

**Simon Blackburn:
*Ruling Passions***

**Chapter 8
Self-Control, Reason, and Freedom**

§ Hume-Friendly Reason

- 1. Our courses are set by our passions or concerns. Reason can inform us of the facts of the case and possible upshots of actions, but it is silent on how we would act.**
- 2. When there are defects of our will or passion such that we act imprudently, we are not being *irrational*.**
- 3. Reason's office is to represent the world to us as it is. But how we react to the situation [ethically], is a matter of a dynamic response – the formation of passions, attitudes, policies, or intentions. The nature of our dynamic response shows our passionate nature, or sensibility.**
- 4. A Hume-friendly notion of *reason* is being *reasonable*, which stands as a label for an admired freedom from various traits – ignorance, incapacity to understand our situation, shortsightedness, lack of concern for the common point of view, etc.**
- 5. What Hume calls 'reason' may be the voice of prudence, or of far-sighted, wide concerns (such as concerns for accommodations with others), as opposed to the narrow concerns with the immediate future.**

§ The Kantian Captain

Reason for the Kantian is not the slave of the passions, but a motivational spring of a different kind, an independent source of a fundamentally different kind of pressure. To take up an inclination and make it our own, to acknowledge it or endorse it as a 'maxim', or legislate it as a principle governing action, is an exercise of practical reason.



The Platonic model of a person as a ship:

___ For Hume, the ship is worked by a crew, each representing a passion or inclination or sentiment, and where the ship goes is determined by the resolution of conflicting pressures among the crew.

___ For Kant, there is another voice standing above the crew – a voice with ultimate authority and ultimate power. This is the Captain, as an embodiment of pure practical reason, detached from all desires.

Blackburn's Critique:

The Kantian captain is a dream – or nightmare – of pure, authentic self-control. Context-free, non-natural, and a complete stickler for duty, perhaps the Kantian self is nothing but the sublimation of a patriarchal, authoritarian fantasy.

Kant is a great democrat. If we see our fellow human beings as each possessed of Kantian control, and only succumbing to other pressures when things are going wrong, then a dangerously optimistic politics is possible.

The unhappy common failures, when people shoot each other, abuse drugs, drive unsafely, or brutalize their families show us only defectives who unaccountably will not listen to the voice of reason within them, and these can safely be demonized, put away, rejected as beyond the social pale.

We thus combine unreasonable optimism about what people might be like, with unreasonable hatred of them when they are not like that. We also fail to put into place social structures that safeguard against the inevitable failures.

§ The Mistake about Deliberation

- 1. Kant's aim was to present the true self, the deliberator, as free from all personal variances. He is not an embodiment of a social view, or religion, or class, or gender, but simply of reason and morality. But nothing on this earth that makes deliberations is free from his or her natural and acquired dispositions as they do so. You, when you deliberate, are what you are: a person of tangled desires, conflicting attitudes, inchoate ambitions, preferences, and ideals, with an inherited ragbag of attitudes to different actions, situations, and characters. You do not manage, ever, to stand apart from all that.**
- 2. Deliberation is an active engagement with the world, not a process of introspecting our own consciousness of it.**
- 3. Our desires do not sit passively until certified by reason. When we desire, aspects of the situation present themselves as affective or attracting.**
- 4. It is tempting to think that the *whole crew* is within my purview. But this is the romantic, existentialist illusion. It is only the same old me doing the deciding. And if the assemblage of facts I manage to bear in mind sways me one way or another, that too is a fact about me: another contingent and**

situated and moulded aspect of my sensibility or conative nature.

Q: What would I do if only I were fully rational or reasonable?

Hume: Nothing.

§ Normative Humean Ethics

Q: Can the Humean ethics be normative, or is it merely a psychological description of human motivations, emotions, passions and desires?

A: A Humean ethicist can issue the injunction to avoid cruelty. He is forbidding a class of actions, and warning that wanting to perform them counts as no kind of excuse.

The Humean position is that when *we* say that it is desirable that someone does *x*, or that someone has a normative reason to do *x*, we are voicing *our* attitudes towards the person and their choice situation. We are *not* therefore simply describing the state of his or her desires. Nor are we confined to approving of what they themselves have inclinations towards. We are judging them, not describing them.

Hume is quite capable of saying that it is categorically undesirable that someone desire to wallow in the blood

of others. It is not just undesirable if the agent wants other things. It is undesirable *tout court*, and is to be regarded as undesirable by anyone.

A Humean can sensibly urge that any agent *should* be motivated to avoid gratuitous cruelty, regardless of what profile of desire they actually have. In saying this he deploys his own values, of course, but then what else should he be doing?

⇒ Expressivism

Hume, like Aristotle, thinks it typically takes maturity, experience, judgment, care, imagination, and sympathy to know what it is desirable to do.

The Humean approach works not so much by individual blame, but by the social and environmental changes that grow the right fruits. An intelligent approach to human affairs may have less to do with the primitive mechanisms of anger, blame, and revenge, but much more to do with fostering the right kinds of situation, making the kind of world where bad behavior become unmotivated.

But this kind of policy is expensive, and violence is cheap.

§ A Final Critique of Rawlsian Contract Theory

[veil of ignorance]

+

[original position]

+

[social contract]

⇓

The most just social/political system could be devised if we could abstract ourselves from our social and empirical positions, under a “veil of ignorance,” so to speak, and come to the bargaining table to decide, under the original position of society, what the most just arrangement of our interests and powers would be.

And we would all have chosen the present system with freedoms under the law, and a substantial welfare floor.

Blackburn’s Critique:

We should refuse the spurious posture of neutrality. The fact that currently I admire and encourage such an aim is *not* independent of my current wants and desires. If it were, it would not be a real value.

Q: What happens if you come to the bargaining table with little or nothing to offer (for example, through being handicapped)?

People deserve the protection of their community because they need it, not because they are likely to

repay it with goods and services. A community is largely constituted by its disposition to enter into common action to meet its members' needs.

Our lives will go worse if the only notion of a community that we can muster is one of conditional co-operation so long as it is to our own benefit.