

PHI 1500: Major Issues in Philosophy

Session 19

November 11th, 2015

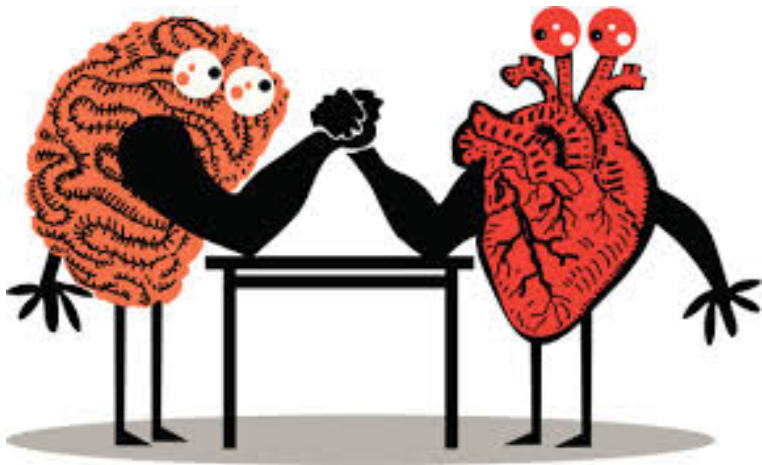


Philosophy of Action: Hume

➤ **Epictetus** (and other **Stoics**) believed that using your **reason** will promote personal well-being & good decision-making.

– Some worries about this approach included:

- there may be some situations in which negative emotions are warranted or necessary for appropriate action
- protecting oneself from negative emotions seems to mean sacrificing strong positive emotions (like loving your family members)
- it might be too focused on individual well-being, to the neglect of the good of one's community.



In contrast to Epictetus, Hume will argue:

- our emotions are always involved in our decision-making & actions
- our emotions help us to make good decisions & do the right actions.

David Hume (1711-1776): Scottish philosopher, historian, and essayist

- Like Locke, Hume was interested in our *ideas*: how we get them, form associations between them, and use our ideas to guide our actions.
 - He defended and expanded upon empiricism, the view that all of our ideas come from experience.
 - He controversially argued that the idea of God makes no sense, because there is no way for us to develop that concept from sensory experience.

“Of the Influencing Motives of the Will” (from *A Treatise of Human Nature*) expresses Hume’s **sentimentalist** outlook on human action:

- that we need to recognize the crucial role our emotions play in guiding our decisions & actions.
 - He challenges the predominant view that people can, and should, obey reason and control/suppress their emotions.





Hume remarks,

- “**Nothing is more usual** in philosophy...
than to talk of the combat of passion and reason,
 - to give the preference to **reason,**
 - and assert that men are only so far virtuous as they conform themselves to its dictates.

Every rational creature, it is said, is **obliged to regulate his actions by reason;**

- and if any other motive or principle challenge the direction of his conduct,
- he ought to oppose it, till it be entirely subdued, or at least brought to a conformity [in agreement with] with that superior principle [i.e., **reason**].” (1)

He surmises that there is no opinion more popular than
“this **supposed pre-eminence of reason above passion.**”

- The eternity, invariableness, and divine origin of [reason] have been displayed to the best advantage:
- The blindness, unconstancy, and deceitfulness of [passion] have been as strongly insisted on.” (1)

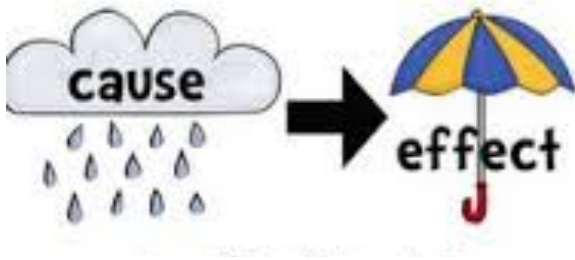
➤ **Hume’s goal is “to show the *fallacy* of all this philosophy”.**

Hume's first objective is to show that

➤ **“reason alone can *never* be a motive to any action of the will.”**

He distinguishes **two forms of reasoning**:

- » one which “regards the *abstract relations* of our ideas”,
 - e.g., the relation between *religion & morality*
- » one which regards “those *relations of objects, of which experience only gives us information*”, (1)
 - especially the relation of cause & effect.



- Hume believes that we can only learn which causes lead to which effects through repeated observation:
- From the ‘constant conjunction’ of two events in sequence, we infer that the first caused the second.

He first observes that “...the first species of reasoning [i.e., **abstract reasoning**] **alone is [never] 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*,
 - » demonstration & volition [reasoning & acting] seem... to be totally removed from each other.” (1)

For example,

- **math & logic** are types of abstract reasoning, which are useful **“in almost every art and profession:**
 - **But it is not of themselves they have any influence” on our actions.**



Hume gives an example of a merchant who adds up the his total income from exchanges with a particular client.

» This sum is *just a number*.

- It is only *meaningful* to him if he also has an idea of how that sum *could be used to satisfy his wants and needs*,
 - i.e., if he understands what *effects* he could bring about from spending or investing those earnings.
- Abstract or demonstrative reasoning, therefore, never influences any of our actions,
 - but *only...directs our judgment concerning causes and effects...*”

Hume thinks **abstract reasoning cannot produce *behavior*,**

➤ ***except by informing our practical, cause-and-effect reasoning*** about how to get what we want / avoid what we don't want.

“It is obvious, that *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.”*



- **I form a *desire for* what I expect will bring me *pleasure* (caffeine),**
- **and an *aversion to* what I expect will bring me *pain* (decaf).**

- It is also obvious, that this emotion [of desire/aversion leads us to consider] whatever objects are connected with its original one by the *relation of cause and effect.*”

- Once we know what we want, our **desire motivates us to figure out what actions will result in getting what we want.**

- » “Here then **reasoning takes place to discover this relation;**
- » and **according as our reasoning varies, our actions receive a subsequent variation.”**

- E.g., if I desire caffeine *immediately*, my reason says I should get coffee from the Barnes & Noble downstairs.
- If I desire *especially good* coffee, my reason says I should walk a little further to get Gregory’s Coffee. 7

**BARNES
& NOBLE**



Hume's point is that

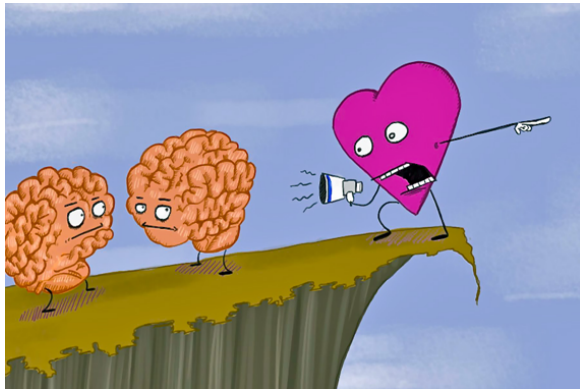
- We need reason to figure out *how* to attain what we desire,
 - but reason alone cannot *motivate* us to act accordingly.



– As he puts it,

» **the impulse [to act in order to get what we want] arises not from reason, but is *only directed by it.***" (1)

- "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;
 - ...as [practical] reason is nothing but the discovery of this connection [of cause & effect],
 - it cannot be by its means [alone] that the objects are able to affect us." (1-2)

Hume's claim is that using **reason** is *necessary*, but *not sufficient* for action.

➤ **One also needs *passion* to motivate one's actions.**

- Reason is like Google Maps: it gives directions, but doesn't make you go.
- Passion is like the engine in the car or train you take to follow the directions.

Hume's second aim is to show that

➤ **reason “can never oppose passion in the direction of the will.”**

He thinks we are ***mistaken*** when we talk of
“*the combat of passion and of reason*”.

- “Since reason alone can never produce any action...
 - I infer that the same faculty is as incapable of preventing volition [action in accordance with our desires],
 - or of disputing the preference with any passion or emotion.” (2)
 - Hume reasons that **if reason cannot by itself motivate us to act,**
 - **it also cannot counteract our emotions to prevent us from acting.**
 - At best, reasoning might lead us to choose a different course of action, but couldn't cancel out the influence of our emotions.
- So, Hume believes that **emotions are essential to enabling our actions,** while our reason serves a *supporting* role:

***“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.”*** (2)

Since Hume thinks emotions & reason aren't really opposed to one another,

➤ he wants to clarify what we mean when we call emotions 'irrational' or 'unreasonable'.

– “...passions can be contrary to reason only so far as they are accompanied with some judgment or opinion.

• According to this principle,...it is **only in two senses, that any affection can be called unreasonable.**



– *First, when a passion, such as hope or fear, grief or joy, ...is founded on the supposition or the existence of objects, which really **do not exist.***”

» e.g., it is unreasonable to be excited about Santa Claus or to be afraid of vampires, since neither of those things exist.

– “*Secondly, when in exerting any passion in action, we choose means insufficient for the designed end [goal], and deceive ourselves in our judgment of causes & effects.*” (2)

» e.g., it is unreasonable to expect to satisfy a desire for coffee by going to Chipotle, since you know they don't sell coffee.



No matter how absurd,

- **“Where a passion is neither founded on false suppositions, nor chooses means insufficient for the end,**
- **the understanding can neither justify nor condemn it.”** (2)
 - ... since there is no other way for an emotion to be ‘unreasonable’.

This claim leads to some **surprising conclusions:**

- ***“It is not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger.”***
 - This isn’t to say that this is a *good* way of thinking
 - but just that it’s not unreasonable.
- *“It is not contrary to reason for me to choose my total ruin, to prevent the least uneasiness of [a] person wholly unknown to me.*
- *It is as little contrary to reason to prefer even my own acknowledged lesser good to my greater, and have a more ardent affection for the former than the latter.*
 - A trivial good may, from certain circumstances, produce a desire superior to what arises from the greatest and most valuable enjoyment...” (2)



Hume explains that it is **wrong to treat reason & emotion as *mutually exclusive* influences on our behavior.**

- “The **common error** . . . has lain in **ascribing the direction of the will entirely to one of these principles, and supposing the other to have no influence.**

➤ In general we may observe, that ***both these principles operate on the will;***
• and where they are contrary, that either of them prevails,
according to the general character or present disposition of the person.”

- E.g., some people are prone to act against their reasoning;
- others are prone to suppress or overrule their emotions using thought.

- “What we call *strength of mind*” is not the exclusive use of reason, but rather “implies the *prevalence of the calm passions above the violent*;

- though we may easily observe, there is no man so constantly possessed of this virtue, as never on any occasion to yield to the solicitations of passion and desire.

- From these *variations of temper* proceeds the great difficulty of deciding concerning the actions and resolutions of men, where there is any contrariety of motives and passions.” (3-4)



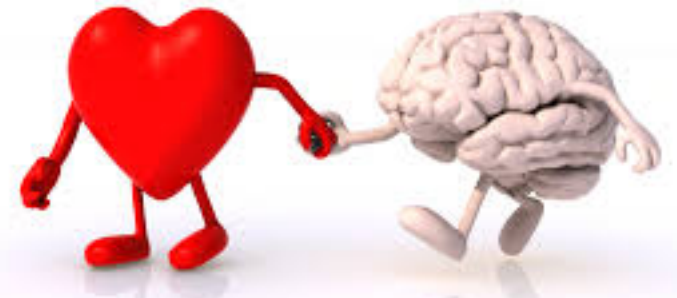
To summarize Hume's view:



- Reason and emotion are both necessary to guide our actions,
 - but emotion takes the *primary role* by motivating our actions,
 - while reason plays a *supplementary role* by directing our course of action (“reason is...the slave of the passions”)
 - This challenges the dominant view that reason should always rule over our emotions and keep them in check.

- Reason and emotion are not opposed to one another.

- They play different roles for us,
- and there's no need to prioritize one over the other at all times and in all contexts.



Recent research in psychology & neuroscience has supported Hume's claim that we cannot act on reason alone, but instead need emotions to motivate us.

➤ **Emotions help us to assess our environment and respond to it appropriately.**

- E.g., the sight of a spider may trigger *fear*,
 - which causes us to move away to avoid a poisonous bite.
- Someone cutting you in line may trigger *anger*,
 - which can cause you to confront them for acting selfishly.
- The smell of a newborn baby's head may trigger its mother's *affection*,
 - which contributes to the mother's interest in protecting it from harm.



➤ **People who are unable to feel emotions, or to form memories of how something made them feel, are *impaired* in effective decision-making & action.**

Joachim Krueger explains (bit.ly/1GWaFVk):

- **“A few years ago, neurologist Antonio Damasio and his colleagues showed how *negative emotions can improve decisions involving risk.***
- They devised a *gambling task*, in which players repeatedly selected cards from four decks. With each draw, they either gained or lost money.



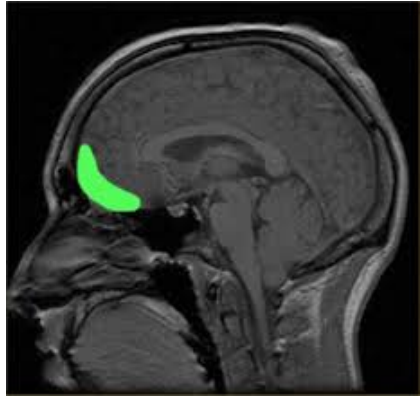
- Two of the decks were safe and advantageous; choosing them consistently would gradually accrue money over the course of the task.
- The other two decks were riskier. Although the winning cards were worth more than the winning cards from the safe decks, the losing cards were so damaging that, if chosen repeatedly, the risky decks would eventually bankrupt the player.
 - The best strategy was to consistently choose from the safe decks.

- Damasio and colleagues found that participants were initially attracted to the risky decks because of their large positive payoffs.
 - However, players soon retreated to the safer decks where they fared better in the long run.” (1)

➤ **Participants were able to accurately determine that the risky decks were dangerous, and changed their behavior accordingly.**

» ***How did they do it?***

- “How did they figure out that playing it safe was better?”
 - The answer came from a group of *neurological patients with damage to a brain region* associated with emotional sensitivity to reward & punishment (i.e, the *orbitofrontal cortex*).



- Though these patients' **cognitive reasoning was unimpaired**,
 - they **could not experience the negative emotions that normally accompany large losses.**
- Like the unimpaired participants, these patients were initially attracted to the riskier decks,
 - ***but because they failed to respond emotionally to large losses, they never learned to avoid the risky gambles.***



- Damasio has found that patients with this condition,
 - which prevents them from experiencing emotional responses to the prospects of gains & losses,
- ...are also deeply impaired in their ability to make quick, effective decisions.
 - **video:** bit.ly/1HGDNL2

The lesson from the neurological patients seems to be that

➤ **we need emotional cues to make good decisions,**

- because emotional cues indicate what is *important* to us,
 - and which of our options we *prefer*.
- Without emotional cues, we have no impetus to select any option over another,
 - even if we have thoroughly reasoned through all our options.

➤ *Think about how hard it can be make a trivial decision when you can choose between so many options:*

- psychologists call this *paradox of choice*.

➤ This supports Hume's claim that emotions & reason cooperate to produce our actions.





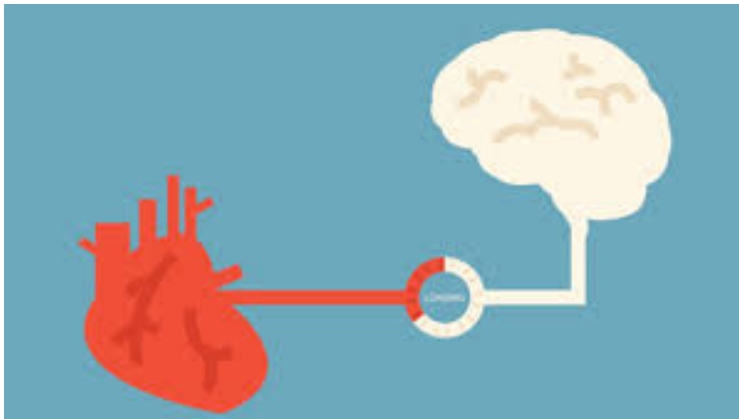
However, **some psychologists side more closely with Epictetus' view,**

➤ and use Stoic ideas as the foundation of a form of psychotherapy called ***cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)***.

– CBT is based on the idea that *our feelings are dependent on the perspective we form about things.*

• This explains why people sometimes get stuck feeling depressed or anxious long after the cause of those feelings has gone away:

– as long as people think about the thing negatively, it continues to impact their emotions.



» **So, perhaps there is merit to both Epictetus' and Hume's views.**