

1-1-2011

## Reason, Faith, And Meaning

Charles Taylor

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

---

### Recommended Citation

Taylor, Charles (2011) "Reason, Faith, And Meaning," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 28 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol28/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

# REASON, FAITH, AND MEANING

Charles Taylor

There are two connected illusions which have become very common today. The first consists in marking a very sharp distinction between reason and faith—even to the point of defining faith as believing without good reason! The second is to take as a model of rationality what we might call “disengaged” reason. One illusion exaggerates the capacities of “reason alone” (allusion to Kant intended); the second sees reason as essentially “dispassionate.” Moreover, the two are closely linked. This paper argues against both, while exploring the link.

## 1

There are two connected illusions, it seems to me, which have become very common today. The first consists in marking a very sharp distinction between reason and faith—even to the point of defining faith as believing without good reason! The second is to take as a model what I want to call “disengaged” reason. And these two are tightly linked.

To start with the first, since the Enlightenment, a notion has been developed of “reason alone” (I’m taking this from the title of Kant’s book, *Religion within the limits of Reason Alone*). By that was meant, reason no longer augmented (or disturbed) by Revelation. It was in that way explicitly contrasted to reasoning which operates along with, or on the basis of, Revelation.

Obviously, the proposal to dispense with Revelation was something new, but there was still an important continuity with earlier understandings. For the Scholastic tradition, reason was capable of establishing important truths on its own. It could demonstrate the rational nature of human beings, and the ethic which should follow from this. It could even establish the existence of a Creator. But it needed Revelation to take us farther, for instance to bring us the insight that this Creator was the Triune God of the Bible.

What seems agreed between pre- and post-Enlightenment positions is that Reason and Revelation can be clearly distinguished as distinct sources of truth. Many post-Enlightenment thinkers took over this conception of the two sources, and simply discarded or denied one of them.

But I would like to argue that the vicissitudes of the appeal to “reason alone” force us to depart more radically from this tradition. For a whole host of important purposes, “reason” is not the name of a reliable source



offering univocal and reliable answers; and “Revelation” itself is a category by which we try, rationally, to make sense of the truths we discern.

I have just said that “reason” doesn’t offer univocal and reliable answers in a number of domains. But there are some in which it seems to come very close to this. Let’s look at these, because they provide the basis on which the belief in “reason alone” has been grounded. (A) Reason gets pretty close to univocal validity when it comes to the kind of reasoning whose rules are codified in formal logic and mathematics. And we might see (B) the discovery of reliable truth in natural science as a fruit of reason. Being rational here involves applying a correct method; we painstakingly validate our observations; and then we infer from them to the best explanation.

But while the Vienna positivists in their heyday may have thought that this suffices to generate valid scientific theories, the reflections of philosophers of science like Canguilhem and Thomas Kuhn have shown us that we need more. Good explanation—and then the further rational discovery which this enables—depends on (C) an adequate conceptualization. Our explanations can improve radically with a shift in what Kuhn called our “paradigms.” As well as painstaking observation (1), and explanatory inferences (2), we need the exercise of (3) the theoretical imagination which enables us to reframe our questions. Sometimes our grasp of some domain remains very incomplete, and full of unexplained anomalies, until we transform our understanding of the crucial questions through a paradigm shift.

One famous example can suffice to illustrate this. Post-Galilean mechanics arose through shifting the crucial question. According to the Aristotelian mechanics which had dominated for centuries, in order to explain the continued motion of a projectile after it has left the hand (or the cannon mouth), one had to find some agency which went on propelling it. All motion required a motor force contemporary with it. The crucial question was: what causes continuing movement? Various candidates were proposed which all proved unsatisfactory. Continued motion remained an anomaly. The adoption of the inertial perspective changed the question; now it was: what causes changes in velocity? At once it became possible to make sense of the whole domain of imparted motion. The anomalies were explained and thus overcome.

Reason in this domain of natural science must include this third dimension, a creative recasting of the problem, which can’t be “delivered” through a reliable pre-existing method. It requires something in the nature of insight, which can be validated, but only afterwards, through the overcoming of anomalies. Now in the domain of natural science, this doesn’t seem to exclude our arriving at solid and agreed conclusions. Because even if the new insights can’t be generated at will, and we may labour a long time before someone hits on them, we can generally agree which paradigm shifts have been valid. These impose themselves because they resolve the anomalies which earlier theories generated, without creating equally difficult ones in their place. This kind of progress can thus be credited to “reason alone.”

We should note, however, that this happy result is only possible through a stringent form of self-restriction; “scientific” language in the meaning of the act must be purged of all reference to its significance for us; it must be used to make “literal” claims, in a sense which excludes metaphor, except those which can be “cashed out” quite “literally.” It is a special “insulated” form of expression.<sup>1</sup>

But when we come to those issues in which the explanation and evaluation of human life is at issue; when we come, for instance, to ethics, political theory, social science, history, literature, philosophy, aesthetics, and the like, we are in a very different predicament. “Insulated” language is no longer adequate. New creations of our theoretical imagination (we might call this our “moral-anthropological imagination”) are not lacking. But we find it very difficult to arrive at the kind of universal consensus which we at least approach in natural science. On the contrary, people of different cultures, different ethical outlooks, different aesthetic and moral intuitions, adopt very different paradigms for their accounts of human action and the nature of our moral life; and they cannot easily convince each other, or converge on a favoured view, except in certain milieux and often for a limited time.

Faced with this disagreement, some conclude to relativism, and claim that there is no fact of the matter. Human nature is shaped by the interpretations we offer of it, and there is no given basis on which we must eventually converge. I haven’t got the space to argue this here, but this inference doesn’t convince me. We don’t need to assume that there is no fact of the matter. Continued disagreement springs rather from this profound connection between the explanatory paradigms we find convincing in explaining human life, on one hand, and our moral and aesthetic, or spiritual sensibility, on the other. It is very often extremely difficult even to understand each other when we are arguing over a significant gap in spiritual outlook, and actually changing someone’s mind may involve a thoroughgoing re-orientation of his/her spiritual life, and not simply a punctual shift in a particular opinion which leaves the rest of his/her being unchanged.

An example may help clarify this. Take a widespread paradigm (alas) in social science today, that based on rational choice theory. The affinity with the ethical theory we call utilitarianism is fairly evident, and both share a faith in a kind of transparent rational grasp of our motivations and moral predicament, which others (myself included) believe is bought at the expense of a considerable distortion of human experience. The attraction of the explanatory account is obviously linked to the attraction of this construal of the human moral predicament, and both express the powerful draw of a certain notion of rationality. You need a big change in your stance towards the world to get out of this pervasive construal.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>See Nicholas Lash, *Theology for Pilgrims* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 30–33.

<sup>2</sup>This wide gap in the understanding of what is at stake can be seen in the public arguments which have been sparked by Angry Atheists. The God denounced by Dawkins, Hitchens, etc. doesn’t seem to bear a close relation to the God of Abraham that Christians, Jews, etc. worship.

So I would like to claim that there is a truth of the matter underlying this kind of dispute; I would like also to say that we can reason about it; for instance we can debate which view really makes sense of human action, and put rational choice theory under severe strain when it is confronted with certain human actions in history. We can also show a rational path from one to another moral construal, by demonstrating how the better account can free us to take account of important things which the inferior one was blocking out.<sup>3</sup>

But I can't argue this here.<sup>4</sup> I would like rather to say what this means for our understanding of reason. What this means is that our reasoning always involves a third dimension, beyond accurate observation and reliable inference, namely what I called "theoretical imagination" in connection with natural science, and what we could call the "moral-anthropological imagination" in relation to human affairs. Reason has, in other words, a creative component; it can and must generate new ways of conceiving the reality it is trying to understand. How do we generate these? There is no standard answer, no sure method, but in general we can say that we do so by articulating what start as barely definable hunches, or inchoate insights. These unformed insights draw us strongly; we are willing to engage our attention very deeply in them. We have an as yet unfounded and nonetheless powerful anticipatory confidence in them; we might even speak of this as a kind of faith.

*Fides quaerens intellectum*: it may seem shocking to invoke this formula in a discussion of scientific paradigms. But I believe that there is a distant but discernible analogy with the theological. There is, in other words, a similarity of structure which can be discerned in all uses of the imagination which leap ahead of and set the path for more certain knowledge. Of course, this structure is visible in an impoverished mode in the scientific "hunch." The impoverishment resides in the fact that the act of faith is not in the general case in God, in the love and fidelity of one (a Being? but God is not really a Being) who is capable of these. And correspondingly, our faith emerges from and is nourished by our whole sense of what is of ultimate importance in life, whereas the scientific hunch relates to a much more circumscribed area. Thus one can say that the faith in God which seeks intellectual expression defines a direction for the intellect only because and to the extent that this faith gives a direction to our whole being. But nevertheless a loose analogy holds. The dawning sense of a new paradigm leaps ahead of what we know, and defines the direction of further enquiry which aims to clarify what draws us to it.

---

<sup>3</sup>I have argued this point at greater length in "Explanation and Practical Reason," in *Philosophical Arguments* (Harvard University Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup>In fact one recurring theme of the "adventures" of reason since the Enlightenment has been the flip-over whereby the exaggerated hopes for certain knowledge reposed in one or another method generate a far-reaching skepticism or relativism once it becomes clear that they cannot be met. This theme deserved much fuller treatment than I can give it here.

This richer notion of reason has often been neglected or forgotten in recent Centuries, but it returns us to Plato. His “logos,” which we translate “reason,” involves the articulation in words of insight, whose full nature can nevertheless not be fully communicated in words. Reason cannot be simply reduced to explicit reasoning, the methodical rational operations which we carry out on our already articulated insights.

It was Descartes among others who caused us to lose this broader understanding of reason. Descartes held that reasoning could be from start to finish guided tightly by a defined method. He had no place for the notion that reasoning relies on articulations, which then only justify themselves, if they ever do so, post factum, by the sense they manage to make of the reality under study. These articulations transform our understanding. So much so, that even the kind of sense we end up making may be undreamt of before the articulation is made.<sup>5</sup>

The path through reason to truth inevitably involves a phase of near-blind groping which only later may be ratified in the clarity of the sense-making that ensues. There are two facets to this ratification. The first comes from the clarity of the sense we make, which each one of us may experience for ourselves. The second comes from the general agreement of all those engaged in reasoning, that we have really made sense of things. Because reasoning is something we don’t only do alone, but which also inescapably involves dialogical collaboration and exchange, these two facets can never be wholly separated from each other. Descartes not only neglected this interplay of groping and ratification, but he supposed the ratification as self-authenticating in the certainty of clarity and distinctness. The dialogical dimension dropped from sight altogether.

Of course, this two-step understanding of reason, moving from articulation to ratification, gives just the most general, abstract form of its progress. This notion has to be augmented and enriched as soon as we think of reasoning as situated in a tradition. I will return to this below.

But for the moment, we should ask: What does this understanding of reasoning do to the post-Enlightenment notion of “reason alone”? In fact, it makes it very problematic to say the least. If reason alone is defined in opposition to faith, then it threatens to collapse as a category when we see the role that faith in our inchoate insights must play. If it is opposed to revelation, then the problem is that “revelation” is a category which we come to articulate in order to make sense of our most fundamental insights. It is itself the fruit of reason-as-articulation.

Maybe we can salvage a category of reason alone as what is operative in certain everyday reasonings as well as in natural science (the categories that Vienna positivists were willing to declare as free from metaphysics). We can say that once the inchoate insight has been articulated in a new paradigm, and once this paradigm shift is ratified through the sense

---

<sup>5</sup>The importance of such articulations is central to Gadamer’s critique of the omnicompetence of “method.” See his *Truth and Method* (New York, 1975).

it enables us to make of things, the element of faith is transcended. But for this very reason, the category can't apply to that whole domain which I outlined above where the anthropological-moral imagination is ever-active. On the contrary, in this domain ratification is never clear without zones of puzzlement and obscurity, and in the dialogical dimension it never comes close to generalized assent.

## 2

So we begin to see how the too simple separation of reason and faith comes unstuck. It does, indeed, seem to hold in certain domains, for instance, in mathematics and natural science. But once we step beyond these, it breaks down.

Now this begins to make clear the connection of this first error with the second, the belief that reason must be disengaged. The domains in which reason can easily seem to dispense with faith are the privileged fields of disengaged reason. By that I mean a reasoning which in no way draws insight from the significances things have for us as embodied, social beings, who mark moral or aesthetic distinctions in things and actions. This prescind from life meanings was the essential founding step of modern post-Galilean, Post-Baconian natural science. This natural science can be convincing to everyone, regardless of culture, because its explanations recur to factors which are not defined by their meanings for us, but simply by their efficient-causal relations. Descartes for his part defines clear and distinct perception as a disembodied grasp of things, where our normal grasp of them as embodied beings counts as obscure and confused. Our seeing the colour in the object, our sensing the pain in the tooth, these are obscure and confused; to objectify the process, and to see the pain as arising from some pathology in the tooth is to see things clearly.<sup>6</sup>

Now it is true that even in these domains, our hunches are often given force by their elegance and simplicity, and mathematicians' intuitions can be drawn to what they see as beautiful forms. But the objects studied in each case have to be defined without reference to these meanings.

When, however, we come to the domains I mentioned above, including ethics, history, social science, literature, this kind of disengagement is impossible. How do we come to understand the emotions and reactions, the sense of beauty and the good, whether of another person, or of a strange society, without drawing on our own reactions? This may sound strange, because precisely in the case of cultures very different from ours, the easiest and most damaging mistake will often be to see them as operating out of the same gamut of possible emotions and reactions as we do. This will often make them come out as espousing the worse rather than the better, as being rude rather than refined, as addicted to pleasure rather than disciplined, as pagans worshipping the devil rather than revering the

---

<sup>6</sup>See *Meditations* III, in *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (A&T) (Paris: Vrin, 1973), vol IX-1, p. 34; and also *Principles* I.68 in A&T IX-2, p. 56.

true God, etc. And it is almost always the case that these too ethnocentric perceptions are misreadings, and we have to come somehow to see these other cultures in their difference.

But precisely, this can't be done simply by setting aside our own reactions, and studying this alien group "dispassionately." We can't just neutralize our expectations, because that doesn't help us understand. To observe these people outside of any frame of human meaning is to see them as another animal species, opaque and enigmatic. True, our expectations make their behavior puzzling, and we have to get far enough to see that these expectations are wrong. But the only way beyond them is to go deeper into the puzzlement they awaken in us, to live in and analyze this until a liberating insight comes into where the differences lie. This kind of science can only be done while one "inhabits" the meanings things have for us, rather than by disengaging from them.

We come to a similar conclusion when we look at what it is to make headway in ethical or spiritual insight. We ask ourselves what is really important in human life, for instance. Or we ask ourselves whether our spiritual life shouldn't take a new direction. We can explore this kind of question only through our own sense of what is important, or where spiritual growth lies. Again, this sounds paradoxical, because we want precisely to *grow* when we ask these questions. So surely we need to set aside our present intuitions? And in one sense, this is true, but in another important sense, not.

We may indeed ask other people to guide us, or read books to get other points of view, but what we are trying to do here is to educate our sense of what is really important; we are not simply bracketing it and studying the question dispassionately. And indeed, what will help convince us that we are making headway is a changed insight into what is important, but this is also something that we feel. Such insights are not in the nature of things purely dispassionate. When we might want to use this term, it is because we sense that it is taking us beyond some passions, those for instance of narcissistic ego-satisfaction, not that we are coming to a pure, emotion-free perception of the meanings of things.

Such moments do exist—when we have a fleeting insight, for instance, that we are living on a much lower plane than we need to. But these are exceptional moments. Normally, our sense that X is important ethically is inseparable from our feeling its importance, from admiring those who follow it, for instance; or being inspired by it; or feeling relieved and grateful that this exists as a human possibility.

In other words, the perception of significance, of human meanings, can't be detached from the experiencing of these meanings, an experience which can only be rarely and fleetingly indifferent. We grasp these meanings through our partiality to them. To such a point that we can often say, with Plato, that one hasn't really understood the good unless one is drawn to it; unless one loves it—though one may be driven, and also drawn to incompatible ends.



This is what the disciples at Emmaus knew, when they said to themselves “did not our hearts burn within us?” (Luke 24:32). They meant: we ought to have known. Our hearts were recognizing the truth, even while we were resisting it.

But again, this sounds paradoxical. Does this mean that we ultimately judge by brute reaction? We feel this is good, so we judge it good? Does reason have no further role here? On the contrary. Just as in the case where we are trying to understand people very different from us, there can be reasons to mistrust our reactions. Maybe some of the things we are induced to do by our present ethical sense shock us or others in some way. Maybe we have reason to think that our reactions are coming out of something extraneous in us, that has no reason to be linked with a correct perception of *this* good. Thus my satisfaction with my reaction to some challenge may come not from a real perception of its rightness, but from a more narcissistic fulfilment: that I like the image of myself responding, giving the stinging rebuke to wrong-doing, for instance, or standing up with integrity. We can come to liberate ourselves from these irrelevant reactions, and the truer perception of what’s important that thereby emerges is all the more convincing, because it comes out of such an error-reducing move.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, just having the feeling that X is important doesn’t resolve the issue. Questions, puzzlement may remain; and they may be raised by others. This hunch can’t be fully ratified as long as these questions remain, and others disagree. The process of reasoning goes on. And this process involves the two phases of reasoning we identified above. Partly, it involves a re-articulation of our original insight: for instance, to distinguish what in it is really valid from what comes from narcissistic satisfaction. And articulation of inchoate insights is the first phase of reason. And we re-articulate in order to resolve anomalies and contradictions, which is the second phase: the good insight seems to have bad fruits, or our feelings of self-satisfaction are uncomfortably strong.

But without a perception which proceeds through a *feeling* of importance, there is no insight at all; neither the first off one which must face objections, nor an eventually more satisfactory one which has answered these. The whole process cannot go forward in disengaged mode.

The process of rational critique that I have just been describing is central to moral development. Moral growth involves, among other things, a change in our emotional reactions to people, acts, predicaments, making these reactions more accurate and insightful. But this doesn’t mean that the standards which we aim at in this process are—or even could be—set by an utterly disengaged form of rationality, such as might suffice to calculate utility consequences, or to check if a maxim could be coherently applied universally. The temptation to resort to such abstracted forms arises from the mistaken belief that our sentiments are brute, non-cognitive,

---

<sup>7</sup>I have talked about this kind of reasoning through transitions in “Explanation and Practical Reason”; see note 3.

uninformed by insight, whether accurate or not. I will take up this error in the next section.

Needless to say, the process of surmounting anomalies is never finished. I remember going to see the film *Cabaret*, made on the basis of Christopher Isherwood's novel of late-Weimar Berlin. At one moment, a young man in uniform stands in the street and sings a song, "Tomorrow Belongs to Me." To my horror, I felt my feelings being recruited, by the music, the singer's youth, his wonderful confidence. Am I becoming a Nazi? Well, no, but it was an uncomfortable reminder: of lots of things, including how easily we respond to certain appeals towards a beautiful future. And I also reflect: I will not be a Nazi, because I have 20/20 hindsight where that leads. But what if I had been a young German in Berlin in 1932?

All of the above shows the crucial link of reason with the "passions": let this term stand here for our perception of life meanings through feeling—through the way that these meanings *move* us. Not seeing this is a fruit of making the disengaged uses of reason the only ones that deserve the name. So our two errors connect: the separation of reason and faith, and the separation of reason from the passions which are inseparable from the perceptions of certain meanings. There are certain domains where both separations (more or less) work; and others where they are both crippling. And we can see what distinguishes the two kinds.

### 3

Ideally, I would like to trace the origins of these connected errors: that of "reason alone," and that of a necessarily "dispassionate" reason. But unfortunately, there isn't space for this massive task here. I will just be able to take up the latter here, and relatively briefly, because the error is (perhaps) easier to see through.

A widespread mistake in modern philosophy is to lose sight of the distinction between an emotion and what might be called a sensation or a "raw feel." An emotion, like fear or despondency, joy or hopefulness, involves a perception. The emotion is a response to its "intentional object," and as such essentially involves a "take" on this object. I fear some impending disaster, or I am despondent at some disappointing outcome which has already befallen. The emotion is an apprehension of the object, threatening or actually present, but in the register of feeling.

This contrasts with what I'm calling a sensation, like pain, or a tingling in my foot, or the pleasurable feeling of entering a warm bath after trekking through deep snow. Of course, you also perceive the bath, and perhaps the cut which causes the pain, but these two are distinct. The sensation can be exactly this feeling, an acute pain in my hand, for instance, even if one has no idea what causes it. One rushes to a doctor to find out.

One of the distortions introduced by the modern objectified philosophical anthropology was to split emotion from its constituent perception, and thus assimilate it to sensation. On this view, the fact that a given emotion attends a certain kind of event—despondency in face of a disaster, for

instance—can be judged neither appropriate or inappropriate; it is just a brute fact about us, like that fact that pain attends some kinds of changes in our bodies, and not others, or that some substances cause nausea and not others. The relation between event and affect is purely causal, and as such contingent.

Thus Hume will argue, in one of the most fatefully influential passages of his philosophy, that our moral sentiments are not ultimately grounded in reason. It is just a brute fact about us that we respond with approbation to what conduces to utility, ours or that of others. He is making a clear rupture with the ethical tradition of the ancients, which saw the good as an object of rational perception, an object which cannot be rightly perceived without being loved.

On this view, the rational perception of reality is by its very nature independent of our emotional reaction. It can proceed quite dispassionately. Passion can disturb us, if it is too strong, or too subtly seductive of our reasoning powers, but it cannot help.

But surely this mistrust of passion is not itself a modern error. Does it not go back to the ancients, who in general did understand our emotions correctly as perceptions in the register of feeling? Yes, but the mistrust of passion didn't involve a declaration of independence from all emotion. Take the Stoics, for instance. They did declare all passions as illusions. But they saw that these passions claimed the status of perceptions, that is, that they involved "opinions" (*doxai*) about their objects. To fear something was to see it as noxious. But the opinions intrinsic to the passions were all false. We had to liberate ourselves from these erroneous views, and hence of the passions which they animated.

But this didn't mean that our perception of the true order of things was utterly without affect. On the contrary, the correct grasp of things was accompanied by joy (*chara*). In a similar way, the correct grasp of the Good for Plato must move us to love it.

So the venerable doctrine that true rational understanding was "dispassionate" didn't amount to the modern view that it was affect-free. This is not to say that we will necessarily agree with the different traditional ways in which "passion" has been defined and distinguished from the affect inherent in the perception of truth. We couldn't, of course, agree with *all* of them, but we might well disagree with them all, and still not fall into the crucial error of the moderns, which is to fail to see the intrinsic epistemic content of emotion.

I invoked Hume above as the originator of the view that our moral opinions are grounded ultimately in brute reactions. Now there are many readings of Hume, and John Milbank has recently proposed another.<sup>8</sup> The one I am espousing here is the one which has made Hume a founding

---

<sup>8</sup>Milbank's essay, "Hume *versus* Kant: Faith, Reasoning and Feeling," was given at the "Faith, Rationality and the Passions" conference at which this paper was delivered. It is to be published in the April 2011 issue of *Modern Theology*.

thinker of modern naturalism. I'd like to spell out a bit more what this reading involves.

The dominant tradition from the ancients sees ethical meanings as discernible by reason. Some modes of action, together with the motives inherent in them, are objectively higher; they are the object of a strong evaluation. Examples are: Aristotle's *theôria*, or else the citizen life, where you exercise and perfect your *phronésis*. You are actuated by love of truth, desire to know (*theôria*), or you seek honour, but also the common good. But another example is the Christian vision of a life actuated by *agape*. Or think of modern notions of career: aspiring to be a composer, writer, artist. These higher modes of being can also be described in terms of virtues. To have virtue is to be spontaneously disposed to act in the highest way from the highest motives.

On this model, reason can discern the order of higher and lower activities. This is quite understandable with Aristotle and Plato, where reason is precisely the faculty which can discern orders in things.

It follows that there is such a thing as getting it wrong. You fail to see what is higher in the citizen life. Or you misidentify what makes the citizen life *kalos* (noble-beautiful). You think it's just getting power, or fulfilling desires, or enjoying prestige.

There is a clear contrast with the reaction-triggering properties of things: e.g., shit is nauseating. There is no such thing as rightly/wrongly identifying this property. You can be unusual in not finding excrement disturbing, and/or in having nausea triggered by other things; but you can't be wrong. What nauseates is just a brute fact about you and other agents.

Now Hume denies this model. In the *Inquiry*, he poses the question about the foundations of morals, "whether they be derived from Reason, or from Sentiment."<sup>9</sup> His first answer is that both seem to have a case. We do *argue* about moral issues, about right and wrong. But on the other hand, it seems that

the final sentence, it is probable, which pronounces characters and actions amiable or odious, praise-worthy or blameable; that which stamps on them the mark of honour or infamy, approbation or censure; that which renders morality an active principle and constitutes virtue our happiness and vice our misery: it is probable, I say, that this final sentence depends on some internal sense or feeling, which nature has made universal in the whole species.<sup>10</sup>

This sentiment, then, is the ultimate basis of morality. This is a brute fact about us, not the deliverance of reason that we approve virtue and abhor vice. But this sentiment is quite different from our reaction of nausea, because it is directed towards certain human qualities, and we sometimes

---

<sup>9</sup>134 (170). See Hume's "Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morality" in David Hume, *Enquiries*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd Edition (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1902 [reprinted 1970]). Numbers out of brackets refer to the sections in the text, those in parentheses to the page number in this edition.

<sup>10</sup>137 (172–173).

need to reason in order to determine whether these hold or not in given cases. The contrast case, for which I have chosen nausea as an example, is represented for Hume by “some species of beauty, especially the natural kinds, [which] on their first appearance, command our affection and approbation; and where they fail of this effect, it is impossible for any reasoning to redress their influence, or adapt them better to our taste or sentiment.”<sup>11</sup>

But “in order to pave the way for [the moral] sentiment, and give a proper discernment of its object, it is often necessary, we find, that much reasoning should precede, and nice distinctions be made, just conclusions drawn, distant comparisons formed, complicated relations examined, and general facts fixed and ascertained.”<sup>12</sup>

We thus have something here which is intermediary between, on one hand, the Platonic-Aristotelian rational perception of a higher way of being, and, on the other, mere brute reactions. What, then, do we, as a matter of brute fact, approve? Hume turns to examine this question, taking the example of the “benevolent or softer affections . . . [which] wherever they appear, engage the approbation and good will of mankind.”<sup>13</sup> “No qualities are more entitled to the general good-will and approbation of mankind than beneficence and humanity, friendship and gratitude, natural affection and public spirit, or whatever proceeds from a tender sympathy with others, and a generous concern for our kind and species.”<sup>14</sup>

Here he speaks of qualities “entitled to” our approbation, but this is to speak with the vulgar, to offer an expression of our common sentiment rather than an ultimate justification. For Hume this sentiment can be explained as a joint creation of two other motives which we universally share: we value “utility,” that is, whatever conduces to life, health and the fulfillment of (non-harmful) desire; and we experience sympathy for other human beings. Utility alone makes us like beneficent acts of which we are the object and dislike the disutilities imposed on us by others. But utility in the context of sympathy induces us to respond positively to beneficence, and negatively to malefaction, whoever the recipients are or may be. Here Hume is following Hutcheson and the Scottish tradition of moral sense. Approbation and blame are *distinct sentiments*, immediately recognizable as such, and different from liking and disliking. It is these sentiments which can be explained (but not shown to be higher) by the joint operation of utility and sympathy.

But just because it is the real occurrence and not just the semblance of beneficence which gains our approbation, there is always room for argument, for probing, to establish that this object really exists in a particular case. Perhaps the supposed philanthropist is actually weaving some careful scheme to bring the apparent beneficiary under his control. Perhaps what we take

---

<sup>11</sup>(173).

<sup>12</sup>(173).

<sup>13</sup>139 (176).

<sup>14</sup>340 (178).

as a case of one man inflicting terrible pain on another turns out really to be a surgeon removing a potentially fatal tumour. Our first off reactions can be revised. This revisability explains certain historical changes in Hume's view. The ancients disapproved of "luxury, or a refinement on the pleasures and conveniences of life," because they thought it to be "the source of every corruption in government, and the immediate cause of faction, sedition, civil wars, and the total loss of liberty." We moderns who now attempt to prove "that such refinements rather tend to the increase of industry, civility, and arts regulate anew our *moral* as well as *political* sentiments, and represent, as laudable or innocent, what had formerly been regarded as pernicious and blameable."<sup>15</sup>

That humans value utility goes without saying, but moral sentiments show that our concern goes wider.

If usefulness, therefore, be a source of moral sentiment, and if this usefulness be not always considered with a reference to self; it follows, that everything, which contributes to the happiness of society, recommends itself directly to our approbation and good-will. Here is a principle, which accounts, in great part, for the origin of morality: And what need we seek for abstruse and remote systems, when there occurs one so obvious and natural?<sup>16</sup>

A footnote to this passage adds: "It is needless to push our researches so far as to ask, why we have humanity or a fellow-feeling with others. It is sufficient, that this is experienced to be a principle in human nature. We must stop somewhere in our examination of causes; and there are, in every science, some general principles, beyond which we cannot hope to find any principle more general."<sup>17</sup>

In other words, the positive evaluation of utility needs no explanation, and sympathy is a brute fact about our nature. What need have we to look further, for some supposedly rational insight which shows the love of the general good to be "higher"? We can see right away that the conception of reason has changed. The reason Hume invokes is not the discernment of an order of higher and lower; it is reasoning about consequences. That some character trait in fact conduces to the general utility, if this is sufficiently evident, is enough to explain why it is valued as a virtue. We see this with the case of justice (Section III). With some virtues, we might judge people by their intentions, rather than the actual results of their actions. This would be the case with benevolence, for instance. But then the issue is what good results they were striving to encompass.

The reason involved here is instrumental reason, what causes what? In particular, what brings about utility for human beings in general, severally and individually? Its relevance to our motivation is no longer the same as with Plato and Aristotle. For them, the reason discerning order was

---

<sup>15</sup>143 (181).

<sup>16</sup>178 (219).

<sup>17</sup>(219–220).

thought to motivate us to live up to this order. Indeed, we can't really be said to grasp the order if we are not appropriately moved by it. But with Hume, we now have a perception of causal relations which by itself would be motivationally inert. What it lacks as a motivating force is precisely a desire to encompass certain ends, which would set us about producing the means. That is the ultimate principle which Hume invokes. Reason establishes "factual" connections. These are motivationally inert. So what can move us, if not "some internal sense or feeling, which nature has made universal in the whole species. For what else can have an influence of this nature?"<sup>18</sup> This is the ultimate clincher. Or as Hume put it in the *Treatise* (2.3.3.4): "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions."

So Hume (a) eliminates reason as a perception of higher/lower, and (b) refocuses reason as the enquiry into what makes for utility. One can see how this outlook by a slight shift could mutate into Benthamite utilitarianism. And indeed, Bentham credits Hume as his major inspiration in the introduction to his *Principles of Morals and Legislation*. We simply start from the obvious importance of utility, and the fact of sympathy, and then we can ask: what else might justify any act as the right one, other than its having the greatest utility consequences? For any rival criterion has been displaced from the scene, and especially the outmoded ancient theories of virtue.

## 4

So a concatenation of errors has contributed to a Wittgensteinian picture which has "held us captive."<sup>19</sup> The powerful model of natural science has convinced many that true knowledge of the world has to be in "neutral" terms, that is, in terms which are purged of human meanings. Theoretical reason must operate in such a purified mode. But this means that practical reason cannot find the grounds for action in a world of "facts" alone. "Neutral" facts, by definition, can't tell us what we should do. They can only guide us once we have espoused certain goals, in the light of which these facts can become relevant to action. But since theoretical reason cannot establish these goals, they must come from ourselves, from our de facto inclinations. A neutral world is given practical shape by the "values" that human agents project onto it. Our values may arise from "faith," and they will almost certainly engage us emotionally, except in the most trivial contexts. But both faith and feeling can't arise in reason. They can only guide practical, that is, instrumental reason as ungrounded premises. The very possibility of a close relation between reason, faith and feeling becomes invisible. And so it remains for great numbers among our contemporaries.

McGill University

---

<sup>18</sup>137 (173).

<sup>19</sup>"Ein Bild hielt uns gefangen," L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Section I, paragraph 115.