



**DEPARTMENT OF
ECONOMICS**

David Hume on Reason as a Passion

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Working Paper No. 15-13

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Abstract: This brief research memo collects quotations from David Hume's works about reason as a passion—specifically, a calm passion. The collection shows that after *A Treatise of Human Nature*, which Hume disavowed, the dichotomy between reason and passion pretty much falls away, and, instead, reason is, in the main, presented to be a sort of passion. The collection shows that, in fact, even in the *Treatise* Hume gestured in that direction, though such gestures have been overshadowed by the passages that suggest a dichotomy between reason and passion. In this matter (and others), Hume's disavowal of the *Treatise* should be minded and taken to heart. This note does not refer to any secondary literature on the matter.

Keywords: David Hume, reason, passion, calm passion

JEL codes: A1, B1, B4

This memo is chiefly a compilation of passages from Hume's works pertaining to the notion that reason is a calm passion. Erik Matson, working as a research assistant to Professor Daniel Klein, has searched through all of Hume's writing except for his correspondence and autobiography. The notable passages are mostly from Book II of the *Treatise* and from *A Dissertation on the Passions (Second Dissertation)*, which is a recasting of the material from the *Treatise*. There are a few passages in the *Enquiries*.

In the *Treatise*, Hume introduces the calm-violent passion distinction, and discusses why certain passions are calm while others are violent. Calm passions can become violent, and violent passions can be controlled by a certain set of calm passions. Reason is explicitly identified as being governed by calm passion, but also it is somewhat indirectly considered to be calm passion itself. In the *Dissertation on the Passions* Hume transitions to explicitly treat reason as a calm passion.

In the *Treatise*, Hume often refers to reason and passion distinctly, as though reason and passion are dichotomous. In a few key passages, however, he implicitly dissolves the distinction. In the *Dissertation on the Passions*, the dichotomy is largely abandoned, and reason is treated more directly as a calm passion. We have included brief commentary on the passages and how they reflect the development of Hume's thought, and particularly his language, from the *Treatise* to the *Dissertation on the Passions*.

Works Cited:

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2. Hume, David. [1739] 1976. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. With an analytical index by L.A. Selby-Bigge. Edited by P.H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

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4. Hume, David. [1757] 1898. *Four Dissertations*. From *The Philosophical Works of David Hume*. Edited by T.H. Green and T.H. Grose. London: Longmans, Green, and Co. [Link to PDF from Rutgers](#) (*Of the Passions* begins on p. 21)
5. Hume, David. 1777. *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*. Vol. II. London: Cadell. [Link](#)

This research memo does not refer to any secondary literature.

Legend:

In the passages from the *Treatise* we give the page number for both the Liberty Fund PDF (which appears first in the citations) and the Nidditch edition (which appears in brackets). For example: (*Treatise*, p. 200 [313]) means page 200 from the Liberty Fund PDF, and page 313 from the Nidditch edition.

For the *Enquiry* and *Dissertations* we give only the page number corresponding to the PDF versions cited above. We have organized the passages chronologically by work. All emphases are original unless indicated otherwise.

Passages from the *Treatise*:

Hume separates perceptions of the mind into impressions and ideas. Passions are secondary impressions, that is, reflections of immediate sensations. There are two types of secondary impressions (i.e. passions), calm and violent. Reason is identified throughout Hume's work with calm impressions, and implicitly as a calm passion:

The reflective impressions may be divided into two kinds, viz. the *calm* and the *violent*. Of the first kind is the sense of beauty and deformity in action, composition, and external objects. Of the second are the passions of love and hatred, grief and joy, pride and humility. This division is far from being exact. (*Treatise*, p. 189 [276])

Again, in the *Treatise* Hume sometimes seems to dichotomize reason and passion, notably in Book II Part iii, where he famously asserts that reason is the slave of the passions. We have not searched the *Treatise* exhaustively on the matter, but the following at least illustrate the reason-passion dichotomy that sometimes appears:

Custom readily carries us beyond the just bounds in our passions, as well as in our reasonings. (*Treatise*, p. 202 [293])

Now nothing is more natural than for us to embrace the opinions of others in this

particular; both from *sympathy*, which renders all their sentiments intimately present to us; and from *reasoning*...Such judgments are always attended with passion; and nothing tends more to disturb our understanding, and precipitate us into any opinions, however unreasonable, than their connexion with passion; which diffuses itself over the imagination, and gives an additional force to every related idea. (*Treatise*, p. 220 [321])

Nothing is more usual in philosophy, and even in common life, than to talk of the combat of passion and reason, to give the preference to reason, and to assert that men are only so far virtuous as they conform themselves to its dictates...In order to shew the fallacy of all this philosophy, I shall endeavour to prove first, that reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will; and secondly, that it can never oppose passion in the direction of the will. (*Treatise*, p. 282 [413])

We speak not strictly and philosophically when we talk of the combat of passion and of reason. 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. (*Treatise*, p. 283 [415])

Since a passion can never, in any sense, be call'd unreasonable, but when founded on a false supposition, or when it chuses means insufficient for the design'd end, 'tis impossible, that reason and passion can ever oppose each other, or dispute for the government of the will and actions. (*Treatise*, p. 284 [416])

The above passages would tend to undermine an interpretation of Hume seeing reason as a calm passion. Indeed, in the *Treatise*, Hume explicitly states that reason cannot determine the will, while calm passions can.

Since reason alone can never produce any action, or give rise to volition, I infer, that the same faculty is as incapable of preventing volition, or of disputing the preference with any passion or emotion. (*Treatise*, p. 283 [414])

Beside these calm passions, *which often determine the will*, there are certain violent emotions of the same kind, which have likewise a great influence on that faculty. (*Treatise*, p. 284 [417], italics added)

But in the midst of the distinction Hume begins to blur the lines between reason and calm passion by noting that reason is often confounded with calm passion:

Hence it proceeds, that every action of the mind, which operates with the same calmness and tranquillity, is confounded with reason by all those, who judge of things from the first view and appearance. Now 'tis certain, there are certain calm desires and tendencies, which, tho' they be real passions, produce little emotion in the mind, and are more known by their effects than by the immediate feeling or sensation. These desires are of two kinds; either certain instincts originally implanted in our natures, such as benevolence and resentment, the love of life, and kindness to children; or the general appetite to good, and aversion to evil, consider'd merely as such. When any of these passions are calm, and cause no disorder in the soul, they are very readily taken for the determinations of reason,

and are suppos'd to proceed from the same faculty, with that, which judges of truth and falshood. Their nature and principles have been suppos'd the same, because their sensations are not evidently different. (*Treatise*, p. 284 [417])

And he seems to suggest that reason could consist of or be directed by passions, in that habitual passions become triggered responses that appear calm and relatively indifferent after a time. He further suggests that his reason-passion distinction is in reference to a vulgar or popular understanding of reason:

'Tis evident passions influence not the will in proportion to their violence, or the disorder they occasion in the temper; but on the contrary, that when a passion has once become a settled principle of action, and is the predominant inclination of the soul, it commonly produces no longer any sensible agitation... But notwithstanding this, 'tis certain, that when we wou'd govern a man, and push him to any action, 'twill commonly be better policy to work upon the violent than the calm passions, and rather take him by his inclination, *than what is vulgarly call'd his reason*. (*Treatise*, p. 286 [419], italics added)

When Hume comes down with a definition of reason, he seems to collapse it into passion, despite his previous distinctions, and to argue that, in fact, even the distinction between calm and violent passions can be frail and delicate. At the end of the passage he implies that there is no very hardy distinction between reason and passion:

What we commonly understand by *passion* is a violent and sensible emotion of mind, when any good or evil is presented, or any object, which, by the original formation of our faculties, is fitted to excite an appetite. By *reason* we mean affections of the very same kind with the former; but such as operate more calmly, and cause no disorder in the temper: Which tranquillity leads us into a mistake concerning them, and causes us to regard them as conclusions only of our intellectual faculties. Both the *causes and effects* of these violent and calm passions are pretty variable, and depend, in a great measure, on the peculiar temper and disposition of every individual... What makes this whole affair more uncertain, is, that a calm passion may easily be chang'd into a violent one, either by a change of temper, or of the circumstances and situation of the object, as by the borrowing of force from any attendant passion, by custom, or by exciting the imagination. Upon the whole, this struggle of passion and of reason, as it is call'd, diversifies human life, and makes men so different not only from each other, but also from themselves in different times. (*Treatise*, p. 299 [437-438])

Hume says here that reason is able to oppose passion, even though he explicitly states in Book II that only another passion can oppose a passion, as reason cannot will man to action. These statements can only be reconciled if, in fact, his working understanding of reason is as a calm passion, which seems to be corroborated in the second part of this passage:

'Tis seldom men heartily love what lies at a distance from them, and what no way redounds to their particular benefit; as 'tis no less rare to meet with persons, who can pardon another any opposition he makes to their interest, however justifiable that opposition may be by the general rules of morality. Here we are contented with saying,

that reason requires such an impartial conduct, but that 'tis seldom we can bring ourselves to it, and that our passions do not readily follow the determination of our judgment. This language will be easily understood, if we consider what we formerly said concerning that *reason*, which is able to oppose our passion; and which we have found to be nothing but a general calm determination of the passions, founded on some distant view or reflexion. (*Treatise*, p. 386 [583])

Minding Hume's Disavowal of the *Treatise*

In 1775 Hume wrote an "Advertisement" that disavowed the *Treatise*. It is significant for the matter at hand, because the passion-reason dichotomy largely falls away in the works subsequent to the *Treatise*. Here is the text of the disavowal, which was included in the 1777 volume containing the two enquiries, the dissertation on the passions, and the natural history of religion (Hume 1777). Here is the Advertisement in full:

Most of the principles, and reasonings, contained in this volume, were published in a work in three volumes, called A TREATISE OF HUMAN NATURE: A work which the Author had projected before he left College, and which he wrote and published not long after. But not finding it successful, he was sensible of his error in going to the press too early, and he cast the whole anew in the following pieces, where some negligences in his former reasoning and more in the expression, are, he hopes, corrected. Yet several writers who have honoured the Author's Philosophy with answers, have taken care to direct all their batteries against that juvenile work, which the author never acknowledged, and have affected to triumph in any advantages, which, they imagined, they had obtained over it: A practice very contrary to all rules of candour and fair-dealing, and a strong instance of those polemical artifices which a bigotted zeal thinks itself authorized to employ. Henceforth, the Author desires, that the following Pieces may alone be regarded as containing his philosophical sentiments and principles. (Hume 1777, in front matter)

Hume's disavowal of the *Treatise* is important in matters for which declamations or expressions by Hume appear in the *Treatise* but either fall away or are modified in the subsequent works. The disavowal is important for several notions often attributed to Hume: Aside from the dichotomizing of reason and passion, such matters include Hume's apparent objection in the *Treatise* to proceeding from *is* to *ought* and Hume's statements in the *Treatise* to the effect that justice is an "artificial" and not a "natural" virtue. For those three matters, the disavowal is starkly important; there may be some others, as well, though perhaps less starkly so.

Passages from the *Enquiries*

The *First Enquiry* (of human understanding) has much to say regarding the weakness of human reason, but little to say on the psychology of passion and the relationship between reason and passion. One passage discusses the limited control of the mind (implicitly reason) over the body and the passions:

Secondly, The command of the mind over itself is limited, as well as its command over the body; and these limits are not known by reason, or any acquaintance with the nature

of cause and effect, but only by experience and observation, as in all other natural events and in the operation of external objects. Our authority over our sentiments and passions is much weaker than that over our ideas; and even the latter authority is circumscribed within very narrow boundaries. (*First Enquiry*, p. 54)

This passage from the *Second Enquiry* (of the principles of morals) echoes the passage quoted above (*Treatise*, p. 386 [583]) concerning the relationship between sympathy and space. But here Hume substitutes calm judgments for reason, reflecting his move to join reason and passion:

Sympathy, we shall allow, is much fainter than our concern for ourselves, and sympathy with persons remote from us much fainter than that with persons near and contiguous; but for this very reason it is necessary for us, in our *calm judgements* and discourse concerning the characters of men, to neglect all these differences, and render our sentiments more public and social. (*Second Enquiry*, p. 136, italics added)

Here Hume argues, similar to (*Treatise*, p. 286 [419]) quoted above, that affections are functions of their objects. But he does not employ reason in this discussion, as he did in the *Treatise*, only calm passion:

Our affections, on a general prospect of their objects, form certain rules of conduct, and certain measures of preference of one above another: and these decisions, though really the result of our calm passions and propensities, (for what else can pronounce any object eligible or the contrary?) are yet said, by a natural abuse of terms, to be the determinations of pure *reason* and reflection. (*Second Enquiry*, p. 141)

Passages from *A Dissertation on the Passions* (*Second Dissertation*)

There is still a semblance of the supposed reason-passion distinction here:

Custom readily carries us beyond the just bounds in our passions, as well as in our reasonings. (*Second Dissertation*, p. 27)

It seems that Hume employs the word *reason* in different senses (as is also suggested in the passage above at *Treatise*, p. 286 [419]). Reason “in a strict sense” is not the way Hume typically employs the term, where he conceives of reason as a passion:

It seems evident, that reason, *in a strict sense*, as meaning the judgment of truth and falsehood, can never, of itself, be any motive to the will, and can have no influence but so far as it touches some passion or affection. (*Second Dissertation*, p. 29, italics added)

The reason-passion distinction is faint in the *Dissertation on the Passions*, and is immediately and directly qualified with the notion that reason is a calm passion:

2. What is commonly, in a popular sense, called reason, and is so much recommended in moral discourses, is nothing but a general and a calm passion, which takes a comprehensive and a distant view of its object, and actuates the will, without exciting any

sensible emotion. A man, we say, is diligent in his profession from reason; that is, from a calm desire of riches and a fortune. A man adheres to justice from reason; that is, from a calm regard to public good, or to a character with himself and others. (*Second Dissertation*, p. 29)

3. The same objects, which recommend themselves to reason in this sense of the word, are also the objects of what we call passion, when they are brought near to us, and acquire some other advantages, either of external situation, or congruity to our internal temper; and by that means excite a turbulent and sensible emotion. Evil, at a great distance, is avoided, we say, from reason: Evil, near at hand, produces aversion, horror, fear, and is the object of passion. (*Second Dissertation*, p. 29)

The matter treated in the present research memo has surely been treated abundantly in the literature on Hume. We welcome pointers and suggestions to pertinent literature; communications may be sent to us at dklein@gmu.edu and ewmatson@gmail.com.

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