

Elizabeth S. Radcliffe. *Hume on the Nature of Morality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022, pp. 71. ISBN 9781108706568. Cloth, \$20.

*Hume on the Nature of Morality* sits within the ‘Cambridge Elements’ book series. As such, it is intended to introduce its topic to students while also presenting an independent thesis that scholars will find interesting. Elizabeth Radcliffe has achieved this aim with aplomb. I think this book will be especially valuable to those students who have some understanding of metaethics but who are relatively new to Hume. Several of the book’s arguments draw on Radcliffe’s earlier works, notably her *Hume, Passion, and Action* (Oxford, 2018). It is to be hoped that some readers will be persuaded to engage with that excellent work too, but if not then they will find plenty to engage with here. Radcliffe argues for a distinctive interpretation of Hume’s moral theory, while also surveying alternative readings, placing Hume’s arguments in their contemporary context, and adverting to his influence on twentieth and twenty-first century philosophers.

The largest part of the book addresses Hume’s metaethics, with a focus on his understanding of moral motivation. Here, as elsewhere, Radcliffe argues that Hume endorses what is now thought of as a strongly Humean view. According to Humeans, no belief can directly push us to action: only desires or desire-like states can do so. Indeed, Radcliffe understands Hume to use the term ‘motive’ to mean simply a passion that provides an impetus to action (7). Humeans also claim, at a minimum, that beliefs and desires are only ever contingently connected. Radcliffe understands Hume to add to this that no belief can ever cause a desire. As she observes, several scholars think that Hume allows for at least some beliefs to cause desires. On her interpretation, however, his thesis of the inertness of reason entails that they cannot.

One of this book's great strengths is its detailed but unobtrusive contextualisation of Hume's arguments and theses. For example, during her discussion of Hume's theory of motivation, Radcliffe argues that virtually none of his contemporaries believed that reason could produce actions without the involvement of passion (11). However, they did believe that reason could *regulate* the passions. Radcliffe argues that Hume wanted to oppose this thesis, by arguing that reason could only oppose a passion if it could cause a conflicting passion, but that no process of reason or belief could ever cause a passion. Here, as elsewhere in the book, Radcliffe's discussion of the wider philosophical context not only supports her interpretation of Hume, but also offers an excellent resource for readers who want to engage more broadly with the philosophical issues that Hume addresses.

In Radcliffe's view, Hume thinks that all desires (or aversions) are caused by previous pleasures (or pains). For example, if I want to eat the apple before me, then this can only be because I have previously enjoyed foods with features that I believe the apple to possess. My previous pleasures will have caused a long-standing desire for foods with such features. This desire will now be 'directed' by my beliefs about the apple such that it becomes a desire *for* the apple (8).

Having argued that Hume is a Humean, Radcliffe addresses the role of sentiment or passion in his theory of moral judgement. Somewhat like Jacqueline Taylor, in *Reflecting Subjects: Passion, Sympathy, and Society in Hume's Philosophy* (Oxford, 2015), Radcliffe distinguishes Hume's *Treatise* account of moral sentiment from that in his later moral *Enquiry*. In the *Treatise*, Radcliffe argues, Hume claims that our moral judgements are founded on both sympathy and our capacity to form general ideas (16–23). In brief, her interpretation is as follows: We initially call a person's character 'virtuous' only if it causes pleasure to that person or to those around her, in such a way that we too are pleased via sympathy. It is from this kind of experience that we derive the general idea of virtue.

However, we sympathise with some people more than with others, and we feel very differently about characters depending on our relations to them. Nevertheless, we all want to converge on similar moral evaluations of characters. For this reason, we learn to apply the concept of virtue more broadly. We learn to call characters ‘virtuous’ even when we feel no pleasure, if we recognise that we *would* feel a sympathetic pleasure if we were differently positioned.

In the *Enquiry*, Radcliffe argues, Hume suggests the simpler thesis that we all share a common sentiment – ‘humanity’ – in virtue of which we share a ‘general concern for other human beings’ (27). We therefore all approve of actions which promote human happiness. Radcliffe suggests that Hume’s treatment of the sentiment of humanity appears to contradict his earlier claim, in the *Treatise*, that we possess no ‘universal affection to mankind’ (T 3.2.1.12). Briefly surveying the arguments of some contemporary psychologists, she argues that a capacity for such a sentiment may indeed be a part of human nature (30). However, she worries that Hume’s claim that humanity is itself virtuous appears meaningless, given his understanding of humanity as the source of moral normativity (28–29).

Radcliffe next turns to Hume’s distinction, at least in the *Treatise*, between the ‘artificial virtues’, which depend upon some human artifice or contrivance, and the ‘natural virtues’, which do not (31). Hume’s paradigm artificial virtue is justice, which can only exist once we have developed conventions regarding the acquisition and distribution of property. Radcliffe offers an admirably clear summary of Hume’s complex discussion of our original motive to be just (31–38). In brief, Hume appears to claim: (1) that it is virtuous to act justly; (2) that our only motive to act justly is our desire to be virtuous, and; (3) that no action can be virtuous unless we possess a motive to perform it other than the desire to be virtuous. Although Hume recognises the apparent contradiction in his argument, it is far from immediately clear how, or whether, he thinks it can be resolved. Radcliffe recommends Don

Garrett's reading of this discussion, such that Hume is arguing that we possess an *artificial* motive to be just ('The First Motive to Justice: Hume's Circle Argument Squared', *Hume Studies* 2007). However, she neatly summarises several other readings too, and she suggests a range of further interpretations for her readers to consider.

Radcliffe offers a similarly fair-minded but decisive treatment of the famous passage, at T 3.1.1.27, in which Hume observes his contemporaries' frequent attempts to move from 'is' propositions to 'ought' propositions. She surveys a range of interpretations of the passage, from Jeremy Bentham's to Annette Baier's, before broadly endorsing that of Nicholas Sturgeon (47). On Radcliffe's interpretation, Hume argues that we could not infer from any description of an action how a moral spectator would feel about that action; at least, not unless we have experienced moral sentiments in similar situations. His point is thus understood to be that our moral judgements fundamentally depend on passions or sentiments.

This naturally raises the question of whether Hume thinks that moral judgements just *are* passions or sentiments, as he sometimes appears to suggest (e.g. T 3.1.2.3). If so, then he denies that moral judgements are beliefs, and so endorses what we now call 'non-cognitivism'. Radcliffe argues otherwise. Somewhat like Garrett, in *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (Oxford, 1997), she thinks that Hume denies only that we could possess moral beliefs without having first experienced moral sentiments. She thinks he allows that, once we have acquired moral ideas, we can and do employ such ideas as moral beliefs (51–53). Radcliffe therefore understands Hume as a cognitivist.

As Radcliffe notes, there is a famous worry about cognitivism that seems highly relevant here (50). As we have seen, she defends the traditional claim that Hume is a Humean about motivation. She also suggests that he holds an 'internalist view about morality' (51). Here, she has in mind something similar to motivational judgement internalism: the thesis that sincerely held moral judgements are necessarily, if defeasibly, motivating. However, as

Michael Smith famously argued, if moral judgements are necessarily motivating, and if Humeanism about motivation is true, then it seems that moral judgements cannot be beliefs (*The Moral Problem*, Blackwell 1994). Therefore, if Hume is both a Humean and an internalist, it seems that he ought also to be a non-cognitivist.

Radcliffe argues otherwise, by denying that Hume sees any moral beliefs as necessarily motivating, or even as capable of producing motivation on their own. This is, of course, a particular application of her general interpretation of Hume's Humeanism. Given this, and given her reading of Hume as a cognitivist, Radcliffe cannot – and does not – take him to endorse internalism as Smith understands it. Indeed, although Radcliffe fully explains what she means by calling Hume an 'internalist', I initially found this argument a little hard to follow, since she and Smith use the term in different ways (56). Smith would, I think, understand Radcliffe's Hume as an externalist. However, Radcliffe is certainly right to stress the very close connection that Hume sees between moral judgement and motivation.

Radcliffe understands Hume to argue that our ideas of character traits cause moral sentiments, which move us to regard those traits as virtues or vices, such that they 'build our normative concepts' (55). For example, by approving of a trait like courage or prudence, we add to our idea of that trait the normative concept of its being a virtue. Therefore, Radcliffe argues, Hume allows that we can have normative beliefs, such as the belief that courage is virtuous. However, he thinks that any moral *motivation* must be provided by a moral sentiment. Radcliffe argues that, since Hume thinks that our moral sentiments both determine the contents of our moral beliefs and provide our moral motivation, he has argued for a connection between moral judgement and motivation that is, he thinks, 'as necessary as human nature gets' (56).

This last point cannot be quite correct, since Hume could claim that moral judgements are *desires*, and so claim that any moral judgement is identical with a motive. However,

Radcliffe rightly notes that Hume understands our moral sentiments as pleasures and pains, not desires. Therefore, although Radcliffe does not address this point, it appears that Hume cannot endorse motivational judgement internalism, even if he *is* a non-cognitivist. Unless he were to *define* the moral sentiments as sentiments that cause certain desires, which he does not, he must allow that it is merely a contingent fact that moral sentiments motivate. Whether Humean moral judgements are sentiments or beliefs, it seems that they can motivate only by either causing or directing our moral desires.

In Radcliffe's view, Hume understands all instances of moral motivation as desires to be dutiful, which occur whenever we lack a 'commonly endorsed, natural motive' of some kind, such as gratitude towards benefactors (60). In such cases, Hume argues, we will want to act *as if* we possessed the relevant motive (T 3.2.1.8). Radcliffe takes this to mean that we will adopt a 'third-person stance' towards ourselves, disapprove of ourselves, and so direct our aversion to being the object of disapproval towards the performance of the kind of action that such motives typically produce (61). Radcliffe also reads Hume to think that we will 'anticipate' the self-approval that we will feel if we acquire the motive, so that we will be motivated to improve our character in the relevant way (51).

This last point leads Radcliffe to move away from Hume's metaethics, and to ask about his normative theory of ethics, if indeed he has one. She argues that, although he does not explicitly set out a normative theory, he implicitly endorses a 'normative ethics of virtue' (60). On Radcliffe's interpretation, Hume thinks we all *ought* to recognise deficiencies in our characters and try to rectify these. Furthermore, he implies that the best way to do this is to surround ourselves with good people, since we will thereby improve our ideas of virtues, which can help us 'engineer' our own self-improvement (61).

Radcliffe thus offers a rich and detailed interpretation of Hume's moral views. She does an impressive job of introducing the core elements of Hume's moral philosophy, noting

his often puzzling and sometimes seemingly conflicting claims, and offering her readers insights into some ways in which they might make sense of these.

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