

HUME'S SENTIMENTALISM: NOT NON-COGNITIVISM

Abstract: *This paper considers and argues against old and recent readings of Hume according to which his account of moral judgement is non-cognitivist. In previous discussions of this topic, crucial metaethical distinctions—between sentimentalism and non-cognitivism and between psychological and semantic non-cognitivism—are often blurred. The paper aims to remedy this and argues that making the appropriate metaethical distinctions undermines alleged support for non-cognitivist interpretations of Hume. The paper focuses in particular on Hume's so-called 'motivation argument' and argues that it is a poor basis for non-cognitivist interpretations. While there is textual support for attributing to Hume what may be called 'modally weak' motivational internalism, there is no solid textual support for attributing to him either psychological or semantic non-cognitivism. The paper also challenges briefly some further alleged support for non-cognitivist interpretations. It concludes by offering some positive evidence against such interpretations, namely that Hume appears to hold that there are moral beliefs and moral knowledge.*

Keywords: *Cognitivism, Hume, internalism, motivation, non-cognitivism*

1. Introduction

Non-cognitivist interpretations of Hume's metaethics have for several decades been rather popular both inside and outside of Hume scholarship (see, e.g., Flew 1963; Fogelin 1979; Snare 1991; Bricke 1996). My main aim in this paper is to challenge and undermine such interpretations. I do so by distinguishing clearly between Hume's sentimentalism and different kinds of non-cognitivism. I also argue that the so-called 'motivation argument' is a poor basis for non-cognitivist interpretations. In the light of some recent contributions to Hume scholarship in which non-cognitivist interpretations are severely criticized, it may appear that pursuing the project of this paper is no more worthwhile than flogging a dead horse (see, e.g., Radcliffe 2006; Botros 2006; Cohon 2008; Sturgeon 2008; Sayre-McCord 2008; Lo 2009; Pigden 2009). There are two reasons for why this is only an appearance. First, in scholarly discussions about Hume's metaethics, crucial metaethical distinctions between kinds of non-cognitivism are often blurred. As a consequence, not all ways in which Hume might be read as a non-cognitivist about ethics are properly canvassed, and correlatively, the reasons why Hume

is not to be read as a non-cognitivist remain unclear. Secondly, non-cognitivist interpretations have recently received renewed support (Joyce 2009; Smith 2009; Sobel 2009; Shecaira 2011; Chamberlain 2019).¹ I shall argue that making the appropriate metaethical distinctions undermines this renewed support and shows that non-cognitivist interpretations remain unpersuasive.

I begin in section 2 by clarifying a crucial distinction that is often blurred, between *psychological* and *semantic* non-cognitivism. In section 3, I distinguish these two kinds of non-cognitivism from Hume's *sentimentalism* about ethics. In sections 4–5, these distinctions are put to use in order to undermine non-cognitivist interpretations of Hume and to respond to the aforementioned recent attempts to revive and defend such interpretations. In section 6, I offer some textual evidence that does not merely undermine but count positively against non-cognitivist interpretations.

Before I begin I shall comment on a worry about anachronism. The question whether Hume was a non-cognitivist about ethics may seem absurd. After all, the terms 'cognitivism' and 'non-cognitivism' appeared no earlier than in twentieth century debates, and it is arguable that at least non-cognitivist theories are also late modern inventions. But we can sensibly ask which one, if any, of the modern metaethical views *fits best* with Hume's theory as a whole. Pursuing this question is both historically and philosophically interesting and illuminating, since it promises to enrich our understanding of Hume's theory as well as of modern metaethics.²

2. Non-Cognitivism: Psychological and Semantic

Non-cognitivism about ethics is often said to be a theory of moral judgement. However, this description is imprecise, due to the ambiguity of the expression 'moral judgement'. First, it can mean the psychological state of holding a view on some moral matter, for example, the view that benevolence is a virtue. According to non-cognitivism about this kind of psychological state, to hold the view that benevolence is a virtue is not (primarily) to have a belief about benevolence, but to hold a non-cognitive attitude to benevolence, for example, to approve of it. Let us call this view *psychological non-cognitivism*. And let us call the view that to hold a view on some moral matter is (primarily) to have a belief about that matter, *psychological cognitivism*. I say that according to psychological non-cognitivism, to hold a moral view is not *primarily* to have a belief, because on some versions of non-cognitivism—

1 It should be noted that while Smith and Shecaira both argue that Hume is best read as a non-cognitivist, Joyce's reading of Hume's metaethics as involving non-cognitivist strands is highly tentative, and Sobel offers his interpretation as a rational reconstruction of what Hume says. Chamberlain attributes to Hume an 'emotivist' theory of moral judgement.

2 Similar remarks about the sensibility and interest of interpreting Hume's metaethics in terms of modern metaethical categories have been made by Cohon (2008: 96); Radcliffe (2006: 358; 2018: 138); Shecaira (2011: 268); and Sturgeon (2008: 513–14).

for example, R. M. Hare's prescriptivism (Hare 1952) and more recent hybrid theories (e.g., Ridge 2007)—to hold a moral view is not only to hold a non-cognitive attitude but also (secondarily) to have a belief. Importantly, the beliefs that are, on these views, partly constitutive of moral judgements have only *non-moral* content. For non-cognitivists, there is no such thing as a belief with *moral* content. This is because there is, on these views, no such thing as moral content of attitudes; what we may think and speak of as 'moral beliefs' are in fact desires or desire-like attitudes whose content is non-moral.³

Secondly, 'moral judgement' can mean the linguistic act of uttering a moral sentence, for example, 'Benevolence is a virtue.' According to non-cognitivism about this kind of linguistic act, its meaning is not to be understood truth-conditionally in terms of a proposition it expresses. For, at least on traditional versions of non-cognitivism, such an utterance has no truth-conditions and expresses no (moral) proposition.⁴ Instead, the meaning of moral utterances is to be understood in terms of the psychological state (e.g. approval or disapproval) that the uttered sentence (e.g., 'Benevolence is a virtue') conventionally expresses. Let us call this view *semantic non-cognitivism*. And let us call the view that the meaning of a moral utterance is to be understood in terms of its truth-conditional content, that is, the proposition it expresses, *semantic cognitivism*.

For the purposes of this paper, it is important to notice that psychological non-cognitivism does not entail semantic non-cognitivism.⁵ To illustrate, one might hold that to think that benevolence is a virtue is to approve of benevolence, and that to utter the sentence 'Benevolence is a virtue' is not to *express* approval of benevolence but to *report* that one approves of benevolence. On this view, a speaker's utterance of 'Benevolence is a virtue' expresses a proposition and has a truth-condition, namely that the speaker approves of benevolence. This would be to combine a version of psychological non-cognitivism with a version of semantic cognitivism. Such a combination of views is perfectly coherent. Whether it is also an attractive metaethical view in its own right is a further issue that will not detain us here. The main points here—which are crucial for the debate on how to interpret Hume's metaethics—are that psychological and semantic non-cognitivism are distinct positions and consequently that arguments that support the one need not support the other.

3 I take it that this is what Michael Smith has in mind when he says that according to some non-cognitivists, moral beliefs are 'constituted by desires' (Smith 2009: 109).

4 I say that on traditional versions of non-cognitivism, utterances of moral sentences express no *moral* propositions, since on some traditional versions of non-cognitivism, for example, Hare's, moral utterances have a secondary descriptive meaning in that they express descriptive (non-moral propositions); see Hare 1952. On some recent, non-traditional versions of non-cognitivism, moral utterances have *deflationary* truth-conditions.

5 Neither does semantic non-cognitivism entail psychological non-cognitivism. But the combination of semantic non-cognitivism and psychological cognitivism is more exotic than the combination of psychological non-cognitivism and semantic cognitivism.

Yet the distinction is often blurred in discussions of Hume's metaethics, by advocates as well as by critics of non-cognitivist interpretations. For example, Fábio Shecaira, who defends a non-cognitivist interpretation, takes non-cognitivism to be a 'semantic theory of moral statements' (Shecaira 2011: 268, 272), and he goes on to say that according to non-cognitivism, 'moral judgements are not beliefs (they are not truth-evaluable and, therefore, are not generated by reason), but they should instead be equated with emotions, valuations, avowals of prescriptions, or some other kind of practical, non-representational attitude' (Shecaira 2011: 275). Rachel Cohon, who is critical of non-cognitivist interpretations, takes non-cognitivism to be the view that '[m]oral judgements are not cognitive states or representations, but mere feelings or expressions of feeling; they do not assert propositions or represent states of affairs, and can be neither true nor false' (Cohon 2008: 11).

Both of these descriptions blur the distinction between psychological and semantic non-cognitivism. As we have seen, psychological non-cognitivists maintain that moral judgements are not (primarily) beliefs or cognitive or representational states; they are rather to be equated with certain kinds of emotions or feelings. But psychological non-cognitivists do not have to agree that moral utterances are not truth-evaluable and do not assert propositions; they can, maintain, for example, that moral utterances report the attitudes (emotions or feelings) that constitute moral judgement. In other words, psychological non-cognitivists can accept semantic cognitivism. This point is important since much of the alleged evidence for non-cognitivist interpretations of Hume supports only *psychological* non-cognitivist interpretations. We have seen that such evidence need not support *semantic* non-cognitivist interpretations.⁶

3. Hume's Sentimentalism

Next, we need to consider Hume's *sentimentalism* and how it relates to the two kinds of non-cognitivism we have distinguished. Hume's foremost metaethical question is 'whether it be possible, from reason alone, to distinguish betwixt moral good and evil' (T 3.1.1.4; SBN 457). That is to say, Hume's foremost metaethical focus is on the *epistemological* question of how we distinguish virtue from vice, good from evil, and right from wrong. The view he is primarily concerned to refute is the *rationalist* view that we can do so by means of reason alone. He endorses the *sentimentalist* view that sentiments of approbation and disapprobation are what ultimately enable us to make moral distinctions.

6 James Chamberlain has recently argued that Hume holds an 'emotivist' theory of moral judgement (Chamberlain 2019). Like many others, however, Chamberlain fails to distinguish semantic from psychological accounts. It is not clear whether he takes emotivism to be a semantic or a psychological account of moral judgement, or both (see, e.g., pp. 1059–60, 1070–71).

Hume famously defines virtue as ‘whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation, and vice the contrary’ (EPM App. 1.10; SBN 289). He equally famously holds that reason is concerned with two things only, namely relations of ideas and matters of fact concerning cause and effect (EHU 4.1–4.2; SBN 25–26; see also T 2.3.3; SBN 413–18). Reason alone does not suffice to distinguish virtue from vice, because reason alone cannot *originally* tell us which kinds of mental actions or qualities give rise to sentiments of approbation or disapprobation. In order to make moral distinctions, we need to have experiences of instances of the relevant mental actions and qualities and of the sentiments they give rise to (Cohon and Owen 1997; Kail 2007: 192–3). That is the sense in which ‘[m]oral distinctions [are] not derived from reason’, as the title of section 3.1.1 of the *Treatise* states. Once we have such experiences, reason can inform us of their causes and since ‘like causes always produce like effects’ (T 1.3.15.8; SBN 174), reason can help us realize that similar mental actions and qualities are likely to give rise to similar sentiments, and are therefore likely to be virtues or vices, depending on the kind of sentiment they give rise to.

For example, reason alone cannot inform us that benevolence is a virtue. We need to have experience of a real or imaginative benevolent character and the pleasing sentiment of approbation that arises from such an experience. Once we have had such experiences and sentiments we can reason from them to the conclusion that similar benevolent characters are, or would be, virtuous too. More generally, reason alone cannot tell us which kinds of activities are pleasant or agreeable and which are not. To give a non-moral example, experience may tell us that drinking cold beer on a hot summer day is pleasant, and reason can help us infer from such experiences that drinking similar liquids in similar circumstances is likely to be pleasant too. Now, if the inability of reason alone to inform us about what character traits are virtues or vices supports non-cognitivism about moral judgements, then the inability of reason alone to tell us which kinds of activities are pleasant and which are unpleasant should, in the same manner, support non-cognitivism about judgements concerning the pleasant and the unpleasant.⁷ But the latter view is highly unattractive and to my knowledge, no one has defended it. By the same token, the mere claim that reason alone does not suffice to make moral distinctions—distinctions between virtue and vice—gives no support to non-cognitivism about ethics.

Since Hume's sentimentalism is foremost an *epistemological* view of moral judgement it has no direct implications concerning *semantic* non-cognitivism and cognitivism. However, it might be tempting to think that Hume's sentimentalism fits better with *psychological* non-cognitivism than with psychological cognitivism. In order to resist that temptation, let us suppose that one holds the psychological cognitivist view that to judge that

7 Pigden (2009: 96) makes a similar point.

benevolence is a virtue is to believe that benevolence gives rise to sentiments of approbation in spectators. That view is perfectly compatible with the epistemological view that the belief that benevolence gives rise to approbation in spectators cannot be based on reason alone, but must ultimately be based on impressions of the relevant kinds of sentiments or passions; just as my belief that I am now hungry, or that drinking cold beer on a warm day is pleasant, must be based on the relevant kinds of sense impressions.⁸ These beliefs are all ultimately non-inferential.

The fact that Hume's sentimentalism is perfectly compatible with psychological cognitivism does not imply that it is *incompatible* with psychological non-cognitivism. It has been noted before that Hume's sentimentalism is compatible with a number of different metaethical views (e.g., Mackie 1980: 73–5). We shall see in section 5 below that some possible readings of Hume as a non-cognitivist rely on failures to distinguish appropriately between sentimentalism and non-cognitivism, but the most notable non-cognitivist interpretations of Hume are not based simply on his sentimentalism but on more specific claims and arguments he makes. One such argument that has been thought to provide strong support to non-cognitivist interpretations is the motivation argument, to which we turn next.⁹

4. The Motivation Argument: Not Non-Cognitivist

Hume famously holds that 'morals [...] have an influence on [...] actions and affections' (T 3.1.1.6; SBN 457). In contrast, 'reason [is] cool and disengaged [and] is no motive to action' (EPM App. 1.21; SBN 294). A canonical statement of what has become known as Hume's 'motivation argument' is this (at T 3.1.1.6; SBN 457):

- (M) 'Morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions.'
- (R) 'Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular.'
- (C) 'The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason.'

As many commentators have pointed out, the argument is far from obviously valid. In order to render it valid, we might try the following reformulation:

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- 8 Elizabeth Radcliffe distinguishes between cognitivism and non-cognitivism concerning the 'process' of judging morally and its 'product', that is, moral judgement (Radcliffe 2006: 361, 363; see also Radcliffe 2018: 142–43). The process of judging morally, as she describes it, is broadly speaking an epistemic process, so her distinction between non-cognitivism and cognitivism about this process corresponds to my distinction between sentimentalism and rationalism. With respect to the 'product' of this process—moral judgement—Radcliffe makes no distinction between the psychological state and the linguistic act of making a moral judgement, so she does not distinguish as I do, between psychological and semantic cognitivism and non-cognitivism.
 - 9 Other traditional grounds for non-cognitivist interpretations of Hume, such as the is-ought passage, are amply criticised in Sturgeon 2008 and Pigden 2010. See also Cohon 2008.

- (M*) Moral judgements excite passions and produce or prevent actions.
- (R*) Conclusions of our reason cannot of themselves excite passions or produce or prevent actions.
- (C*) Moral judgements, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason.¹⁰

The inference from (M*) and (R*) to (C*) is still not obviously valid. For it might be that moral judgements are conclusions of our reason and that we are so disposed as to be motivated to act in accordance with our moral judgements. Without this disposition, however, moral judgements would not motivate, since conclusions of reason in and of themselves cannot motivate. In that way, (M*) and (R*) could both be true and (C*) false.

In order to attribute to Hume a valid argument, it is a standard suggestion that we read (M) and (M*) as expressing a version of motivational *internalism* (Radcliffe 2006: 356; Shecaira 2011: 269). Motivational internalism is ordinarily understood as the claim that it is necessary that if an agent makes a sincere moral judgement, she is to some extent motivated to act in accordance with that judgement.¹¹

However, not everyone understands internalism in this way. In his recent non-cognitivist interpretation of Hume, Fabio Shecaira takes internalism to be the view that moral judgements are *intrinsically* motivating. That is to say, moral judgements are capable of motivating on their own, 'without the contribution of an independent state of mind' (Shecaira 2011: 269, 277; Radcliffe 2018: 115–16), such as a disposition or standing desire to act in accordance with one's moral judgements. We can call this version of internalism 'modally weak', since it allows that moral judgements do not motivate necessarily. For even if moral judgements can motivate intrinsically, this motivation can be blocked by independent states of mind.

In the context of interpreting Hume, the modally weak version of internalism is significant in a way that deserves to be emphasized. For it turns out that in order to render the motivation argument valid, we need not interpret premise (M*) as the claim that moral judgements motivate *necessarily*. Since premise (R*) says that conclusions of reason of themselves *cannot* motivate, it suffices that premise (M*) says that moral judgements of

10 This formulation of the motivation argument is in line with Shecaira's interpretation (2011: 269–70). It is not an uncontroversial interpretation, however. Rachel Cohon has argued that the motivation argument concerns moral properties rather than moral judgements (Cohon 1997: 259–61). I find her reading doubtful on this score, but shall not consider it further here, since I want to grant as much as possible to defenders of non-cognitivist interpretations.

11 'Internalism' is used as a label for a regrettably large number of different positions in philosophy. In what follows, I shall use it only as a label for a distinctive view about the connection between moral judgement and motivation to act. For expository reasons, I shall mostly drop the qualifier 'motivational'.

themselves *can* motivate. In other words, in order validly to derive Hume's anti-rationalist conclusion that moral judgements are not conclusions of reason, we need not attribute to Hume internalism as ordinarily understood, but merely the view that moral judgements can motivate on their own (modally weak internalism) and that conclusions of reason cannot motivate on their own.¹²

Shecaira's argument for interpreting Hume as a non-cognitivist is that internalism fits much better with non-cognitivism than with cognitivism (Shecaira 2011: 275). Whether Hume is an internalist in any sense is contested.¹³ I believe that modally weak internalism can be plausibly attributed to Hume. But we shall see that even so, the motivation argument still does not support non-cognitivist interpretations of Hume, whether psychological or semantic.

4.1. *Internalism and Semantic Non-Cognitivism*

According to Shecaira, '[s]ome semantic theories about moral statements are incompatible with internalism' (Shecaira 2011: 272). That claim is mistaken. The supposed intrinsic connection between moral judgement and motivation to act obtains between the *psychological state* of making a moral judgement and being motivated to act. It would not be plausible to maintain that the connection holds only between the *linguistic act* of uttering a moral sentence and being motivated to act, for in many contexts we do not utter any moral sentences but are still motivated to act in accordance with what we judge to be morally virtuous or vicious, good or evil, or right or wrong. It would be highly implausible to maintain that in order to secure a connection between the judgement that, for example, benevolence is a virtue, and motivation to praise or emulate benevolent characters, we would have to utter a sentence like 'Benevolence is a virtue'. If anything, that would seem to so show that the supposed connection between the psychological state of judging that benevolence is a virtue and being motivated to act is *not* intrinsic.

Contrary to Shecaira's claim, then, no semantic theories about moral statements are incompatible with internalism, since internalism is a theory about the psychology of moral judgement, not the semantics of moral judgement. But perhaps Shecaira could concede that internalism is not

12 Elizabeth Radcliffe interprets Hume as an internalist, but it is not clear whether she means to attribute to Hume the standard version of internalism or merely the modally weak one. Some of her formulations of internalism suggest the latter, while some others suggest the latter. See Radcliffe 2006: 353, 355; 2018: Ch. 5.

13 For example, Charlotte Brown has argued that Hume is inconsistent in that he accepts internalism in the motivation argument but rejects it elsewhere (Brown 1988), while Elizabeth Radcliffe argues that Hume is a consistent internalist (Radcliffe 2006, 2018), as does Shecaira (2011: 276–8). According to Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (2008), there is evidence that Hume was not an internalist and he argues that none of Hume's arguments rely on internalism. Simon Blackburn has recently defended an externalist reading of Hume (Blackburn 2015).

incompatible with semantic cognitivism, and revert to his weaker claim that internalism *fits better* with semantic non-cognitivism. It is not clear, however, exactly what it would be for a semantic theory of the meaning of moral utterances to fit well or badly with a psychological theory of what it is to hold a moral view. There is more plausibility in the claim that internalism fits better with psychological non-cognitivism than with psychological cognitivism, at least given some currently popular views about which kinds of mental states are motivationally efficacious and which are not. As we shall see in the next section, however, Hume did not endorse these currently popular views.

4.2. *Internalism and Psychological Non-Cognitivism*

It might be that reading Hume as an internalist supports attributing to Hume psychological non-cognitivism. Psychological non-cognitivism offers a very simple and straightforward explanation of the supposed intrinsic connection between moral judgement and motivation to act, since it holds that to judge that someone is virtuous or vicious, or that something is good or evil, or right or wrong, simply *is* (or is primarily) to hold a non-cognitive and motivationally efficacious attitude to whoever or whatever it is that is judged virtuous or vicious, good or evil, or right or wrong.

However, this explanation of the supposed connection supports psychological non-cognitivism over psychological cognitivism only on the assumption that no cognitive state, that is, no belief, is motivationally efficacious. It is a popular view in modern metaethics that beliefs are motivationally inert, whereas desires are motivationally efficacious: In order to be motivated to act, an agent must have a desire and a relevant means-end belief. This view often goes under the name—misleadingly, as we shall see—the ‘Humean Theory of Motivation’ and is often based on a functional account of belief and desire, according to which beliefs and desires have different, in fact opposite, directions of fit. The idea is that beliefs are states that aim to fit the world, while desires are states that aim to make the world fit them (Smith 1994: Ch. 3). It is easy to see how and why many who accept internalism and the Humean Theory of Motivation are also attracted to psychological non-cognitivism about moral judgement.

Crucially, however, Hume himself did not accept the Humean Theory of Motivation. In particular, he did not accept the claim that no belief is motivationally efficacious. What he did accept is the much more restricted claim that no belief based on reason alone is motivationally efficacious. But that claim is far too restricted to justify attributing psychological non-cognitivism to Hume.

A potential mistake is to take Hume's famous claim about the motivational inertia of conclusions based on reason alone (T 2.3.3.3–4; SBN 414–15) to concern belief in general. In fact, Shecaira makes this mistake in that he interprets the second premise of the motivation argument (R*

above) as the thesis that ‘no belief can (alone) motivate to action’ (Shecaira 2011: 280).¹⁴ A possible explanation of why the mistake may be made is the interpretive assumption that only reason generates beliefs, which is clearly a mistaken interpretive assumption. For example, my current beliefs that I am now hungry and that drinking cold beer on a hot summer day is pleasant are both based on sense impressions and experience, and are not (purely) conclusions of reason. In general, since beliefs for Hume are lively ideas, and since ideas are copies of impressions, there is clearly nothing that rules out the existence of beliefs that are copied from impressions and sentiments, and not generated by the motivationally inert faculty of reason.

As an illustration of Hume’s rejection of the view that no belief alone can motivate action, consider Hume’s account of how impressions of pleasure and pain give rise to ideas of pleasure and pain, which produce motivation to act:

An impression first strikes upon the senses, and makes us perceive heat or cold, thirst or hunger, pleasure or pain of some kind or other. Of this impression there is a copy taken by the mind, which remains after the impression ceases; and this we call an idea. This idea of pleasure or pain, when it returns upon the soul, produces the new impressions of desire and aversion, hope and fear, which may properly be called impressions of reflexion, because derived from it. (T 1.1.2.1; SBN 7–8)

When an idea ‘returns upon the soul’ it may be or become so lively as to amount to a belief. The belief that some behaviour or some object would generate pleasure or pain can thus produce the motivationally efficacious states of desire and aversion. As Hume also says,

we find by experience, that the *ideas* of those [pleasant or unpleasant] objects, *which we believe either are or will be existent*, produce in a lesser degree *the same effect* with those impressions, which are immediately present to the senses and perception. The effect, then, of belief is to raise up a simple idea to an equality with our impressions, and bestow on it a like influence on the passions. (T 1.3.10.3; SBN 119, emphases added.)

It is worth stressing that Hume claims that it is ‘the *idea* of pleasure or pain, when it returns upon the soul, [that] *produces* the new impressions of desire and aversion’ and that ‘*ideas* of [pleasant or unpleasant] objects, which we believe either are or will be existent, *produce* in a lesser degree the same effect with [...] impressions.’ Hence Hume’s view appears not to be that beliefs

14 Elizabeth Radcliffe does not make this mistake but argues at length that Hume’s view is that no representational state, such as a belief, can motivate on its own and that the so-called Humean theory of motivation is fully compatible with Hume’s own view. (See Radcliffe 2018, esp. Ch. 2.) While I have some doubts about Radcliffe’s claims on this score, her reading is not in conflict with my main contention that there is no solid evidence for non-cognitivist interpretations of Hume (Radcliffe 2018: Ch. 5).

about what is or will be pleasant or painful are motivating only because of *independent* desires to pursue pleasure and avoid pain, at least that is not how he states his view.¹⁵ His view appears rather to be that beliefs about what is or will be pleasant or painful are motivating because they produce desires to act in the relevant ways.¹⁶

Since Hume holds that observing and possessing virtue are normally pleasant, and correlatively that observing and possessing vice are normally unpleasant (T 3.3.6.6; SBN 620–1; EPM, ch. 9), Hume could argue that moral beliefs (lively ideas of virtue and vice) motivate in a similar way, that is, by producing desire and aversion, approbation and disapprobation. To illustrate, a spectator's belief that St Francis' benevolence is a virtue is a lively idea that is a copy of an agreeable impression of approbation that the spectator feels when contemplating St Francis' benevolence from the common point of view. When the idea that St Francis's benevolence is a virtue 'returns upon the soul' and acquires the vivacity of belief, it produces in the spectator—by virtue of being a representation of the agreeableness felt when contemplating St Francis' benevolence—various motivationally efficacious attitudes, such as love of St Francis, and a desire to emulate his benevolent character and behaviour. Other kinds of beliefs about objects and their causes and effects—

15 Rachel Cohon calls that view the 'background impulse model' (2008: 38–40) and she criticises it effectively, both for being in itself less plausible than the view that beliefs about pleasure and pain give rise to desires without the help of backgrounding general desires and for not fitting very well with Hume's apparent claims that it is the beliefs that produce the desires (2008: 45–9). Shecaira complains that Hume's claims about the motivational efficacy of belief in *Treatise* book I are 'remote' in relation to the discussion of morals in book III, and that on the other side of the argument is Hume's 'clear statement that reason [...] cannot alone motivate to action' (2011: 280). In response to the first complaint, it can be argued that while some of Hume's claims about the causal efficacy of belief may be remote from book III in terms of page numbers, the fact that they are made at a very early stage in book I indicates that they are fundamentally important in his psychology of action. Moreover, Cohon has shown that Hume makes claims even in book III that suggest that he takes some beliefs to be motivationally efficacious (Cohon 2008: 18). For example, Hume says that '[a] person may be affected with passion, by supposing a pain or pleasure to lie in an object' (T 3.1.1.12; SBN 459). In response to Shecaira's second complaint it suffices to repeat a point in the main text above, namely that it is a mistake to take Hume's claims about the motivational inertia of conclusion based on reason to concern beliefs in general.

16 Shecaira is thus mistaken to attribute to Hume the view that '[k]nowledge of X's potential to cause happiness will only drive one to pursue X if one has an independent desire to pursue whatever course of action has the potential to cause happiness' (Shecaira 2011: 273). In fact, several authors have noted recently that Hume holds that beliefs about prospects of pleasure and pain can motivate (see, e.g., Cohon 2008: 17–18; Kail 2007: Ch. 8; Sturgeon 2008: 522–3; Pigden 2009: 101). Shecaira considers the point as presented by Sturgeon and he challenges Sturgeon's claim that Hume takes impressions to differ from ideas only in being more forceful and vivacious. According to Shecaira, impressions and ideas also differ in that only the latter are representational and hence capable of truth and falsity (Shecaira 2011: 279). That is correct as far as it goes, but it does nothing to show that Hume holds that no belief is motivationally efficacious

beliefs whose content does not concern prospects for pain and pleasure, and beliefs that do not represent agreeableness or disagreeableness—do not have this kind of motivational force.

This reading settles the question whether any form of motivational internalism can be attributed to Hume. It makes it plausible to attribute to Hume modally weak internalism, according to which moral judgements can motivate intrinsically. For the view is not that moral beliefs motivate by virtue of an *independent* mental state, such as a standing desire or disposition to act in accordance with one's moral judgements; the view is that moral beliefs, produce motivation to act because of their special content: they represent the agreeable or disagreeable sentiments felt when contemplating characters from the common point of view. These representations get associated with ideas of the relevant characters, and so the characters are represented as agreeable (virtuous) or disagreeable (vicious).

To recap, Hume's view that some beliefs can excite passions and produce or prevent actions suffices to show that his motivation argument against moral rationalism is perfectly compatible with reading him as a psychological (and semantic) cognitivist. In other words, this point suffices to undermine the alleged support the motivation argument gives to non-cognitivist readings of Hume. Attributing to Hume modally weak internalism is textually justified, but it does not support non-cognitivist interpretations. In section 6, we shall consider some textual evidence that does not merely undermine non-cognitivist readings but count positively against them. But before we come to that we shall consider some other passages that may be thought to support non-cognitivist interpretations. We shall see that as long as we keep in clear view the distinction between non-cognitivism and sentimentalism, as explained in section 3 above, these passages do not lend support to non-cognitivist interpretations.

5. Some Further Alleged Support for Non-Cognitivist Readings

One might be tempted to think that, quite regardless of the best understanding of the motivation argument, Hume's view that we distinguish between virtue and vice by means of our impression rather than merely by means of our ideas, gives some support to non-cognitivist interpretations (T. 3.1.1.3–4; SBN 456–7). But Hume's view that we distinguish vice from virtue by means of impressions support only the sentimentalist view that moral judgements must originally be based in part on sentiments or feelings. The temptation to think that it (also) supports non-cognitivism rests on a failure to distinguish between sentimentalism and non-cognitivism. We saw in section 3 above that there is no incompatibility at all between Hume's sentimentalism and cognitivism.

A similar mistake might lead one to think that the following passage from *Treatise*, book 3, supports non-cognitivism:

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. ... We do not *infer* a character to be virtuous because it pleases (T 3.1.2.3; SBN 471, last emphasis added).

These claims may be thought to be in tension with cognitivist interpretations, but in fact they are not. First, to have the *sense* of virtue from the contemplation of a character is not yet to judge that the character is virtuous; the feeling that constitutes the sense of virtue may be, and often is, the basis of such a judgement (Sayre-McCord 2008: 303). Secondly, to praise or admire a character is to have feelings of peculiar kinds that can—and often do—serve as bases of judgements to the effect that the character in question is praiseworthy or admirable. Thirdly, beliefs about the virtue or vice of a character that are based on feelings that result from contemplation of that character are non-inferential beliefs; that is why we do not infer a character to be virtuous because it pleases.

There are also some passages in the second *Enquiry* that might be thought to support non-cognitivist interpretations. Consider Hume's claim that 'when [a speaker] bestows on any man the epithets of *vicious* or *odious* or *depraved*, he ... expresses sentiments, in which, he expects, all his audience are to concur with him' (EPM 9.6; SBN 272).¹⁷ It is plausible, however, that all Hume means to say here is that when we make moral judgements, for example, when we judge that a person's character is vicious, odious, or depraved, we take up the common point of view, and so expect others to concur with our judgement. By contrast, when we express mere dislike of another person, or when we deem him a personal enemy, rival, adversary, or antagonist, we 'speak the language of self-love' (EPM 9.6; SBN 272), and so do not expect others to concur with our judgements. This has no special implications for the truth or falsity of cognitivism, whether psychological or semantic.

One might also suggest that there is support for non-cognitivist interpretations in Appendix 1 of the second *Enquiry*, in which Hume argues that before we can fix on a moral verdict, all the circumstances of the case at hand need to be laid out (Sobel 2009: 65). When they have been, 'the understanding has no further room to operate' and then '[n]othing remains but to feel, on our part, some sentiment of blame or approbation; whence we pronounce the action criminal or virtuous' (EPM App. 1.11–12; SBN 289–91). But this seems to be a description of the process of making a moral judgement, and as such it is fully compatible with cognitivism (psychological and semantic). To think otherwise is again to fail to distinguish appropriately between Hume's sentimentalism and non-cognitivism.

17 Richard Joyce (2009: 48) and Howard Sobel (2009: 64) both refer to this passage in their respective tentative readings of Hume's view as involving non-cognitivist strands.

6. Evidence against Non-Cognitivist Interpretations

I shall offer two main bits of evidence against non-cognitivist interpretations and I shall begin with a piece of circumstantial evidence. Hume says in the opening chapter of the second *Enquiry* that one question he is interested in pursuing is ‘whether we attain the knowledge of [moral distinctions] by a chain of argument and induction, or by an immediate feeling and finer internal sense’ (EPM 1.3; SBN 170). This formulation clearly indicates that Hume assumes that there is such a thing as moral knowledge.¹⁸ We may safely assume that when Hume intimates that there is moral knowledge, he uses the term ‘knowledge’ in colloquial sense and not in the strict sense stipulated in the *Treatise*, in which knowledge requires certainty (T 1.3.11.2; SBN 124). This is not the only place at which uses the term ‘knowledge’ in a non-strict, colloquial sense. For example, in the first *Enquiry* Hume queries ‘how we arrive at the knowledge of cause and effect’ (EHU 4.5; SBN 27), and in the second *Enquiry*, Hume concludes the section on justice by claiming that his theory provides knowledge of the relevance of public utility to justice and other social virtues (EPM 3.48; SBN 203–4). Here Hume uses ‘knowledge’ in the colloquial and not the strict sense.

The assumption that there is such a thing as moral knowledge sits uneasily with the interpretation that moral judgements are to be equated with passions, since on Hume’s view, passions are non-representational ‘original existences’, which, for that reason, cannot be true or false (T 2.3.3.5; SBN 415).¹⁹ According to Hume, ‘truth [...] consists in an agreement [...] either to the *real* relations of ideas, or to *real* existence and matter of fact [and] ’tis evident our passions [...] are not susceptible to such agreement’ (T 3.1.1.9; SBN 458, Hume’s emphases). Since knowledge implies truth, this suggests strongly that, for Hume, knowledge that some person is virtuous or that some character trait is a virtue is not merely a matter of having a passion towards that person or character trait; it also involves having a lively idea of that person as virtuous, or of that character trait as a virtue. As we saw in the preceding section, this idea can be traced back to an impression of approbation of that person or character trait, and we can say that passions are in that sense grounds of our moral knowledge. But for the reasons just given, moral knowledge also requires or presupposes moral ideas.

The second piece of evidence I will offer is less circumstantial. I said in section 2 above that according to psychological non-cognitivism, to hold a moral judgement is not primarily to hold a belief. If Hume’s view of moral judgement were more in line with psychological non-cognitivism than with psychological cognitivism we would expect him to hold that there are

18 Hume also presupposes that there is such a thing as *political* knowledge (EPM 3.34; SBN 196–7).

19 For an illuminating discussion of Hume’s claim that passions are ‘original existences’, see Cohon and Owen (1997).

no moral beliefs.²⁰ But I have already intimated—in the present and the preceding sections—that Hume held that there are moral beliefs. One might object that there is no textual support for this reading.

However, on least at one occasion, Hume speaks explicitly about ‘moral ideas’ (‘Of the Immortality of the Soul’, EPML 595) and on several occasions of our ‘ideas of virtue’ and of our ideas of ‘vice and moral deformity’ (T 3.2.2.23; SBN 498, T 3.2.8.7; SBN 545; EPM Dial. 39; SBN 337). Since beliefs for Hume are lively ideas and since there is no textual reason to suppose that Hume held that ideas of virtue and moral ideas cannot be lively, there is no reason not to attribute to Hume the view that there are moral beliefs. Defenders of non-cognitivist interpretations might suggest that Hume speaks loosely in the relevant passages, and that by ‘ideas of virtue’ he rather means *impressions of virtue* or *moral sentiments* (Smith 2009: 112). But such a reading seems strangely contrived and lacks textual support: Why deny that impressions of virtue and vice can give rise to ideas of virtue and vice, where the latter are copies of the former, just as sensory impressions of, for example, colour and heat and cold can give rise to ideas of colour and heat and cold, where the latter are copies of the former? This question has no plausible and textually supported answer.²¹

It is important to note, once again, that none of this compromises Hume’s sentimentalism. For recall that Hume’s sentimentalism maintains that moral judgements cannot be based on reason alone, but must in part be based on sentiments. Reason alone is not capable of making moral distinctions. Once we are aware, by virtue of sentiment, that some character trait gives rise to approbation or disapprobation in a spectator, we can use reason to conclude that similar character traits will give rise to similar sentiments of approbation or disapprobation in a similar spectator. But the original insight that some character trait is a virtue or a vice is due to sentiment and is not a conclusion of reason. In that sense, morality is ‘more properly felt than judg’d of’ (T 3.1.2.1; SBN 470). And in that sense it is not possible ‘*from reason alone*, to distinguish betwixt moral good and evil’ (T 3.1.1.4; SBN 457, emphasis added).

7. Conclusion

In this paper we have distinguished between cognitivism and non-cognitivism concerning the psychological state of making a moral judgement, and between cognitivism and non-cognitivism concerning the linguistic act of uttering a moral judgement. We have found that neither kind of non-cognitivism is attributable to Hume. In particular, regardless of whether Hume is a motivational internalist who holds that moral judgements

20 Chamberlain 2019: pp. 1062–64.

21 For another defence of the view that Hume’s view recognizes moral beliefs, see Radcliffe 2018: 138–43.

motivate intrinsically, non-cognitivist interpretations, whether psychological or semantic, remain implausible. Hume is plausibly read as a sentimentalist, but not as a non-cognitivist, about ethics.²²

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