence, in willing an end, one wills the “means that are indispensably necessary to it that are under his control.”

understanding what it might or might not establish. In the *Enquiry*, Hume marks the same two modes of reasoning but refers to the second, the determining of whether particular ideas are true or false, as moral reasoning: “All reasonings may be divided into two kinds, namely demonstrative reasoning, or that concerning relations of ideas, and moral reasoning, or that concerning matter of fact and existence.” [E. 4.18, SBN 35]

⁵ Kant explains the analyticity this way: “As far as volition is concerned, this proposition is analytic; for in the volition of an object, as my effect, is already thought my causality as an acting cause, i.e., the use of means” (*Grounding* (1785), [Ak 4:417]). This would explain why, in willing the end, one is, simply in virtue of that, willing certain means to its achievement. But it is not clear that this is the claim Kant needs. He acknowledges that one may maintain an end and in fact not pursue what one recognizes as the necessary means to its achievement. This is a classic case of weakness of will, and he wants to account for it by saying that in these cases, reason does not have a decisive influence on one’s will, which requires the analytic truth he is after to be one between reason having a decisive influence on one’s will and one willing the (recognized) necessary means to one’s end. Such a truth would presumably turn on the nature of the idea of reason that is in play.

At the same time, Hume could well – and presumably would – also argue that the standing of reason, so understood, as *setting a standard* for action is not settled by the analytic truth. The analytic truth is perfectly compatible, as Kant notes, with reason not actually having a decisive influence on one’s will. Granting the truth leaves open the question of whether reason (so understood) should have that influence. Hume doesn’t, and needn’t, deny that it should. What Hume is committed to is holding that *this* question is not answered by the truth on offer nor by it being analytic and that whether the truth serves to set a standard cannot be settled by reason alone.⁶

Analytic truths establish what must be true. But in this case, the truth that is supposed to be settled – about the implications of reason, understood in a certain way, having a decisive influence on one’s will – is silent on whether reason *should* have a decisive influence and so on whether our will ought to be such as always, in willing an end, to will the means that are “indispensably necessary and within our power.” In recognizing the analytic truth, there is no commitment one way or the other as to what standards, if any, are appropriate – unless, of course, one already valorizes the sort of rationality on offer. But in that case, what is called for is an argument that rationality of the kind in question is a virtue or that it sets a standard for our will. The proffered analytic truth does not provide that.

Hume’s skepticism about *rationalist accounts* of the standards of virtue is, importantly, not a skepticism about there being true judgments of virtue and vice, nor, more generally, about

⁶ There is an understanding of Kant’s claim that leaves no room for one to will an end without at the same time willing the indispensably necessary means to its achievement. It follows Kant’s official explanation of the analyticity – willing the end as an end is willing the means – but it then abandons the idea that we should will the means but may not, which is crucial to the idea that we are talking about a normative standard we should, but at least in principle might not, meet. Kant’s framing of the claim itself makes clear that he recognizes a failure is possible: reason, as he acknowledges, might not have a “decisive influence.” In fact, Kant notes that imperfectly rational beings, which includes all people, are such that what is objectively necessary is for them subjectively contingent.

there being genuine standards for practical deliberation. Indeed, Hume begins the *Enquiry* writing that

Those who have denied the reality of moral distinctions, may be ranked among the disingenuous disputants; nor is it conceivable, that any human creature could ever seriously believe, that all characters and actions were alike entitled to the affection and regard of every one.

[E 1.2, SBN 169–70]

Rather, Hume’s skepticism is about reason’s capacity to discover – alone and unaided by experience – the standard(s) in light of which such judgments would be true. Hume’s conclusion is simply that “since vice and virtue are not discoverable merely by reason, or the comparison of ideas, it must be by means of some impression or sentiment they occasion, that we are able to mark the difference betwixt them” (T. 3.1.2.1, SBN 470).⁷ In other words, experience must be added into the mix in order to account for the standards that distinguish virtue from vice. Hume ends up developing an account of the relevant standards that depends crucially on sympathy and the sentiments of approbation and disapprobation that sympathy makes available.

⁷ Hume goes on to finish the thought, writing “Morality, therefore, is more properly felt than judg’d of.” People have often taken this as grounds for thinking Hume rejected the idea that we make moral judgments, which might be true or false, and instead embraced emotivism or some other form of non-cognitivism. But that mistakes his point here, which is that our moral judgments require the input of experience (in the form of either an impression or a sentiment, both of which are felt, not judged). At the same time, it flies in the face of his careful development of a theory of the standard virtue in light of which our moral judgments are to be evaluated as true or false. Moreover, Hume makes clear that once the standard is in place, we can both make true moral judgments, without the corresponding feeling of approval, and have feelings of approval for what is not, in fact, virtuous. In these respects, our judgments of virtue and vice are analogous to our judgments of color. Such judgements are possible for us only because of certain kinds of experiences people are able to have, and they need to be understood in terms of those experiences, but the truth of the judgments we might make concerning them are independent of the particular experiences we might have, even though we often rely on our experiences (of approval and of visual experience) in making those judgments.

Hume frames his discussion of normative standards in terms of virtues and vices, not reasons and rationality. And much of his discussion focuses on what are commonly recognized as *moral* virtues and vices. So, it would be easy to think that Hume's account of the standard of virtue and vice is restricted to what we now think of as morality, without implications for practical rationality and the nature of reasons more broadly. But that would be a mistake. Hume's discussion comes with an explicit commitment to the category of virtues and vices being much broader than just the moral and as including traits that are commonly thought to fall within practical rationality but not morality. In particular, he mentions "prudence, temperance, frugality, industry, assiduity, enterprize, dexterity" as well as "*perseverance, patience, activity, vigilance, application, constancy*" and "other virtues of that kind" (T 3.3.4.7, SBN 610–11). As Hume develops his account of the relevant standards, he is concerned with identifying, articulating, and defending them as standards of, as he put it, "personal merit," without regard to whether they would normally be thought of as moral.

Indeed, in "Of Some Verbal Disputes" (an Appendix to the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*), Hume makes a special point of holding that there is a single general story of the standards in light of which people should be judged meritorious, even if different standards come into play (within that story) regarding different aspects of peoples' character, motives, and actions. And he emphasizes again that these include standards for what are now commonly thought a matter of practical rationality, not morality.

According to Hume's overarching story, traits of character, motives, and actions count as meritorious (i.e. as virtuous) *if, when, and because* they would secure approval from an

appropriately “common” or “general” point of view.⁸ In the *Treatise*, he goes into great detail about what that point of view is like, about why it is needed, and about why it sets the appropriate normative standard for our judgments of virtue and vice. On Hume’s account, taking up the appropriate general point of view requires (i) knowing the relevant facts about who is likely to be affected (and how) by the traits in question, (ii) being engaged via sympathy with the welfare of those who are affected, and (iii) responding with approval (or disapproval) without regard to one’s own interests. In short, Hume holds that the standard for our judgments is set by the reactions of those who are appropriately informed, genuinely concerned, and yet suitably impartial. Their reactions set the standard for distinguishing between what happens to secure approval and what is actually approvable.⁹

In defending his account, Hume requires that the standard it offers line up reasonably well with the distinctions we actually draw between virtue and vice, since otherwise it would not plausibly count as the standard for what we are actually thinking about. Yet, at the same time, he insists that the correct standard for those distinctions must be one that we can justifiably endorse as appropriate – it must itself be approvable and not merely be something that captures what we happen to approve of. As Hume puts it at the end of the *Treatise*,

⁸ (T. 3.3.1.30, SBN 590–1 and E 9.6, SBN 272–3). I have been lumping character, motives, and actions together in this discussion so as to leave things general. It is worth noting, though, that on Hume’s view, the relevant aspect of a person’s character is constituted by her motivations, which determine both the quality of her character and the quality of her actions. He thinks well-motivated attempts at various actions are fully virtuous and that actions that are ill motivated, no matter what their effects, are not approvable, however salutary their impact. In this way, Hume is much like Kant in finding the full value of how a person carries herself in her motives (including, of course, her appropriate concern for others) and not in the actual effects of what those motives happen to cause.

⁹ Similar accounts, albeit with important differences, have been offered by Adam Smith (1790), Roderick Firth (1951), and, most recently, Michael Smith (1994). What they share is the idea that the appropriate standards for our normative judgments of morality or rationality are set by the reactions of those who are suitably situated, even as they differ in important ways about which reactions matter and what it takes for someone to count as appropriately situated.

not only virtue must be approv'd of, but also the sense of virtue: And not only that sense, but also the principles, from whence it is deriv'd. So that nothing is presented on any side, but what is laudable and good.

[T 3.3.6.3, SBN 619]¹⁰

We can leave to one side most of the details of Hume's account of what he takes to be the appropriate point of view, which we might call the "General Point of View," given the aims of this chapter.¹¹ But it is crucial to register three things.

The first is that Hume embraces the General Point of View as setting the standards for the decisions and actions that are usually seen as falling within the ken not just of morality but more generally of practical rationality. Hume was not a skeptic about there being such standards. Moreover, he devotes a lot of time and attention to articulating and defending how and why the General Point of View sets the standards it does.¹²

The second is that, on Hume's account, the standards set by the General Point of View are not purely instrumental, even when considering prudence. The standards do, in many cases, treat motives and actions that promote the satisfaction of the agent's desires as meritorious. This is because those who take up the General Point of View and so focus, sympathetically and

¹⁰ In insisting on this point, Hume is taking issue directly with Hutcheson, who claims that the sense of virtue neither admits of, nor requires, a defense as itself justified. See Hutcheson (1742), sec. 1. Adam Smith follows Hume and offers a sustained defense of the position they share. See *A Theory of Moral Sentiments*, p. 323. I explore this requirement in Sayre-McCord (2013).

¹¹ Hume starts with the observation that common or general points of view are a central part of making judgments of virtue and then works to identify the specific general point of view that informs our judgments. For some details about Hume's view of the character of that specific general point of view, see Sayre-McCord (1994), Sayre-McCord (1996), and Sayre-McCord (2013).

¹² Something similar can be said about Hume's defense of certain standards of causal reasoning, which he clearly sees as standards by which we should be judged and to which we should conform. See "The Ways of the Wise: Hume's Rules of Causal Reasoning," by Deborah Boyle (2012), for an interesting discussion of the relation these rules to the virtue of wisdom.

impartially, on what will advance the welfare of the agent in question will often approve of that agent acting in ways that will satisfy his or her desires. But not always, and for two reasons. The first is that sometimes acting to satisfy one's desires will predictably not make one better off, and when that is the case, so acting will not secure approval from those who take up the General Point of View.¹³ The second is that in taking up the General Point of View, one will, from an informed concern for the agent's welfare, approve of certain motives and actions regardless of whether the agent has a relevant desire. So, while Hume's standard for prudence takes an agent's desires seriously, it treats them as neither sufficient nor necessary for an agent to have prudential reason to act in certain ways. Moreover, as attention shifts from prudence to other traits of character, what will secure approval from the General Point of View will not be settled by the agent's desires, even as, often, the agent's desires, as well as the desires of others, play a central role in what reasons we have (when and because they help to determine what would be approved of from the General Point of View).

The third is that once the General Point of View, and the standards it makes possible, are in place, Hume is in a position to mark the crucial normative distinction between what *happens to secure* our approval and what actually *merits* that approval. This provides critical purchase on actual practice, allowing Hume to make sense of, say, the "monkish virtues" not being virtues at all and the various practices we might endorse being open to serious criticism and in need of substantial revision. While Hume is committed to the role of experience (including those experiences that result from our capacity for sympathy and feelings of approval) in determining the appropriate standards, he does not hold that those standards are a function of what people

¹³ More accurately, such actions might secure approval from the General Point of View, it will not be because of the (expected) satisfaction of those desires but because of some other benefit the actions generally promote.

actually feel or approve of – nor are those standards simply whatever people might happen to think they are. Hume is attempting to capture what we are thinking and doing in making judgments of virtue and vice, and to that degree, his aim is descriptive, but the judgments he is giving an account of are not descriptions of what social practices and beliefs happen to be but of what they should be – they are not, as Hume might put it, judgments of what *is* but judgments of what *ought* to be.¹⁴

Still, just to fill in the details a little bit. . . . When it comes to benevolence, for instance, Hume’s view is that its standing as a virtue depends on our vulnerability, on our potential need for the help of others, and on other’s ability actually to help. With that vulnerability in mind, were we to take up the General Point of View, focus on how people can benefit from others trying to help, and sympathize with those who might thereby be benefitted while leaving aside our own interests, we would approve of the efforts to aid that are involved in acting benevolently. Yet were things different in crucial respects, for instance, if we were never in need of help, or if people could not help despite our need (and perhaps would make things worse if they tried), then benevolence, on Hume’s view, would not be a virtue – precisely because, under such conditions, it would not receive the requisite approval from the General Point of View.¹⁵

¹⁴ Hume is, of course, famous for arguing that in our reasoning, we need to register and explain the jump from claims about what is to what ought to be: “as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, ‘tis necessary that it shou’d be observ’d and explain’d; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it” (T 3.1.1.27, SBN 469–70). Hume’s explanation is that the transition from the various claims about what is to conclusions about what ought to be are forged by the standards that would be endorsed – that is, approved of – from the General Point of View. Of course, he holds as well that an inference from what would be approved of to what ought to be calls for explanation, and he thinks it is an important virtue of his account that the explanation is found in the General Point of View also approving of itself setting the standard for our standards. If it did not, he holds, it would have to be rejected.

¹⁵ From the General Point of View, one considers the trait in question (in this case, benevolence), with an eye to its usual effects (on the possessor and others) under standard conditions, where standard conditions are determined by the practical problems faced by the people whose characters are being considered. (There is a neat and complicated story behind the General Point of View having this focus, which I leave to one side here.) In having all that in view, and leaving aside one’s own interests in favor of being influence solely by sympathy, when one considers the effects

Similarly, when it comes to prudence, its standing as a virtue depends on the prospect we have of benefitting from a concern for our own welfare. To the extent we can and do benefit from such a concern, were we to take up the General Point of View, focus on how those who pursue their own interest fare, and sympathize with them while leaving aside our own interests, we would approve of their efforts to advance their welfare. Yet were things different in crucial respects, for instance, if a concern for one's own welfare consistently made one worse off, then such a concern, on Hume's view, would not be a virtue – precisely because, under such conditions, it would not receive the requisite approval from the General Point of View.

Just as the virtue of benevolence requires a respect for the overall welfare of those one is trying to help, a respect that may properly restrain efforts to help, so too the virtue of prudence requires a respect for the overall welfare of those trying to advance their own interests, a respect that may properly restrain those very efforts.¹⁶ The virtuousness of the efforts, as well as the limits on them, are, according to Hume, explained by an appropriate appreciation of when and why the efforts would secure approval from the General Point of View.¹⁷

of the character, one ends up feeling either approval or disapproval directed at the people with the character in question in light of that character's effects on the weal or woe of those being considered. So . . . while in considering benevolence's effects on people like us, from the GPV, we are moved to approve in light of the benefits benevolence usually has. But if we were in a world where, in fact, the road to hell is paved with attempts to help others, and we knew this, attempting to help others would not secure the requisite approval.

¹⁶ Benevolence and prudence are not only, according to Hume, conditionally virtuous, when virtuous, they have their limits. A concern with helping others can quickly lead to meddling, paternalism, or dependency; a concern with promoting one's own welfare can stand in the way of other concerns that enrich one's life and repel others on whose affection one's welfare turns. Here too, Hume thinks, the General Point of View explains the limits.

¹⁷ Most of Hume's detailed discussion of the standards of morality and prudence focuses on character traits and is tied to his view that the virtue or viciousness of an action depends on why a person performed it. But his general account of normative standards, and the role the General Point of View plays in that account, is fully compatible with his recognizing (as he does) that there is something good about a just action regardless of why a person performs it and something good about one meeting or conforming to other kinds of standards (of action or reasoning) independently of why one might be doing so. This leaves room for exploring whether, for instance, there are standards of practical reason that do not focus on character traits that might secure approval from the General Point of View. A standard that requires that one pursue what one recognizes as necessary to the achievement of one's ends or abandon the end might well fall in this category. As it happens, although Hume does offer standards for theoretical reasoning in Book I of the *Treatise*, he does not do the same with regard to practical reasoning.

Hume on the *capacities* required for the activity of practical deliberation

Hume highlights two capacities in particular as crucial to practical deliberation: reason and sentiment. Both, in his account, are required in order for someone to engage in the activity of practical deliberation.

In discussing reason, and its practical role, Hume relies on what he calls a “strict and philosophical sense” of reason (T 3.1.1.12, SBN 459–60). So conceived (and here Hume is pretty much following Locke), reason’s role is limited to determining truth and falsity on the basis of “demonstrative and probable reasonings” (T. 2.2.7.n, SBN 371). On this view, to be conformable to reason is to be true; to be contrary to reason is to be false. Two dramatic conclusions follow directly from this view of reason, as Hume points out.

The first is that

‘Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger. ‘Tis not contrary to reason for me to chuse my total ruin, to prevent the least uneasiness of an *Indian* or person wholly unknown to me. ‘Tis as little contrary to reason to prefer even my own acknowledg’d lesser good to my greater, and have a more ardent affection for the former than the latter.

(T 2.3.3.6, SBN 415–6)

This is because preferences and choices cannot themselves be true or false.¹⁸ Of course denying that these preferences and choices are contrary to reason – that is, are not themselves false – is perfectly compatible with holding that we should not have these preferences and should not make these choices. Moreover, the denial is perfectly compatible with thinking that there are true judgments, discoverable by reason, to the effect that these preferences and choices are vicious, wrong, or bad or such that we have reasons (perhaps decisive reasons) not to have or make them. Hume’s point is that the truth of such judgments cannot be explained by the preferences or choices themselves being contrary to reason, since they are not the sort of thing that can be false (or true).¹⁹

The second dramatic conclusion is that reason can never immediately prevent or produce any action *by contradicting or approving of it* (T 3.1.1.10, SBN 458, ital. added).

¹⁸ The way Hume puts this point is that each is an “original existence” and “contains not any representative quality, which renders it a copy of any other existence or modification. . . . ‘Tis impossible, therefore, that this passion can be oppos’d by, or be contradictory to truth and reason” (T 2.3.3.5, SBN 415). Hume repeats the point in Book III: “Now ‘tis evident our passions, volitions, and actions, are not susceptible of any such agreement or disagreement; being original facts and realities, compleat in themselves, and implying no reference to other passions, volitions, and actions. ‘Tis impossible, therefore, they can be pronounced either true or false, and be either contrary or conformable to reason” (T 3.1.1.9, SBN 458).

¹⁹ Hume is here arguing directly against the eighteenth-century British moralist William Wollaston, who maintains that the immorality of actions was to be explained by those actions making false assertions. He claims that there are many acts, including those “such as constitute the character of a man’s conduct in life, which have *in nature*, and would be taken by any indifferent judge *to have a signification*, and *to imply some proposition*, as plainly to be understood as if it was declared in words: and therefore if what such acts declare to be, is not, they must *contradict truth*, as much as any false proposition or assertion can.” Their immorality, he argues, is found in their falsity. (See Wollaston (1722), Section 1, III, p. 7.) Against the background of this argument, Hume spends some time exploring the idea that the viciousness of such preferences and choices can be traced either to the falsity of the beliefs that cause them or to the beliefs they cause, finding them all wanting. In each case, the problem is that the falsity of the candidate beliefs is neither necessary nor sufficient for the viciousness of the preferences and choices with which they might be connected as cause or effect.

This is because actions, no less than preferences and choices, cannot be true or false and so can neither be contradicted, nor approved of, by reason. Consequently, reason can neither cause actions, nor prevent them, “by contradicting or approving” of them.²⁰

Hume goes on from there to contrast reason, in this regard, with morality, which *can* cause actions by contradicting or approving of them. “The merit and demerit of actions frequently contradict, and sometimes controul our natural propensities. But reason has no such influence” (T 3.1.1.10, SBN 458). The difference between reason and morality that matters here is in their respective means of contradicting and approving – truth and falsity in the first case, merit and demerit in the second – which makes motives, volitions, and actions ineligible for contradiction and approval by reason but not by morality.²¹

This contrast between reason and morality reflects, Hume observes, a distinction within philosophy between “the speculative and the practical” and in life between what is inactive, reason, and what is active, “conscience, or a sense of morals” (T 3.1.1.10, SBN 458). Morality, unlike reason, can and does cause or prevent actions by contradicting or approving of them --

²⁰ Alluding directly to this argument, Hume misleadingly characterizes the key conclusion in these terms: “reason is perfectly inert, and can never either prevent or produce any action or affection,” leaving off the clause “by contradicting or approving of it” (T 3.1.1.8, SBN 457–8). But without that clause, Hume is in no position to hold that reason can never either prevent or produce any action or affection. Indeed, experience alone seems to provide ample evidence that reason, whether we are talking about reasoning or about the products of reasoning, can and often does have effects – pleasures, headaches, conclusions – that might lead to actions or affections. Hume of all people would not hold *a priori* that they do not, having argued at length that “there are no objects which by the mere survey, without consulting experience, we can determine to be the causes of any other; and no objects, which we can certainly determine in the same manner not to be the causes. Any thing may produce any thing” (T 1.3.15.1, SBN 173). What he can and does hold *a priori* is that reason cannot have this effect *by contradicting or approving* of actions or affections (as false or true), because they cannot be either.

²¹ Missing that the argument depends crucially on Hume’s account of what it takes for reason to contradict or approve of something, people have ended up finding in these arguments reason to see Hume as holding that moral judgments necessarily motivate – a view often called internalism – while other judgments, specifically those that are a product of reason, do so only in conjunction with an appropriate desire, passion, or affection. But Hume is clear that moral judgments do not always motivate and that when they do, it is because of a concern for morality that someone might well fail to have. The problem with the sensible knave is not that he fails to recognize iniquity but that he doesn’t care to avoid it except when personal advantage is in the offing (E 9.22, SBN 282–3).

that is, by finding them vicious or virtuous, contrary to, or in accord with, duty, and so on.

Experience, Hume notes, teaches “that men are often govern’d by their duties, and are deter’d from some actions by the opinion of injustice, and impell’d to others by that of obligation.”

Importantly, Hume does not think that morality always has this effect, just that it can have this effect. “’Tis one thing to know virtue,” Hume points out, “and another to conform the will to it” (T 3.1.1.22, SBN 465–6). What makes the difference to whether our opinions, moral or otherwise, influence our will and so shape our actions, turns on our sentiments and specifically on what we are interested in or concerned by.

To a large extent, Hume treats something as being of concern to us as it being the object of a desire, affection, or sentiment of ours. And he tends to treat such things as directly discoverable by us through introspection. But he fairly quickly recognizes that our desires, affections, and sentiments are sometimes so calm (to use his term) that they “are more known by their effects than by the immediate feeling or sensation” and are often just a matter of tendencies and dispositions (T 2.3.3.8, SBN 417)²² Hume goes on to warn that

When any of these passions are calm, and cause no disorder in the soul, they are very readily taken for the determinations of reason, and are suppos’d to proceed from the same faculty, with that, which judges of truth and falshood.

²² The switch to seeing the calm passions as tendencies and dispositions moves Hume toward a generally functionalist account of these passions and means he needs to offer some account of why we need to postulate such things, absent introspective evidence. The overarching grounds for doing so can be found in his view that “when in any instance we find our expectation to be disappointed, we must conclude that this irregularity proceeds from some difference in the causes” (T 1.3.15.8, SBN 174), although a lot of work would need to be done either to defend the functionalist view or to identify the “difference in causes” that matters as passions.

(T 2.3.3.8, SBN 417)²³

Far from determinations of reason, though, the presence or absence of these passions, as well as their objects and strengths, are what explain when and why the determinations of reason – concerning what is true or false – influence our wills.²⁴ For each and every such determination, people might be completely indifferent; whether they are is, Hume maintains, a matter not settled by the operations of reason but by the presence or absence of relevant passions or dispositions.

Some have thought that the very fact that Hume holds that reason needs to be supplemented by sentiment or passion in order to result in action precludes his believing in practical reason. After all, they point out, on Hume’s view – and indeed, in his own words – “reason is perfectly inert” (T. 3.1.1.8, SBN 457–8). Isn’t this a view according to which reason is simply not practical?²⁵

Well, on Hume’s view, neither reason nor sentiment *alone* results in action, even as either might happen to cause certain behaviors.²⁶ So neither, taken alone, in this way of thinking, is practical, even as together they are. Still, when reason is not alone, it can be practical and often is. What sentiment adds to reason is a concern for what reason discovers.

²³ Hume sees the calm passions as being of two kinds: “either certain instincts originally implanted in our natures, such as benevolence and resentment, the love of life, and kindness to children; or the general appetite to good, and aversion to evil, consider’d merely as such” (T 2.3.3.8, SBN 417).

²⁴ Perhaps it is worth noting that admitting this role for the passions leaves completely open whether, when action occurs, the relevant passions need have been present before or independently of the products of reason with which they combine to produce action. Hume’s position here is fully compatible with thinking that often reason itself causes the passions that, in combination with beliefs, gives rise to actions. What is ruled out is that reason causes these passions by discovering them to be conformable (or contrary) to reason. While such passions might be caused by reason, they are not themselves within the ambit of reason.

²⁵ See Jonathan Harrison (1976), Barry Stroud (1977), J. L. Mackie (1980).

²⁶ This is not to deny that sentiments cannot alone cause behavior, as a contrast with causing an action. A sharp feeling of pain may well cause a grimace, for instance, but the grimacing in question, precisely because it does not depend on the person’s understanding of her situation, does not count as an action she has performed. There is cause but not, to use Hume’s term, a motive for the behavior.

Strikingly, Hume's views concerning sentiment's role in explaining the practicality of reason have a remarkable echo in Kant's appeal to respect for the moral law.²⁷ Hume and Kant each recognize that people who hold the same beliefs, whether about morality or otherwise, might fail to will accordingly.²⁸ Each also appeals to something distinct from the belief or judgment to explain its impact (when it has an impact) on the will. For Hume, it is a concern for or interest in virtue; for Kant, it is a feeling of respect for the moral law.²⁹ Moreover, they agree that the relevant motivating feeling can be caused directly by recognition of what virtue or duty requires, unmediated by a separate feeling or desire. As Hume notes, "we have naturally no real or universal motive for observing the laws of equity, but the very equity and merit of that observance" (T 3.2.1.17, SBN 483).³⁰

²⁷ See "On the Incentives of Pure Practical Reason" in Kant (1788). In Kant's view, respect for the moral law works as an incentive, which is to say as "a subjective determining ground of a will whose reason does not by its nature necessarily conform with the objective law" ([72], p. 74). That is not to say, though, that the moral law depends for its effectiveness on any prior feeling. Rather, Kant maintains, the consciousness of the moral law itself gives rise the moral feeling of respect for the law and thus works not just as the "objective determining ground of the objects of action" but also as "a subjective ground of determination" [[75], p. 78). Aspects of Kant's view, as he emphasizes, turn on his rationalism concerning the moral law and on his conception of the free will, both of which Hume rejects. Yet his search for a feeling to let the law serve as the subjective ground of determination for the will reflects a sensitivity to the concerns that led Hume to hold that something (a feeling of some sort) must be added to recognition of one's duty to explain when and why that recognition determines the will. See Guyer (2012).

²⁸ Aristotle, another famous defender of practical reason, similarly holds that the reason or intellect needs to be supplemented by something along the lines of what Hume regards as a passion, noting that "a faculty of practical thought is truth in agreement with the correct desire." He goes on to say that "the origin of action – in terms of the source of the movement, not its end – is decision, while that of decision is desire and rational reference to an end," "Thought by itself sets nothing in motion," and that decision is "either intelligence qualified by desire or desire qualified by thought" (Nicomachean Ethics, Book VI, 1139a 30–35, Rowe trans.) See Aristotle (2002).

²⁹ Exactly how Kant thinks of respect for the law, whether, for instance, it is bound up with recognizing the authority of the law, or is a separate feeling caused by that recognition, is a matter of dispute. What is clear (more or less) is that Kant holds that, absent such respect, an agent capable of acting from duty will fail to do so. See Reath (1989) and McCarty (1993).

³⁰ Hume makes this observation in the context of setting up a puzzle concerning how the laws of equity come to count as virtuous. The problem is that, in Hume's view (for reasons that needn't concern us), each virtue must be such that there is some original motive to act as the virtue requires that is independent of a recognition of it being a virtue, yet the laws of equity *seem* not to meet this requirement. Hume's solution is to distinguish natural from artificial motives and argue that the original motive to equity, which is independent of a recognition of equity as a virtue, is a motive that depends on artifice, not nature.

At the same time, there are plenty of deep differences. Kant holds, for instance, that the beliefs in question are knowable *a priori*, and he holds that the moral feeling of respect has its source in our noumenal selves. Hume, in contrast, would reject both claims.³¹ Moreover, of course, they hold dramatically different views of what sets the authoritative standard, with Kant defending the categorical imperative as the overarching standard of practical reason and Hume appealing instead to the informed and impartial reactions of those who take up the General Point of View.

Another difference, which is directly relevant to our concerns here, is that Kant counts respect for the moral law as a part of reason and its absence as a failure to be rational, whereas Hume works with a more restricted conception of reason and its requirements (as noted previously) – one that limits reason’s constituent capacities to deductive and probabilistic reasoning and its scope of demands to what can be true or false. Yet this difference is merely one of taxonomy, neither deep nor principled. Kant does not hold that respect for the law is in accord with reason *because such respect is true*, nor that its absence is contrary to reason *because not feeling it is false*. Hume meanwhile does not rule out that the authoritative standards might require, among other things, a concern with virtue (which might lead a practically virtuous person who sees something as virtuous to act accordingly). In fact, for all that Hume argues, he could consistently embrace a broader conception of reason according to which a motive (to act as virtue or duty requires) is part and parcel of having reason.³² What is important for our purposes is that such an expanded account of reason – call it “practical reason” – leaves all the key

³¹ More generally, Kant allows the possibility of *a priori* synthetic truths and transcendental proofs, neither of which are in Hume’s repertoire.

³² Hume doesn’t actually hold such a view, but for the substantive reason that if one’s moral views are wrong, it might not be virtuous to act as they require. Kant seems to have more confidence that people can and do successfully recognize their duty and so sees acting accordingly as unproblematic.

elements and arguments of Hume's view (which appeal to the "strict and philosophical" sense) in place, even as it adds in *a concern to act as virtue requires*.³³

In whichever way the capacities crucial to the practicality of practical deliberation are labeled, Hume and Kant (and many others who hold theories of practical reason) share the view that success or failure to act as the standards of practical reason require involves not just the capacity to make judgments (concerning virtue or duty) but the presence of sentiments, feelings, or motives that are not themselves matters of judgment (even if they are required by the relevant standards). Some such extra element is needed so long as it is possible, as Hume and Kant both acknowledge it is, for someone to make the relevant judgment and yet fail to act accordingly. As a result, it is a mistake to think that just because reason, as Hume conceives it, is not sufficient alone for action, the view he develops should not be counted as a view of practical reason.

In this section, I have concentrated on Hume's insistence that sentiment, no less than reason, is central to practical deliberation being practical. Absent the relevant sentiments, Hume insists, whatever judgments reason might lead us to make, they will remain inert.³⁴ The concern has been, in effect, with what Hume calls the influencing motives of the will, of which he considers reason and sentiment equally required.

³³ In Hume's "strict and philosophical" sense of reason, its exercise already supposes the dispositions or concerns that lead one to make deductive and inductive inferences and form beliefs accordingly. He could, without any serious change, simply add in to his account an understanding of the exercise of "practical reason" as involving the dispositions or concerns that lead one to act as practical reason's standards (as set by the General Point of View) require.

³⁴ In insisting on this, I have just argued, Hume is advancing a view that Kant in effect acknowledges when he introduces "respect for the law" as a necessary part of the story of when and why human beings who are rational beings who can recognize their duty and yet fail to act accordingly succeed not merely in acting in accord with duty but in acting from duty.

Hume is similarly convinced that reason and sentiment are equally required in order to understand *practical deliberation*. At bottom, he thinks that in order to understand our taking considerations as counting in favor of (or against) things, we need to pay attention to the nature of approbation and disapprobation.³⁵ I turn to this aspect of Hume's account in the next section.

Hume on the activity of practical deliberation

According to a familiar instrumentalist picture, practical deliberation is a matter of figuring out the effective means to satisfying our desires and then acting accordingly. Our desires set our goals and constrain what we are willing to do to achieve them; our reason then canvasses the options available within those constraints, working to identify what will maximize their satisfaction. Hume clearly does think we engage in this sort of deliberation, and he sees the results as having a seriously practical impact on how we act. Reason might here be the slave of the passions, but like so many slaves, it does a tremendous amount of important work.

Yet to think of Hume's account of the activity of practical deliberation entirely in terms of means-ends reasoning flattens the terrain dramatically and misses the ways in which Hume recognizes that, and offers the resources to explain how, we can deliberate about ends. It also obscures completely his account of the extent to which, even in deliberating about means, we can be, and often are, concerned with identifying and acting in light of what we take to be reasons – that is, considerations that count in favor of or against certain courses of action – regardless of our desires.

³⁵ While I will not go into the point here, I think Hume sees approbation as playing the very same role in explaining when and why we have reasons to believe as in explaining when and why we have reasons to do various things.

Appreciating Hume’s richer story requires paying attention to the distinction he draws between direct and indirect passions, which then reveals the extent to which he was sensitive both to the reactive attitudes and to attitudes that are “reason-responsive.” With those resources on board, I will argue, Hume is able to offer an account of the activity of practical deliberation that distinguishes

- (i) considerations *influencing* our attitudes, from
- (ii) *our thinking* that those considerations count in favor (or against) those attitudes, from
- (iii) those considerations *actually counting in favor (or against)* those attitudes (whether or not we recognize that they do and whether or not they have an influence).

Early on in Book II of the *Treatise*, Hume distinguishes ideas from impressions, then distinguishes original from secondary impressions, then distinguishes, among secondary impressions, those that are direct from those that are indirect (T 2.1.1.4, SBN 276–7). In discussing the indirect passions, he focuses on love, hate, pride, and humility, developing an intriguing and complex account of when and why we feel these passions and the extent to which they are felt in light of, and on the basis of, considerations that weigh in favor of or against approving of those who are the objects of these passions (ourselves, in the case of pride and humility; others, in the case of love and hate).³⁶

³⁶ (T 2.1.2.1, SBN 277- T 2.1.5.11, SBN 289–90). The weighing in question is a matter of in fact inclining us one way or another when it comes to feeling approbation or disapprobation; it is not, of itself, a matter of the considerations actually counting in favor of those feelings nor a matter of the person who is doing the considering thinking that the count in favor.

As Hume makes clear, the story of these four passions extends to the more general sentiments of approbation and disapprobation, which are at the heart of how Hume makes sense of practical deliberation. Approbation and disapprobation, he maintains, are “nothing but a fainter and more imperceptible love or hatred” (T 3.3.5.1, SBN 614).³⁷ What they have in common is that they are felt towards their object only when, and because, one believes their object is related to something that has features consideration of which is appealing or off-putting.³⁸ If either the thing were discovered not to have the relevant feature, or, although it had the feature, that feature was neither appealing nor off-putting but instead a matter of indifference, in those cases, the approbation or disapprobation would, Hume maintains, disappear. That the object has the qualities in question serves as a consideration that, in effect, *weighs* in favor of approving it but only so long as those qualities are themselves appealing. The same story, in mirror image, goes for disapproval and the unappealing qualities that objects may have.³⁹

The guiding idea is that the features in question, when considered by the person whose reactions we are thinking about, must be such that *that* person finds them appealing. That she does find them appealing, though, is often *not* among the considerations that end up weighing positively with her. Still, the fact that some consideration is appealing to her explains why that consideration weighs positively. Of course, the very idea that one finds something appealing

³⁷ Whether they are themselves passions or not is a bit unclear. What is clear is that approbation and disapprobation are, like love and hate, indirect sentiments. One important difference is that love, hatred, pride, and humility all, in Hume’s telling, have people as their objects, whereas approbation and disapprobation evidently take within their scope all manner of possible objects. That difference notwithstanding, they too are felt, when they are, only in light of their object’s perceived relation to some feature that has appealing or off-putting features.

³⁸ Feeling positively about some thing, in light and because of some considerations, is, in Hume’s view, just to approve of it.

³⁹ Hume’s explanation of the indirect passions is so complex that people commonly regard it as too baroque to be worth taking seriously. As a result, it has received relatively little attention. My own view is that the complexities in play are no more than the phenomena to be explained require. Fortunately, though, for our purposes here, we do not need to go into the details. An important exception is Pall S. Ardal (1966). See my (2013) for a description of the explanation Hume offers.

might, itself, be unappealing in a way that leads to disapproving of oneself for finding such things appealing.⁴⁰

Significantly, although approval and disapproval are felt only because we find some features appealing, they are not felt as a means to, nor for the sake of, our desires or ends, nor even as a means to, nor for the sake of, the pleasing feeling of approval. The approval, when felt, is independent of our desires or ends or interest in feeling pleasures, even as it is itself a pleasant response to what we are considering. This is true even though the favorable light in which we see the features of an object often leads us to approve of what has, or might acquire, those features.⁴¹ In such cases, the approval to which the considerations give rise might lead us to promote the qualities in question. Yet we do not feel the approval because the approval has that effect.

When the features in question are seen in a favorable or unfavorable light, they weigh with us in determining what we approve or disapprove of – thus they serve as considerations that *weigh* in favor of or against approving whatever we might be considering, including courses of actions and ways of responding to the actions of others. This is, importantly, not the same as our seeing those considerations as *counting in favor* of approving of them.

So far, we are simply talking about people feeling approval (or not) in light of various considerations. We get to potentially practical *deliberation*, though, once we move to cases in which people see themselves as having various options and are thinking about which to take, letting what they in fact approve of as settling what they will do. In these cases, a person will be

⁴⁰ Plato makes a lot of this with the story of Leontius being disgusted by his desire to gaze upon corpses. See the Republic (ca 380 bc), Book IV, 439a.

⁴¹ The ‘often’ here is important. It is no part of Hume’s theory that we always approve of things that we see as having features that we find appealing. A lot can interrupt the movement from noticing that something has a certain feature that is appealing and approving of it (because of that feature).

taking considerations into account that are, in fact, weighing with her in favor of or against the various options, often in ways that mean there are a lot of considerations in play, weighing more or less strongly for or against different options. To come to a conclusion, in this context, is to end up, all told, approving of one option over the others. Such deliberation will be practically effective when the process of weighing the considerations effectively leads one to take the option one (most) approves of, because one approves of it.⁴²

This is all, as Hume sees things, something that can happen without anyone *thinking* that the considerations *count in favor of* (or *count against*) the objects of our approval or disapproval. The considerations might weigh with us without being seen by us as providing reasons for our attitudes. All the considerations are doing is weighing, one way or another, thanks to their role in causing approbation or disapprobation. They thus so far figure in the explanation, but not the justification, of our approving or disapproving as we do and of our acting as they would have us.

Still, they put Hume in a position to contrast, as Aristotle does, merely voluntary action from voluntary actions performed in light of and because of practical deliberation. Both require that one be responding to one's beliefs concerning one's circumstances, but the latter involves canvassing (what one takes to be) one's options and choosing among them in light of considerations that on balance weigh in favor of one or another.⁴³

Yet Hume recognizes that we can and do distinguish, in effect, between (i) approving or disapproving of something and (ii) that thing being approvable (that is, it meriting the approval

⁴² It is worth noting that the process of weighing need not be linear in its effects. While Hume does not go into this, his view is compatible with thinking, say, that considerations might interact in ways that mean one consideration that would normally have weighed with one might, in light of other considerations, not weigh at all or in ways that mean two considerations might together weigh together more than the sum of each taken individually.

⁴³ Aristotle's account of the distinction between merely voluntary actions and voluntary actions performed in light and because of deliberation is detailed in Book II, Chapters 1–4, of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

or disapproval it might receive).⁴⁴ Something – a character trait, an action, an institution, and so on – is approvable, he argues, thanks to it being such that it would be approved of by those who take up the General Point of View (and so are appropriately informed, impartial, and sympathetic to all who are relevant). Once that standard is available, people are able to think of the considerations that might be inclining them to approve (or disapprove) of various options *as reasons*, that is, as considerations in light of which things might merit approval (or not).

Importantly, people might find themselves approving or disapproving of people, or courses of action, or the reactions of others, in light of various considerations, even as they themselves recognize that those considerations are not reasons for the approval or disapproval they feel. They might for instance recognize that they are racist, or sexist, or classist in ways that have an impact on their attitudes and actions while thinking the considerations that in fact weigh with them should not have that impact.

With the distinction between, on the one hand, being moved by a consideration and, on the other hand, thinking of it as counting in favor of something – that is, thinking of it as a reason – Hume is in a position to explain how, in engaging in practical deliberation, we are able not only to think about means to our ends but also about whether the ends we find ourselves with are worth pursuing (i.e., approvable) or not. Considering which ends are worth pursuing, on Hume’s account, involves reflecting not (solely) on how we actually feel or what we currently desire but

⁴⁴ Hume’s discussion is usually in terms of virtue or merit of something rather than it being approvable, but the contrast in play is the same. Smith takes up the very same contrast, framing it specifically in terms of the difference between securing praise and being praiseworthy, noting that we desire “not only praise, but praise-worthiness; or to be that thing which, though it should be praised by nobody, is, however, the natural and proper object of praise” (*TMS*, 114). In Smith’s account, whether something is praiseworthy turns on whether it would be approved of by an Ideal Spectator who is an “impartial and well-informed spectator” (*TMS*, 130).

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on what we would approve of from the General Point of View.⁴⁵ Even when we cannot actually take up that point of view, or do not in fact feel as we would if we were to take it up, we can nonetheless *think* in terms of right and wrong, good and bad, and virtue and vice, and sometimes act accordingly. In acquiring these reflective and cognitive resources, people become what Kant characterizes as “rational agents” – agents able not merely to conform to laws but to act according to their conception of the law.⁴⁶

Thus, on Hume’s account, in deliberating about our options, we can and do take into account not merely considerations concerning how we might satisfy our desires or achieve our ends but also considerations concerning the value, permissibility, and virtue (or otherwise) of the courses of action we might take and the ends we might adopt. And we can and often do reach conclusions that, by approving or contradicting the options, lead us to act or refrain from acting. Whether our conclusions have this effect depends, of course, on our being concerned with value, permissibility, and virtue (which virtue itself would normally require).

Thus, Hume makes important room for our deliberating about what to do specifically in terms of what is valuable, permissible, or virtuous and then acting accordingly as a result. Yet Hume’s account allows that other considerations that might weigh with a person can count *as reasons* for or against the actions she is considering, even if she is not thinking of them as reasons (either because she lacks the relevant concepts or because her attention is on something else). These will be considerations the weighing of which, with the person, would secure approval from those taking up the General Point of View. Success in having one’s practical

⁴⁵ That one has certain desires or ends may of course be among the considerations that count in favor of the value of possible ends; the point here is that they do not, in Hume’s account, at all settle whether an end is worth pursuing.

⁴⁶ “Everything in nature acts according to laws. Only a rational being,” Kant observes, “has the power to act according to his conception of laws, i.e., according to principles, and thereby has he a will” [Ak 4:412].

deliberation appropriately sensitive to the reasons one has does not, on Hume's account, require that one be conceiving of those considerations as reasons. What matters is that the right considerations weigh in the right way.⁴⁷

The end result is a rich account of what we are doing in engaging in practical deliberation. In the first instance, we are thinking about (what we take to be) our options, in light of what we believe about them, with these considerations weighing with us, positively, negatively, or not at all, in determining what we approve of doing in a way that leads to action.

Among the considerations available are whether the options are, in fact, approvable: whether they are right or wrong, good or bad, virtuous or vicious. Some people, needless to say, think about what to approve of without ever really thinking about what is approvable. Still, in weighing various considerations they are engaging in practical deliberation (though they are considering what to do without being concerned with whether doing it is good or right or justified). And, depending on the considerations they take into account and how those considerations weigh with them, such people may well succeed in approving what is approvable and do so in light of the relevant reasons (even though, by hypothesis, they are not thinking of them as reasons). Also, though, other people might concentrate in their deliberations on what is approvable, yet be influenced by considerations that do not in fact count in favor or against the options they consider in ways that lead them to the wrong conclusions or to the right conclusions but not for the right reasons.

⁴⁷ In Sayre-McCord (1994), I argue that, according to Hume, it is vitally important that we be able to access the GPV; otherwise, having the standard would not work to solve the problem the solving of which is the *raison d'être* for having a standard of approvability. Other people, of course, have other views of Hume. And, independently of Hume, people (like Firth and Smith) defend views that are, in the ways that matter to this chapter, like Hume's while holding that their equivalent of the general point of view may be wholly inaccessible.

Which ways of deliberating, with which aims in mind, count as the right way of engaging in practical deliberation turns, in Hume's view, on what would be approved of from the General Point of View. He takes more or less clear stands when it comes to certain contexts, regarding, for instance, the various virtues he discusses – as long as their respective demands are not in tension. But, when it comes to practical deliberation, he develops nothing like his “Rules by which to judge of cause and effects,”⁴⁸ although he does in several places refer to ‘moral precepts’ and recommends relying on them to “fortify the mind against the illusions of passion.”⁴⁹ It is unclear how exactly Hume would think of developing rules for practical deliberation. Presumably, though, he would endorse whatever rules might be developed to the extent relying on them, or conforming to them, would secure approval from the General Point of View. These rules might well include the standard principles of decision and game theory, on the grounds that reasoning in accord with them worked to promote optimal outcomes, along with other principles that have been advanced as “rational principles” that require not just that in willing an end we will the means (or abandon the end) but also, say, that we avoid weakness of will, either by acting (or intending to act) as we judge we should, or by abandoning the view that we should so act, and others as well.⁵⁰ However such rules might be developed, though, Hume is committed to holding that such principles cannot be defended as standards for us simply by pointing to analytic truths in which they might figure nor by arguing that flaunting them involves believing or doing anything that is itself false.

In sum

⁴⁸ *Treatise*, BK I, Pt. III, Sect. XV.

⁴⁹ *The Sceptic* (1742), p. 179.

⁵⁰ See Broome (1999), Broome (2001) and Kolodny (2005) for divergent views on how to understand such rules.

I have not here tried to defend what I take to be Hume's theory of practical reason. There are plenty of worries and objections that might be raised and that, as I see it, constitute serious challenges. I have, though, done what I can to make the case for thinking there is such a theory and that it offers plausible accounts of what we are doing when we engage in practical deliberation, of what capacities are required for that activity to be effective, and of the standards that matter when engaging in it.

Admittedly, in doing this, I have pressed against the many standard and influential interpretations that see – and sometimes celebrate – Hume as either a skeptic or an instrumentalist. While I do this without apology, I am mindful that the need to do this itself constitutes reason to be suspicious of the interpretation I offer. Right now, though, I see the standard interpretations, whatever the advantages of the positions they identify, as missing deep and interesting aspects of Hume's actual view, aspects that suggest a richer, and more robust, theory of practical reason than is usually appreciated.