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Hume and the Unity of Reasons

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Abstract

Current debates about reasons and reasoning often draw comparisons between epistemic and practical reasons and reasoning and presuppose substantial unity between the practical and epistemic domains. This stance seems to conflict with a stark Humean contrast between the two domains: With respect to practical reasons and reasoning, Hume highlights the role of impressions, especially the passions, in motivating and rationalizing action, while apparently downplaying the potential relevance of beliefs, reason, or reasons. With respect to epistemic reasons and theoretical reasoning, he urges us to proportion our belief to the evidence (EHU 10.4), which suggests a significant epistemic role for evidential reasons. My contribution argues that there is nonetheless a convincing and interesting unified Humean account of reasons and reasoning across both domains. To present my case, I first narrow down the unity claim that I am interested in. I then closely engage with Hume's claims in epistemology, the philosophy of action, and metaethics to develop the unified Humean account.

1. What Unity?

In current debates on the nature of normativity, philosophers investigate normative phenomena in parallel across different domains as a matter of course, especially the practical and the epistemic domains. Many participants in these debates put normative reasons – considerations that favor a certain response – at the center of their thought; they do so by considering reasons to act in parallel with reasons to believe, with reasons to intend, and sometimes with reasons for other attitudes. To illustrate this observation, proponents of reasons-first views, according to whom normative reasons explain all other normative phenomena, presuppose that their view holds across the different domains (e.g., Scanlon 1998, Schroeder 2021, Schmidt 2018, Kieseletter 2017). Similarly, proponents of the reasoning view hold that normative reasons are premises of good reasoning, both towards action/intention and towards belief (Setiya 2014,

Asarnow 2016, McHugh and Way 2022, Way 2017). And again, philosophers who spell out reasons as considerations that bear on a relevant question, or as answers to a relevant normative question, do so across domains (Hieronymi 2005, Logins 2022).¹

Looking for historical predecessors of such a unifying take on reasons, reasoning, and normativity, Immanuel Kant's 'unity of reason' thesis would seem to be an obvious candidate. He defends "the unity of practical with speculative reason in a common principle, since there can, in the end, be only one and the same reason, which must be distinguished merely in its application." (*Groundwork*, 4:391). David Hume, on the other hand, appears to be a bad fit: In the *Treatise*, he denies both that reason has more than an auxiliary role to play in moving us to act and that our passions – which are central for motivation to act – are representational. He further denies that reason grounds morality or that it enables us to grasp what is morally right or wrong. By contrast, he describes the theoretical reasoning processes of "wise" (EHU 10.4) or "just reasoners" (DNR 2.17) as responsive to the strength of their evidence (which we may, for our purposes here, identify with epistemic reasons), and thinks of judgment or belief as the outputs of our faculty of reason. This apparent recalcitrance of Hume's view vis-à-vis a unified picture of normativity across domains is exactly my motivation for investigating how far we can push a view that still deserves to be called 'Humean' towards unification. Despite initial appearances to the contrary, is it possible to mold Hume's insights regarding reasons and reasoning into a view that is amenable to treating the practical and epistemic domains in parallel?

In this chapter, then, I will investigate the prospects of a unified Humean account of normativity across the practical and epistemic domains, and I will propose a Humean, unified account of normative reasons, reasoning, and of central normative standings of action and belief. As might be expected, this account will not be as far-reaching as Kant's unity of reason. Moreover, the kind of unity I am interested in is not the claim that "epistemic and practical normativity are intertwined" (Hirvelä 2023, 1) – that the epistemic standing of our theoretical responses have an impact on what is practically or morally required of us, or vice versa. I read Hume as sympathetic to this kind of unity: Hume certainly thinks that theoretical reasoning correctly feeds into practical decision-making, since he grants reason an auxiliary role in motivating action (THN 2.3.3.3). Moreover, Hume's Title Principle (THN 1.4.7.11; see Garrett 2007) states that we are entitled to reason towards a belief just in case we are affectively/practically inclined to do so. My interest in this chapter is instead whether we can find, with Hume, substantial structural similarities between practical and epistemic reasons, reasoning, and normativity more generally.

Here are the unity theses I am after:

(1) *Unity of normative reasons*: Considerations that favor a response have substantially similar natures and function in similar ways in practical and epistemic domains.

Among others, reasons-first views exemplify this unity. Proponents typically claim that normative reasons both to believe and to act consist in facts that count in favor of a response by the subject, and that the all-things-considered normative status of a belief or action as justified, right, etc., is determined by the balance of reasons for or against it. For example, the fact that the toddler fell into the pond is a normative reason for Solaika to believe that he is drowning as well as a reason for her to jump into the pond to save him. We can assume that, all things considered, both the belief and the action are justified for her because this reason outweighs reasons against so believing or acting, such as the fact that the pond is shallow or the fact that it would be uncomfortable to get wet. The *Unity of normative reasons* requires substantial similarities between normative reasons in both domains, but not perfect sameness – for instance, it can allow that reasons to act balance permissively, while reasons to believe balance prohibitively (e.g., Brunero 2022).²

A different unity thesis concerns reasoning:

(2) *Unity of reasoning*: There are substantial commonalities between reasoning processes in practical and epistemic domains.

Again, many of the philosophers cited above endorse unity along these lines. Proponents of the reasoning view conceive of sound reasoning patterns along the lines of patterns that take the subject from fitting premise attitudes to fitting conclusion attitudes, like belief or intention, or to correct action. Similarly, discussions of the basing relation between certain attitudes and a subject's response to these often treat practical and theoretical reasoning in parallel (e.g., Mantel 2018, Neta 2019). In the example, Solaika's transitions from the belief that the toddler fell into the pond to believing that his life is in danger, and to jumping into the pond, both instantiate sound patterns of reasoning, by which these responses are justified.³ Like the first, the second unity thesis does not require that practical and theoretical reasoning processes be perfectly aligned, but merely that they share substantial commonalities. For instance, deductive and inductive logic capture the rules of sound theoretical reasoning, but are not a good fit for practical reasoning (Anscombe 1962, Dancy 2018).⁴

If we endorse the first and the second unity claims, a third unity thesis naturally suggests itself:

- (3) *Unity of motivating reasons*: Considerations that move us to give certain responses have substantially similar natures and function in similar ways in the practical and epistemic domains.

Motivating reasons are often conceived as considerations in light of which we act or believe, which we weigh and which – by being weighed – move us to give corresponding responses. In *good* cases of believing or acting on the basis of reasoning, it is our normative reasons themselves that motivate us to give the responses that they favor, all things considered (Dancy 2000, Mantel 2018). The case of Solaika is an example – in believing that the toddler is drowning and in jumping into the pond, she gives correct responses for the very reason that favors her belief and her action (viz., that the toddler fell into the pond). Again, the third unity thesis allows that there may be some differences between motivating reasons in the practical and epistemic domains. For instance, it seems plausible that reasons for action, but not reason for belief, motivate by relating to the good of the subject or of other agents.

Against this backdrop, I will investigate whether we can find in Hume a unifying account of practical and epistemic reasons and reasoning that conceives of normative reasons in both domains uniformly as factors

- (i) that contribute to fixing all-things-considered normative statuses of the subject's responses, such as being justified, and
- (ii) which motivate subjects to give corresponding responses via reasoning.⁵

My aim is to determine what positive claims Hume makes about reasons and reasoning in the epistemic (Section 2) and practical domains (Section 3). I will investigate in what ways the epistemic and practical domains align, according to him; and whether a view in close proximity to Hume's position can be developed that incorporates the three unity claims (Section 4).

2. Hume on Epistemic Reasons and Theoretical Reasoning

In this and the following section, I will engage closely with Hume's views of reasons and reasoning, and of the resulting normative statuses of our responses, starting with his epistemology. Here, my focus will be on the *Treatise*, the first and the second *Enquiry*, and the *Dialogues*. I

will start by reminding readers of some relevant Humean terminology, and describe how theoretical reasoning works, according to Hume, and how it relates to reasons and the normative status of belief.

Core elements of Hume's *epistemology* are impressions and ideas. In a subject's mind, impressions such as perceptual experiences, pains, but also emotions or desires, come first. The subject transitions to ideas by copying her original impressions, and thus forms beliefs, memories, imaginative states, or the like. Hume distinguishes impressions and ideas not only by how they are causally related, but also describing the original impressions as more forceful and lively than the ideas copied from them (EHU 2.3, 2.9). Our ideas are representational in that they represent the impressions from which they are copied. By contrast, Hume denies that impressions represent (THN 2.3.3.5). For instance, Soleika's visual impression of the pond does not represent a pond. It's not even clear whether Hume would agree that sensory impressions are *caused* by external objects – he slides from being noncommittal between realism and idealism about what causes impressions (THN 1.3.5.2, see De Pierris 2015, 79) towards realism about external objects (EHU 5.21, 12.7, 12.21, 12.25).

Next, Hume's understanding of belief is relevant to my project. He holds that belief is characterized by a specific feeling that accompanies certain ideas: It is an especially vivid, forcible, firm conception of a state of affairs. Its vivacity makes belief somewhat similar to impressions, and it enables belief to govern action (EHU 5.11, 5.12; THN 1.3.7). Regarding things that can be believed, Hume distinguishes matters of fact, i.e., propositions supported directly by sensory experience or by reasoning from experience, and relations of ideas, i.e., propositions we can know intuitively or by deduction.⁶ I focus on matters of fact for my purposes here – according to Hume, these can be ascertained by causal inference or by analogical reasoning (EHU 4, 5; THN 1.3.13; DNR 2.7). Here are schemas of three theoretical inference patterns:

*Causal inference*₁: Constant observed conjunction of events c and e $\xrightarrow{\text{inference}}$ c causes e .

*Causal inference*₂: Impression of c (or e) $\xrightarrow{\text{inference}}$ unobserved e (or c) obtains.⁷

Analogy: Similarities between objects o and p in some respects $\xrightarrow{\text{inference}}$ o and p are similar in further respects.

Hume famously holds that what moves us to make these transitions is custom or habit, a principle of human nature or natural instinct – not reasoning or reasons (THN 1.3.6.12, EHU

5.5, 5.8). He denies that these are *reasoning* patterns in the context of his discussion of the problem of induction. The worry on Hume's mind there is that we can give no argument to support the assumption that nature is uniform, even though all three inference patterns rely on this assumption. Elsewhere, Hume does speak of "reasoning" to describe these patterns (e.g., EHU 4.4, THN 1.3.6.16, DNR 11.2, 11.16). On this basis, I will provisionally do the same here (though I will address the concern that this isn't reasoning for Hume below).

How do these transitions move us to belief more concretely, on Hume's picture? One aspect he emphasizes is that they involve the weighing of chances:

There is certainly a probability, which arises from a superiority of chances on any side; and according as this superiority encreases, and surpasses the opposite chances, the probability receives a proportionable encrease, and begets still a higher degree of belief or assent to that side, in which we discover the superiority. (EHU 6.2)⁸

The core idea that Hume expresses here is that the "wise man proportions his belief to the evidence." (EHU 10.4). According to him, the subject's evidence supports a belief to the degree to which it (the evidence) is uniform regarding the issue at hand. For instance, the more Iyad has experienced hitting the switch and the lamp lighting to co-occur, the stronger his evidence for the belief that the lamp in front of him will be lit, given that he is about to hit the switch. On the other hand, if Iyad has sometimes, or often, observed cases where hitting the switch wasn't followed by the lamp lighting, his belief that the lamp will be lit is not well supported by his observation that he (or someone else) is hitting the switch.⁹ The same holds for analogical reasoning, which Hume discusses in detail in his criticism of the argument for design in the *Dialogues*: He says of "just reasoners" that, "[u]nless the cases be exactly similar, they repose no perfect confidence in applying their past observation to any particular phenomenon." (DNR 2.17) The passages from Hume not only highlight that the inference patterns involve *weighing* evidence, but also that Hume connects the evidence weighed, and the weighing/reasoning process, to a normative standing. This is, in the first instance, a normative standing of the reasoner, who is "wise" or "just" to the extent that she correctly bases her belief on her evidence. In the *Dialogues*, Hume also applies normative vocabulary directly to the inferred belief, for instance, when he speaks of a "legitimate conclusion" of analogical reasoning (DNR 12.6) or says that the evidence we have concerning God's attributes "can never be sufficient to *establish* that conclusion" (viz., the conclusion that God is morally perfect), suggesting that in other cases, evidence can be sufficient to establish a conclusion (DNR 11.8).

On Hume's picture, then, evidence for and against a belief competes in a transition from pre-existing mental states to a belief, and thereby jointly fixes the normative status of this belief as the belief of a just reasoner, as established or legitimate, that is, as justified. Such a transition is a process of theoretical reasoning, as this is understood in current debates, and such evidence comes down to epistemic normative reasons to believe. Subjects can believe for the reasons thereby weighed, so these are also motivating reasons. Connecting this to the my question of unity, we have here (i) normative reasons understood as contributors to fixing the all-things-considered normative status of belief, to which (ii) subjects respond as motivating reasons, by forming justified belief via reasoning.

But is my reading convincing? As indicated above, Hume at times appears skeptical about the justificatory force of causal and analogical reasoning, and it may seem that this undermines any positive claims about epistemic normative reasons or theoretical reasoning in Hume. In his discussion of the problem of induction, he can be read as claiming that, while we *do* make transitions according to the three schemas above, this doesn't mean we *ought to*, or that this conveys any normative standing to the resulting beliefs (THN 3.1.2.27). We are driven by the natural instinct of custom to draw conclusions via causal or analogical reasoning, but since we cannot justify the core assumption backing these patterns (the uniformity of nature), their premises do not contribute to any positive normative standing. And so arguably, we are not dealing with genuine reasoning or normative reasons, according to Hume.

My response is that this skeptical reading does not do justice to Hume, given a fuller view of his argument in Sections 5 and 12 of the *Enquiry* specifically.¹⁰ He claims that causal (and presumably also analogical) reasoning mirrors the actual course of nature and is thus truth-conducive, given that we follow our natural instinct and weigh the evidence as he describes:

Here, then, is a kind of pre-established harmony between the course of nature and the succession of our ideas; ... [nature] has ... implanted in us an instinct, which carries forward the thought in a correspondent course to that which she has established among external objects (EHU 5.21–22)

What puts these reasoning patterns in a positive epistemic light – their truth-conduciveness – contrasts with the *Title Principle* that Hume espoused in the *Treatise*, according to which we are rationally entitled to follow our natural inclinations generally in coming to believe: “Where reason is lively, and mixes itself with some propensity, it *ought* to be assented to. Where it does not, it never can have any *title* to operate upon us.” (THN 1.4.7. 11, emphasis added)

My suggestion is that, in the *Enquiry*, Hume defends a non-skeptical position which builds on the truth-conduciveness of the theoretical reasoning patterns backed by custom and habit. I lack the space to develop the details here, but I find the following interpretation of Hume highly plausible: According to Hsueh Qu (2020, 183), we start by trusting our faculties, including the faculty that enables us to draw causal and analogical inferences, which we are antecedently justified to do. We then turn our faculty on itself to investigate whether it is reliable, and by way of “benign bootstrapping”, doing so confirms that it is indeed reliable, which endows it with consequent justification (Qu 2020, 185). Given this positive evaluation of our faculty of theoretical reasoning, and given that we transition from suitable starting points, the inference patterns characteristic of the faculty are able to confer justification on their conclusion attitudes. Qu calls this position he finds in Hume a ‘mitigated skepticism’, contrasting with an excessive Pyrrhonian skepticism rejected by Hume. Unlike Qu, I believe we should think of the emerging view as an (albeit limited) *non*-skeptical view, since it maintains that many of our ordinary beliefs about our surroundings are epistemically justified.

On the basis of this non-skeptical reading of Hume, I submit that there is indeed a substantial Humean account of normative reasons to believe, which become motivating in reasoning, and which thereby determine the all-things-considered normative status of our beliefs as justified.

3. Hume on Practical Reasons and Reasoning

With this promising result, I turn to Hume on the *practical domain*. I here rely on the *Treatise*, but also on the second *Enquiry*. Does his view here include a similar picture of normative reasons and reasoning, allowing for a unifying Humean account? Let me start by removing an initial complication. The practical domain encompasses both moral reasons and practical reasons in the narrower sense of prudential reasons, and actions may be morally right/wrong as well as prudentially rational/irrational. For instance, Solaika’s action of saving the child is morally right and based on a moral reason (that the toddler was drowning), whereas Iyad’s action of switching on the lamp is prudentially justified and based on a prudential reason, say, the fact that he needed better light for reading. We can set this distinction aside, since in the *Treatise*, Hume conceives of prudence as a virtue – so, a prudent or practically rational action is in that respect virtuous, i.e., morally right (THN 3.3.1.30).

With this out of the way, we turn to Hume’s account of the transition from mental states to action, to be picked out as ‘practical deliberation’ in the following:¹¹

Motivation to act: (prospect of) pain/pleasure from object *o* $\xrightarrow{\text{cause}}$ direct, motivating passion: desire/aversion $\xrightarrow{\text{cause}}$ avoidance/pursuit of *o* (THN 2.3.3.3)

To elaborate, *passions* are impressions, not ideas, and so they do not represent (THN 2.3.3.5). Elsewhere, Hume insists that they do have objects or ends – for instance, benevolence is directed at another person as its object; relatedly, it involves a regard to that person’s interest, which it is the end of benevolence to promote (THN 3.2.1.13, THN 2.2.6.4; see Schafer 2008, 200). *Direct* passions include desire, aversion, grief, joy, hope, and fear, and they arise directly in response to something good or bad, or the prospect of pleasure or pain (THN 2.3.9.2). As the schema indicates, reason or belief are not central for motivating action, on Hume’s view. Belief *is* relevant in cases where the prospect of pleasure or pain leads to desire or aversion, since this is plausibly spelled out as the belief that something might cause pleasure or pain. In this way, belief (and the faculty of reason, which produces belief) has a merely auxiliary role. More broadly, it is needed to determine the existence of relevant objects, and to determine how best to seek out or avoid these objects (THN 2.3.3). Hume’s motivation is that such reasoning processes and the resulting beliefs are not of the right kind to impel action themselves – since, as we might put it, they have a mind-to-world direction of fit (see e.g., Setiya 2004). When Hume speaks of the *motive* of an action, he means the motivating passion in the above schema, not motivating reasons in the sense of considerations in the light of which an agent acts (THN 3.2.1.18, see Cohon 2018a). Typical motives are self-love, ingratitude, resentment, or affection for one’s children (e.g., THN 3.1.1.24, 3.2.1.5, 3.2.1.10). The following example illustrates how pain/pleasure and desires, with support from instrumental beliefs and beliefs about what is painful or pleasurable, cause and thus explain action:

Ask a man *why he uses exercise*; he will answer, *because he desires to keep his health*. If you then enquire, *why he desires health*, he will readily reply, *because sickness is painful*. ... [H]e may also reply, that *it [health] is necessary for the exercise of his calling*. If you ask, *why he is anxious on that head*, he will answer, *because he desires to get money*. If you demand *why?* *It is the instrument of pleasure*, says he. And beyond this it is an absurdity to ask for a reason. (EPM, App. 1.18)

Similarly to the weighing that is involved in theoretical reasoning, practical deliberation involves a balancing process, but here it is passions that are balanced. This holds specifically in cases where different passions provide different impulses, one counteracting the other. For

example, a calm passion, including a “view of the greatest possible good” of the agent may counteract a violent passion, such as the desire to consume heroine now (or *vice versa*). Hume observes that it is typically personal character that determines which passion wins (THN 2.3.3.10). Here is another example: “We surely take into consideration the happiness and misery of others, in weighing the several motives of action, and incline to the former, where no private regards draw us to seek our own promotion of advantage” (EPM 2.39)¹²

So far, my focus has been on practical deliberation and action production. Let’s now turn to what makes an action morally right or wrong – or, in Hume’s terminology, virtuous or vicious. Following Rachel Cohon (2008, Chap. 4), I take it that, on Hume’s view, the properties of being morally right or wrong are secondary qualities, which are instantiated, in the first instance, by a *character trait* due to its being disposed to produce the moral sentiments of moral approbation or disapprobation in an observer (see also Setiya 2004, 381). The moral sentiments are pleasures and pains of a specific kind (THN 3.1.1.26), and they are elicited in the observer when she takes up a general point of view, while the mechanism of sympathy is operative in her, as she contemplates the person’s character.¹³ Sympathy is a principle of human nature with which we are naturally equipped (see THN 3.3.6). In this way, observers are directly sensorily aware of a character trait’s virtuousness or viciousness by way of feeling approbation or disapprobation.

Our character traits give rise to our motivating passions, as when Solaika’s love of children becomes manifest in her occurrent desire to promote the toddler’s interest – in Hume’s terms, her benevolence towards the toddler – which moves her to jump in the pond (see THN 2.2.9.3). We feel approbation or disapprobation of an agent’s *motives* as well. Hume claims that we

consider the natural and usual force of the passions, when we determine concerning vice and virtue; and if the passions depart very much from the common measures on either side, they are always disapprov’d as vicious. A man naturally loves his children better than his nephews, his nephews better than his cousins, his cousins better than strangers, where every thing else is equal. Hence arise our common measures of duty, in preferring the one to the other. Our sense of duty always follows the common and natural course of our passions. (THN 3.2.1.18)

In other words, whether a motive is given proper weight in our balancing the competing passions depends on what is the natural force of this kind of motive, as when my benevolence for

my son outweighs that for my niece. Human observers, employing sympathy from a common point of view, respond to motivating passions with moral approbation or disapprobation, according as they have their proper weight or not. At bottom, it is this sensory response that explains the proper weight of motivating passions and in practical deliberation.¹⁴

Finally, the status of an *action* as morally right (wrong) is due to the virtuous (vicious) motive of the agent, from which she acts (THN 3.2.1.4). To illustrate, Solaika's saving the toddler is morally right because it is motivated by her benevolence. We discern the character trait's virtuousness, manifested by her motivating passion and issuing in her action, by contemplating her character, while relying on sympathy. When we do so, we feel moral approbation towards her, and in this way sense the virtuousness of her character, as well as her action's rightness.

Let me now connect the picture presented with my questions about reasons and reasoning. For Hume, actions result from mental transitions that involve the balancing of different motives. The virtuousness or viciousness of the motives for which the agent acts determines whether her action is right or wrong. This is quite amenable to normative reasons as contributing factors to the all-things-considered normative status of actions, which can motivate the agent to act accordingly. There is one worry, however, about lining up Hume's view with a reasons-centric account: His motives, as passions, are quite different from motivating reasons, understood as considerations in the light of which an agent acts, and from normative reasons, conceived as favoring facts. As noted above, Hume holds that passions have objects (the person they are about) or ends (such as the person's happiness). But that a passion has an object or end is not to say that it has a consideration as its content. So how can the reasons picture get a grip?

In response, note first that in the above quotation from the second *Enquiry* (App. 1.18), Hume's assertion that "beyond this it is an absurdity to ask for a reason" implies that his questions (why the man exercises etc.) ask for *reasons*. If we take Hume literally, the answers to his questions give the man's reasons, such as the fact that sickness is painful or that health is necessary for his job. Plausibly, these reasons are the contents not of the man's passions, but of beliefs of the kind that, according to Hume, are relevant for practical deliberation, beliefs concerned with the prospects of pleasure or pain and instrumental beliefs. Note further that such considerations are associated with respective motivating passions – the prospect of a certain pleasure causes the agent to have a corresponding desire, and the belief that a means is instrumental to pursuing the desired object, together with the relevant desire, causes the agent to desire and pursue the means.¹⁵

My proposed Humean view, then, is that the reasons that are weighed in practical deliberation are the considerations believed that contribute to practical deliberation. Importantly, they are weighed as part and parcel with their associated motivating passions. A (motivating) reason's weight, as well as whether it weighs for or against an action, is determined by the strength and direction of the passion with which it is associated. For instance, Soleika desires to save the toddler, she believes that he will drown, and that to save him, she needs to jump in the pond. On the other hand, she believes that jumping in the pond brings will make her wet, which causes an aversion to jump in the pond. In deliberating, she balances her direct passions – the desire to save the child against the aversion to jump in the pond; and bound up with these, she weighs the associated considerations that are believed – the prospect that the toddler will drown against the prospect of her getting wet. Soleika's desire to save the child outweighs her aversion against getting wet, and so she accords the consideration that the child will drown more weight than the consideration that she will get wet – it is the reason for which she jumps.

The weight of a normative reason can diverge from the motivating weight accorded the reason in an agent's deliberation (just imagine that Soleika lets the child drown to avoid getting wet). Hume spells out the proper weight of a passion by appeal to the weight that it normally or naturally has in humans, and this by appeal to observers' moral approbation or disapprobation regarding the passion with its given weight. This account can be extended to explain the weight of the associated normative reasons, and it can be combined with Hume's claim that it is the moral status of the motive that determines the moral status of the action: If the agent balances her passions properly, and thus accords her reasons the proper weight, she will act for virtuous motives and good reasons, and so her action will be morally right.¹⁶

As in the epistemic domain, skeptical worries can be raised about this proposal. As mentioned, Hume famously denies that reason makes much of a contribution to our motivation to act or to the moral status of action (THN 2.3.3, THN 3.1.1). In light of this, he is often understood as a *skeptic* about reason's – and, by the same token, reasons' or reasoning's – role with respect to the motivation of action or its moral status (e.g., Millgram 2005, Korsgaard 1986): It is not reason (reasons, reasoning) that impels us to act, and what is morally right or wrong is not fixed by what is reasonable or by reasons. If so, it is wrong-headed to try to give his views a reading that sees action as motivated by reasons, and the moral status of action as determined by normative reasons to which the agent responds.

My response to this worry is that the skeptical interpretation of Hume is not obligatory. On one plausible interpretation, his claims about reason are claims about the belief-forming faculty, which he sometimes also calls 'understanding', and not about deliberative processes

generally, or about the role of favoring reasons in determining moral status. On this reading, Hume's claims come down to saying that the faculty involved in motivating agents to act is distinct from the belief-forming faculty, and further that the latter faculty is not involved in determining whether an action is morally right or wrong. Hume can then still allow that we respond to normative reasons – together with the associated passions – in practical deliberation and that moral right or wrong is fixed by the reasons to which we thereby respond (Schafer 2008, 190), albeit always in combination with the relevant passions.

Notice an interesting difference to how Hume escapes skepticism in the epistemic domain, however. There, I proposed that Hume ascribes the positive status of being epistemically justified to beliefs (in part) because they track the truth; thus he should not be read as a skeptic. By contrast, our actions do not acquire their moral status by tracking anything external, and nothing external explains how responding to normative reasons in action makes for their positive normative status. What makes an action right or wrong, and – more fundamentally – our motives and corresponding motivating reasons vicious or virtuous, is whether an observer, in the right conditions, is disposed to respond with approbation or disapprobation to them. This, however, does not detract from the fact that there is a substantial Humean account of normative reasons to act, to which we respond in practical deliberation (ii), and which – hand in hand with the associated motivating passions – determine the normative status of our actions (i).

4. Concluding Remarks

Let me pull the different strands of my interpretation of Hume's views together to show what kind of unity of reasons a Humean picture can provide. In both the epistemic and the practical domains, we find transitions from considerations that are weighed against each other, to relevant responses (viz., beliefs or actions). Such transitions can plausibly be called 'reasoning' or 'deliberation'. Whether a response is epistemically justified or morally right depends on whether the subject balances her reasons the right way, though in the practical domain the weight of a normative reason depends on the correct weight of the associated passion.

There are some further, more Hume-specific commonalities between both domains. Hume's account uniformly relies on what responses are natural to humans, in that they are provided by natural instinct. In theoretical reasoning, we form justified belief about causes or effects or about unobserved objects by custom or habit. And the virtuousness of our passionate responses as well as that of our actions and our character traits depends, in the end, on sympathy, "a very powerful principle in human nature", which is universally shared (THN 3.3.6.1). Hume's appeal to natural instinct is, in both cases, motivated by his doubts about whether a

sophisticated inferential capacity, i.e., reason, is up to important tasks like guiding us reliably to correct belief, motivating us to act, or determining what is morally right or wrong. Correspondingly, Hume defends a kind of sentimentalism in both domains, arguing that belief has a sentimental aspect, which ensures its force and thereby enables its role in guiding action, and claiming that moral judgment is a sensory response to an agent's character or actions.

Where do we stand, then, on the issue of whether a unity of reasons can be found in Hume? Recall that the unity theses were (1) the *unity of normative reasons*, according to which practical and epistemic normative reasons are substantially similar in nature and functioning; (2) the *unity of reasoning*, according to which reasoning processes in practical and epistemic domains have substantial similarities; and (3) the *unity of motivating reasons*: motivating reasons in both domains are substantially similar in nature and functioning. The biggest obstacle to a unifying Humean account is Hume's focus on passions as the motives of action, rather than mental states like belief, that have considerations as their contents, which can plausibly be assimilated to reasons (conceived as facts or considerations). To overcome this obstacle, I suggested a reading of Hume which takes the contents of belief that, for Hume, contribute to practical deliberation as the reasons for which we act, and takes them – when weighed correctly – to determine the moral status of action. The resulting view is still very much Humean, and according to it, both in acting and in believing, we give our responses for (motivating) reasons. If all goes well, we thereby also respond to the normative reasons favoring our responses, which together determine the normative status of our action or belief as justified. This, then, is the kind of unified account of reasons and reasoning we can find in Hume.

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¹ For sure, there are also those who point out substantial differences, such as philosophers denying that epistemic reasons are genuinely normative, or are normative independently of their practical import (Steglich-Petersen

2018, Mantel 2019). But even these philosophers react to a broad agreement that there are strong parallels, and tend to accept unity in some respects (e.g., Mantel 2013).

² That is to say, it can allow that, where my reasons to ϕ and my reasons to ψ have the same weight, I am permitted to ϕ or ψ ; but that where my reasons to believe p and my reasons to believe not- p are balanced, I am not permitted to believe either, but am required to suspend.

³ What I have in mind here is *ex post* justification, as her responses are based on the very reasons that justify them, by way of her reasoning. I will pass over this subtlety in the following.

⁴ Notably, Hume himself seems to allow for unity along these lines:

When a man, at any time, deliberates concerning his own conduct (as, whether he had better, in a particular emergence, assist a brother or a benefactor), he must consider these separate relations, with all the circumstances and situations of the persons, in order to determine the superior duty and obligation; And in order to determine the proportion of lines in any triangle, it is necessary to examine the nature of that figure, and the relation which its several parts bear to each other. But notwithstanding this *appearing similarity* in the two cases, there is, at bottom, an extreme difference between them. A speculative reasoner concerning triangles or circles considers the several known and given relations of the parts of these figures; and thence infers some unknown relation, which is dependent on the former. But in moral deliberations, we must be acquainted, before-hand, with all the objects, and all their relations to each other; and from a comparison of the whole, fix our choice or approbation. No new fact to be ascertained: No new relation to be discovered. (EPM App. 1.11)

The limit of unity that Hume emphasizes here is that theoretical reasoning results in belief, whereas practical deliberation results in the choice of an action.

⁵ Thus, I focus on normative reasons in the role of motivating reasons. I leave to one side the issue of how to think of motivating reasons in *bad* cases, i.e., where subjects are mistaken about the facts and are motivated by/reason from false considerations. This issue does not loom large in Hume's thought.

⁶ Hume mostly says that it is ideas that are believed, but he sometimes says this of propositions as well. Since nothing hangs on this for my question here, I will not explore this issue further, and I will talk about propositions as the contents of belief.

⁷ This pattern presupposes that c and e are established to be cause and effect, by the first inference pattern.

⁸ See also THN 1.3.12; and see Hume on the reasonability of believing in miracle reports at EHU 10.8 as well as his discussion of the argument for design at DNR 2.7.

⁹ I put the point here in terms of the degree of support that belief receives from the proportion of evidence. It is also possible to read Hume as talking about degrees of belief or credences that are supported, depending on the strength of the given evidence. I leave this option to one side here since I want to bring Hume into contact with the current debates on reasons for action and belief, which are standardly framed in terms of outright belief.

¹⁰ For a variety of non-skeptical (and subtly argued) readings of Hume's epistemological views, see De Pierris (2015), Garrett (2007), Qu (2020), and Schmitt (2014).

¹¹ Hume says that agents "deliberate" in coming to act e.g., at EPM (App. 1.11).

¹² The same idea is implicit in the famous passage at THN 2.3.3.6, where Hume compares the interaction of the different forces of motives to "mechanics": Given the right kind of set-up "one pound weight [may] raise up a hundred". See also THN 3.2.2.13, 3.2.2.6.

¹³ This is a very brief and crude summary of Hume's views of the nature of virtue and vice, of sympathy and the common point of view. Note that Hume further connects our moral sentiments of approbation and disapprobation to whether a person's character is useful or agreeable to herself or to society (THN 3.3.1.30). For an overview, see Cohon (2018b).

¹⁴ For a similar view in the current debate (that does away with Hume's response-dependence), see Setiya (2007, 13). An example of weighing prudential against moral motives can be found at THN (3.3.3.3).

¹⁵ This is where Schafer's (2008, 200) insistence that passions have content, at least in the sense of being directed at an object or an end, can help, since this allows passions and associated beliefs to be related by way of their contents.

¹⁶ My proposal partly builds on, but also diverges from other attempts to connect Hume's views to practical reason(s), e.g., those of Schafer (2008), Radcliffe (2021), or Setiya (2004).