§1. The standard interpretation

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. 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 are intrinsically motivating.  
*Motivational Internalism About Moral Judgment*  

P2 Mere beliefs are not intrinsically motivating.  
*The Humean Theory of Motivation*  

C Moral judgments are not mere beliefs.  
*Non-Cognitivism About Moral Judgment*

T2 'In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked, that 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*... 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)*

T3 ‘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)*

Hare calls this *Hume’s Law.*

T4 ‘[Hume] makes it look as if the view against which he is arguing is merely that moral distinctions depend upon... demonstrating reasoning, leaving it open
that they might... possess empirical truth... But... he says something quite different at the end of this section, and in any case his main argument offers a contrary indication... [Its conclusion is that] 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)

§2. Problems with the Standard Interpretation

T5 ‘...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. Vice and virtue, therefore, may be compared to sounds, colours, heat and cold...’

(Treatise of Human Nature, p.503)

Hume appears to identify the judgment that φ-ing is morally wrong with the judgment that φ-ing produces in us a negative emotional response.

T6 ‘No doubt he ought to have said, boldly and consistently, something like: that 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 that when we say He ought to resign we are again not stating anything, but 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)

T7 ‘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, p.600)

T8 '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)

§3. Is Hume a Humean?

T9 ‘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.... I believe 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... Abstract or demonstrative reasoning, therefore, never influences any of our actions...'

*(Treatise of Human Nature, p.480)*

T10 ‘...when we have the prospect of pain or pleasure from any object, we feel a consequent emotion of aversion or propensity, and are carried to avoid or embrace what will give us this uneasiness or satisfaction.... This emotion... comprehends whatever objects are connected with its original one by the relation of cause and effect. Here then reasoning takes place to discover this relation... But it is evident... that the impulse arises not from reason, but is only directed by it... 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. Where the objects themselves do not affect us, their connection can never give them any influence; and...as reason is nothing but the discovery of this connection, it cannot be by its means that the objects are able to affect us.’

*(Treatise of Human Nature, p.481)*

P1 Our faculty of reason forms (1) beliefs about the abstract relations of ideas and (2) beliefs about the causal connections of objects.

P2 Our beliefs about the abstract relations of ideas are not intrinsically motivating.

P3 Our beliefs about the causal connections of objects are not intrinsically motivating.  
(These beliefs motivate us only when supplemented by an emotional response.)

C1 Beliefs formed by our faculty of reason are not intrinsically motivating.

One problem... C1 is not the same as...

C2 Beliefs are not intrinsically motivating.

Another problem... There is some evidence that Hume does not accept P3.

T11 ‘...when we have the prospect of pain or pleasure from any object, we feel a consequent emotion of aversion or propensity, and are carried to avoid or embrace what will give us this uneasiness or satisfaction...’

*(Treatise of Human Nature, p.481)*

Rachel Cohon calls these beliefs ‘hedonic beliefs’.

T12 ‘Painful and pleasurable impressions cause motivating passions to spring into being in the mind; and 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)

If I had the faculty of reason, but no sense of pleasure or pain, then I would not be able to have any hedonic beliefs.

My reason would not be able to form the belief that putting my hand on the stove will cause me pain.

Hence the faculty of reason cannot form hedonic beliefs by itself.

It is the faculty of reason in combination with the sense of pleasure and pain that forms these beliefs.

P1 Moral beliefs are intrinsically motivating. Motivational Internalism About Moral Beliefs

P2 If we had reason, but no sentiment (e.g. of pleasure and pain), then we could not have any intrinsically motivating beliefs. Sentimentalism About Motivation

C If we had reason, but no sentiment (e.g. of pleasure and pain), then we could not have any moral beliefs. Sentimentalism About Moral Beliefs

P1 ‘Reasoning processes alone… cannot produce passions, volitions, or actions. P2 Moral discrimination… can and does produce passions, volitions, and actions.

C …our moral discriminations are not reasoning processes (alone), and are not performed by reasoning processes (alone).’

(Rachel Cohon, Hume’s Morality: Feeling and Fabrication, p.82)

§4. Does Hume accept Hume’s Law?

Hume doesn’t explicitly claim that an ‘ought’ cannot be deduced from an ‘is’. What he claims is that a reason has to be given in order to bridge the logical gap between the ‘is’ and the ‘ought’.

What exactly is ‘the ordinary way of reasoning’? Remember that the Rationalists we have met do not base their moral arguments on claims about the causal connections between actions and our emotional responses or sentiments. Would claims of this sort be included in ‘the ordinary way of reasoning’?

T13 ‘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, p.597)

T14 ‘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, p.598)

T15 …We then proceed to examine a plain matter of fact, to wit, what actions have this influence: we consider all the circumstances, in which these actions agree: and thence endeavour to extract some general observations with regard to these sentiments.’

(Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, p.600)

P1 Bravery is beneficial to society/commanded by God.
P2 Whatever is beneficial to society/commanded by God produces a positive emotional response in us.
C We ought to be brave.

Clearly, Hume doesn’t think that C can be deduced from P1… But what if we add P2…?

On the standard interpretation, Hume doesn’t think that C can be deduced from P1 and P2… On the alternative interpretation, he does.

Bibliography