§1. The mythical Hume

T1 ‘Since morals... have an influence on the actions and affections... it follows, that they cannot be derived from reason... and that because reason alone, as we have already proved, can never have any such influence...

(Treatise of Human Nature, p.489)

T2 ‘Morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions... Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular... The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason.’

(Treatise of Human Nature, p.489)

P1 Moral judgments by themselves motivate us to act.
P2 Mere beliefs by themselves never motivate us to act.
C Moral judgments are something more than mere beliefs.

T3 ‘In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with... the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs... when all of a sudden I am surprise to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, is, and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or ought not...’

(Treatise of Human Nature, p.504)

T4 ‘This change is... of the last consequence... For as this ought, or ought not, expresses some new relation or affirmation, it is necessary 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.’

(Treatise of Human Nature, p.504)

T5 ‘No imperative conclusion can be validly drawn from a set of premisses which does not contain at least one imperative.’

(R.M. Hare, Language of Morals, p.28)
§2. The motivation argument

T6  ‘If morality had naturally no influence on human passions and actions, it were in vain to take such pains to inculcate it… And this is confirmed by common experience, which informs us, that men are often governed by their duties… and are deterred from some actions by the opinion of injustice, and impelled to others by that of obligation.’

(Treatise of Human Nature, p.489)

Hume appears to think that the belief that a particular course of action is morally wrong is sufficient to motivate us not to take this course of action…

T7  ‘The understanding exerts itself after two ways… as it regards the abstract relations of our ideas… or those relations of objects, of which experience only gives us information…’

(Treatise of Human Nature, p.480)

T8  ‘…it will scarce be asserted that the first species of reasoning alone is ever the cause of any action… As its proper province is the world of ideas, and as the will always places us in that of realities… demonstrative reasoning… never influences any of our actions…’

(Treatise of Human Nature, p.480)

T9  ‘…when we have the prospect of pain or pleasure from any object, we feel a consequent emotion of aversion or propensity…. This emotion… comprehends whatever objects are connected with its original one by the relation of cause and effect… reasoning takes place to discover this relation… But… the impulse arises not from reason… It can never in the least concern us to know, that such objects are causes, and such others effects, if both the causes and effects be indifferent to us.’

(Treatise of Human Nature, p.481)

P1  Our faculty of reason forms two types of belief, viz. (1) beliefs about the abstract relations of ideas and (2) beliefs about the causal relations between objects.

P2  By themselves, beliefs about the abstract relations of ideas never motivate us to act.

P3  By themselves, beliefs about the causal relations between objects never motivate us to act.

C1  By themselves, beliefs formed by our faculty of reason never motivate us to act.

C2  By themselves, beliefs never motivate us to act.
Hedonic beliefs…

T10 ‘…beliefs that pain or pleasure can be had from available objects… cause passions such as desire and aversion to become strong enough to produce action.’

(Rachel Cohon, *Hume’s Morality: Feeling and Fabrication*, p.43)

P1 Moral beliefs by themselves motivate us to act.

P2 Beliefs produced by our faculty of reason alone never by themselves motivate us to act.

C Moral beliefs are not produced by our faculty of reason alone.

T11 ‘We speak not strictly and philosophically when we talk of the combat of passion and reason… Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions… and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.’

(*Treatise of Human Nature*, p.482)

§3. Is Hume a non-cognitivist?

Mackie takes the conclusion of Hume’s argument to be that…

T12 ‘…the state of mind which is the making of moral judgments… does not consist wholly of knowledge, beliefs, and reasoning of any kinds.’

(J.L. Mackie, *Hume’s Moral Theory*, p.52-53)

T13 ‘…when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious… you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it.’

(*Treatise of Human Nature*, p.503)

*Moral subjectivism* Moral judgments *report* our emotions and desires.

*Moral expressivism* Moral judgments *express* our emotions and desires.

T14 ‘No doubt [Hume] ought to have said… when we say *This is wrong* we are not stating anything, not even that we have certain feelings, but rather we are giving vent to our feelings… or… we are… instead uttering some rather devious sort of crypto-command… But years of labour and ingenuity have been needed fully to develop such fashionable and sophisticated moves.’

(Anthony Flew, *On the Interpretation of Hume*, p.181)
§4. Does Hume accept Hume’s Law

T15 ‘The hypothesis which we embrace is plain… It defines virtue to be whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation; and vice the contrary.’

(Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, R600)

T16 ‘Examine the crime of ingratitude… which has place, wherever we observe good-will… on the one side, and a return of ill will or indifference… on the other… Inquire… first, where is that matter of fact, which we here call crime… It resides in the mind of the person who is ungrateful… But nothing is there, except the passion of ill-will or absolute indifference. You cannot say that these… are crimes…’

(Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, R597)

T17 ‘This representation, you say, is false. Crime… consists in certain moral relations, discovered by reason, in the same manner as… the truths of geometry or algebra… But what are the relations… of which you here talk? …I see first good-will… and then ill-will… Between these, there is the relation of contrariety… Does the crime consist in that relation? But suppose a person bore me ill-will… and I… did him good-offices: here is the same relation of contrariety…’

(Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, R598)

Hume thinks it follows that there is a crime only if we consider the emotional response that the action provokes in us… He thinks that ought-statements can be deduced from statements about the emotional responses that actions provoke in us… He doesn’t think they can be deduced from other types of statement about these actions…

§5. Mary Astell

T18 ‘…virtue… consists in governing animal impressions… in directing our passions to such objects, and keeping them in such a pitch, as right reason requires.’

(Serious Proposal to the Ladies, p.214)

Suppose that moral knowledge is something we acquire by exercising our faculty of reason… Doesn’t it follow that a lack of education prevents us from achieving moral knowledge…?

P1 Early modern women cannot cultivate their rational faculties.
‘Most in this depraved later age think a woman learned and wise enough if she can distinguish her husband’s bed from another’s…’

(Hannah Woolley, *Gentlewoman’s Companion*)

People can acquire moral knowledge only if they cultivate their rational faculties.

People can be virtuous only if they have moral knowledge.

Early modern women cannot be virtuous.

People can be happy only if they are virtuous.

Early modern women cannot be happy.

Against P2 it may be objected that we could still acquire *second-hand* moral knowledge… We could adopt the moral beliefs of better educated people… But isn’t there something problematic about second-hand moral knowledge…?

‘Happiness is not without us… it must be found in our own bosoms.’

(Serious Proposal to the Ladies, p.225)

References

- Astell, M. (2002) *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Parts I and II; Edited by Patricia Springborg*, Broadview Press, Peterborough ON.
- Hume, D. (1975) *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and the*