

HSS317: Ethics/Assignment-2/13-Feb-2020/20171059/CSE

David Hume's position in moral philosophy and ethics has been highly debatable as many philosophers have different interpretations of his writings. In the 'Treatise', which is one of Hume's most famous works, he writes a section on the 'influencing motives of the will' where he denies that reason is the determining factor in human behaviour. Hume attacks the traditional conception that reason is the only motive to human actions. "Reason alone", he says, "can never be a motive to any action of the will".

'Reason'?

Hume believes that reason by itself can't cause any action. He says that **passions are the cause of our actions** and no reasonable argument can stop any action! It was this conception of 'reason' and passions that set him apart from the other philosophers. Moral rationalism stated that all actions are and should be performed based on reason. Hume rejected this idea and said that it is our passions and emotions that influence our actions and not just reasons. Of course, reason aids in the action of the will, but it solely can never give rise to any action. Reason cannot even oppose passion in the direction of the will. Reason only helps us discover causal connections around us. We direct our actions in ways that will help cause the desired goals, which are driven by passion.

Hume says that reason only helps serve the ends, which are determined by passions. Reason is, as he put it, 'a slave of the passions'. It helps us arrive at judgements, but our own passions and desires help us decide whether to accept or reject those judgements. Reason is simply the 'advisor' whereas passion is the actual 'goal-maker'.

Can something be contrary to reason?

Hume's first claim is clear; that reason can never solely motivate action. It is passion that really decides the desired goal and motivates the actions. Hume also says that reason can never oppose passion in the direction of the will, that is, it cannot prevent actions that are motivated by passions. So for instance, if one chooses to destroy the entire world instead of being bit by a mosquito, it may not be reasonable to us, but it is reasonable to him! His passion motivates him to stay away from mosquitoes and if he has to destroy the planet to do that, then he will as it is reasonable for him. Passion is certainly not contrary to reason, as the latter actually directs and guides the former. Passions decide the end goal and reasonableness influences the actions to reach that end goal. Hume's point is that we cannot use reason to ethically evaluate an action.

But sometimes, misjudgements or false judgements can accompany one's passions, causing it to become unreasonable. According to Hume for something to be contrary to reason, the passion must be accompanied by a false judgement. For instance, if my desired goal is to free

the world of terrorists, but I have a false judgement that I would need to destroy entire cities to achieve my goal. It is certainly unreasonable to destroy entire cities as it would kill many innocent people, but it is my mis-judgement that goes contrary to reason as I feel that is way to free the world of terrorists. Such a passion is unreasonable because even though it is a wrong method for achieving the desired end.

False Judgements that accompany a passion

Hume says that all the moral distinctions we make are not derived from reason. Rather, we make such distinctions through our sentiments. Moral rationalists believe that what is morally good is reasonable and what is bad is certainly unreasonable. But Hume says that we can't discover what's good and bad simply by reasoning.

Reason can never go against passion in the direction of the will. Even if something is 'unreasonable', one might perform the action due to passion. So we cannot use reason to claim that the desired end is false. But there are two cases, as Hume points out, where we can. This happens when passion is accompanied with false judgements, which can be of two types.

1. We believe that a thing exists, but it actually does not.
2. We have a desired goal in mind, but the means to reach the goal are incorrect. We think that those particular means will help us achieve the goal, but they do not.

It is these mis judgements that make our passions unreasonable according to Hume. If these were not present, then our desired goal would persist.

Are these False Judgements exhaustive?

No, Hume's classification of false judgements is not exhaustive. Hume overlooks a third type of judgement, one that is known apriori. There are always certain necessary truths known apriori that tell us something about the world. Whatever we conceive to be reality is shaped by our minds. Hume says that all we have are impressions and ideas, but the mind needs to shape that and make sense of the information it receives. This was put forth by Kant, an eminent philosopher who countered Hume through his transcendental philosophy. 'Transcendental' because it is an apriori condition that must be fulfilled in order for empirical knowledge to be possible.

Yes, one does have passions that motivate him/her to reach a desired goal. But why do we have such passions in the first place? And why are these passions constant throughout? This constancy is presupposed in the empiricist frame, and we need Kantian philosophy to be able to explain this.

Yes, there are the two kinds of false judgements given by Hume which cause passions to be unreasonable. If one's judgement goes against the transcendental judgement, then it is a false judgement and renders the passion unreasonable.