

# Ethical Instrumentalism

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## 1

The present essay offers a sketch of a philosophy of value, what I shall here refer to as ‘ethical instrumentalism.’ My primary aim is to say just what this view involves and what its commitments are. In the course of doing so, I find it necessary to distinguish this view from another with which it shares a common basis and which, in reference to its most influential proponent, I refer to as ‘Humeanism.’ A second, more general, aim is to make plausible the idea that, given the common basis, ethical instrumentalism provides a more compelling picture of the philosophy of value than Humeanism does.

## 2

Ethical instrumentalism (EI) is so called for two reasons. The first is that it involves the claim that there are no values, at least not in any sense that philosophers prefer to call ‘realist.’ Hence, according to EI, values are not ‘facts,’ whether of a natural, non-natural, or super-natural kind. Talk of ‘values’ on this account is a ‘useful fiction,’ analogous to the status reserved for theoretical entities in those positions in the philosophy of science that also bear the name ‘instrumentalist.’<sup>1</sup> Reference to values in our discourse—to such things as ‘goodness,’ ‘rightness,’ ‘justice,’ ‘virtue,’ ‘beauty,’ ‘sublimity,’ ‘ridiculousness,’ ‘wickedness,’ ‘evil,’ and the like—is the convenient, perhaps necessary, means by which we communicate about and reflect upon what matters to us. Value terms—and the propositional structures in which they appear—are among the media of evaluative commerce; the coin of the

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<sup>1</sup> Instrumentalism in the philosophy of science and the position being discussed in this paper should not be understood to have any deeper connection than that suggested in the text. Being instrumentalist about value in no way commits one to any particular position about theoretical entities generally, let alone those that figure in scientific theories.

enchanted realm. The ‘enchanted realm’ is, of course, the very world in which we live but, according to EI, it is we who enchant it and there is nothing magical about it. Values are the ‘product’ of our engagement with the world and each other, where that engagement is understood in terms of the interplay of the drives, appetites, attitudes, emotions, concerns, stances, and goals that both serve to unite us and upon which our individuation depends.

So understood, support of EI can be found among a number of philosophers, both historical and contemporary. The Protagorean formula that “a human being is the measure of all things,” is its most famous—and boldest—statement.<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, reacting to the metaphysical extravagance of Plato, takes the source—and object—of value to be in human nature itself, particularly the passions and the degree to which one is disposed to feel them, and is therefore profitably seen as an instrumentalist in this sense.<sup>3</sup> More obviously, this idea finds eloquent adherence in Hume’s declaration that the viciousness of the willful murder cannot be found “till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action.”<sup>4</sup> It is of course Hume who is generally considered the most sure proponent for an entire ‘school’ of thinkers that share this approach to (particularly moral) value. These were the ‘British Sentimentalists,’ which included in their number the likes of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Adam Smith. The early-to-mid twentieth century saw philosophers displaying their sentimentalist sympathies with the doctrines of ‘emotivism’ and ‘prescriptivism,’ with Ayer’s presentation in *Language, Truth and Logic* representing the high watermark of its expression.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Richard D. McKirahan, JR., (1994, p.379).

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle (1941)

<sup>4</sup> David Hume, (1978, p. 468-9).

<sup>5</sup> Alfred Jules Ayer, (1946[1936]).

Today, the EI approach to value finds voice in the ‘expressivism’ of Alan Gibbard and in the ‘quasi-realist’ projectivism of Simon Blackburn.<sup>6</sup>

An ‘ethic,’ as that term is understood in EI, is a pattern of attitudinal, desiderative, and emotional responses—with relevance to perceptual attention and cognitive directedness—to certain features of the world, including their appearance and arrangement; to aspects of a person’s character; to the choices that one makes; to the changes one manages or fail to bring about, and many other features which it bids us to attend. An ethic is a way of living; a general manner, or mode of engagement with the world that finds its expression in our behavior, our reactions, and in our deployment of evaluative language. Indeed, it is the ethic that conveys sense (and often enough assigns a referent) to those kinds of terms mentioned above, for it is only within the framework of an ethic that terms like ‘goodness’ and ‘beauty’ have any recognizable content. If one does not share an ethic, or a sufficient amount of it, with an interlocutor talk of the goodness or beauty of a thing may be quite contentious, if not unintelligible.

### 3

This brings us to the second reason for the term ‘ethical instrumentalism.’ On this view, an ethic is not merely an expression of underlying drives and desires but, more importantly, instrumental in their continuing success. All ethics, properly understood, are in the service of some particular goal or purpose, specifically the flourishing of a particular type of person, that type which found it useful to express itself in terms of that ethic. Nietzsche, undoubtedly the most thoroughgoing instrumentalist so far, nicely captures this point when defining ‘valuations’ as “physiological demands for the preservation of a certain type of life.”<sup>7</sup> With this EI rejects what is arguably a central theme in traditional ‘ethics,’ namely

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<sup>6</sup> See Alan Gibbard, (1990). Blackburn’s work on quasi-realism is spread throughout a number of works. See, especially, (1984); (1993); and (1998).

<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, (1968, p. 201(Part One, section 3)).

that the goal of a person (or a people) is, or should be, to *be* ethical; to be virtuous, good, noble, or just. Virtue, far from being its own reward, is rather, like all the other evaluative ‘conditions’ associated with an ethic, merely a piece of psychological armor protecting some more basic aim or need of the organism that forged it. Indeed, it is in the light of such an aim or need that the relative importance attached to something like virtue—and, importantly, its different manifestations—is made sensible. Failure to recognize the subsidiary and goal-directed nature of ethics leaves one with evaluative phenomena that appear purposeless, inexplicable, and brute.

## 4

The term ‘instrumentalism’ suggests talk of means and ends but we need to handle such talk with care. “Virtue is consider’d as means to an end,” Hume tells us, but adds that the “[m]eans to an end are only valued so far as the end is valued.”<sup>8</sup> His meaning here is not entirely obvious. Elsewhere he says “virtue is an end, and is desirable on its own account, without fee or reward, merely for the immediate satisfaction which it conveys.”<sup>9</sup> Here, too, his intent is open to interpretation. Taken at face value, this last, as we have just seen, runs counter to ethical instrumentalism in the full sense of the term. Being instrumental to the aims of an organism, virtue cannot be understood as an end, at least not so long as we are offering an explanatory analysis of that notion. If, however, Hume is suggesting that from the first-person perspective of an agent deliberating about what to do, virtue *can* appear as something good in itself, one needn’t have quarrel with him. Being instrumental to the aims of an organism, it would not be surprising to find that it efficiently serves those aims to have the ‘virtuous’ condition appear as desirable as possible. The more desirable virtue appears the more likely the organism will become ‘virtuous.’ The more likely the organism is to

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<sup>8</sup> Hume, (1978, p. 619).

<sup>9</sup> Hume, (1975, p. 294).

become virtuous the more likely it is to satisfy the underlying aims that constitute the organism itself. For the ethical instrumentalist, having virtue appear as an ‘end’ is itself a ‘means.’

But let us return to the first of Hume’s claims, that virtue is a means which can be valued only so far as the end is valued. What *might* be suggested is that the ‘end,’ what he refers to as the ‘interest’ or ‘happiness’ of a person or society, is itself good and that it is by proving useful to that end that mental qualities achieve the status of virtues. But this is a suggestion to be avoided. The problem, on this interpretation, lies in Hume’s claim about the value of means, a claim that the full-blooded ethical instrumentalist neither accepts nor is entitled to. Ends, logically and ontologically basic ones at any rate, cannot have value on an instrumentalist scheme. Assuming that they do is to invite an infinite regress that can be staved off only by the claim that the achievement of an end is good in itself, a claim that is straightforwardly inconsistent with the instrumentalist position. Referring to such ‘ends’ as being our (true) ‘interest,’ or ‘happiness,’ only fosters this type of muddle.<sup>10</sup>

For the ethical instrumentalist there are, strictly speaking, no ‘ends’.<sup>11</sup> There are only our drives, instincts, appetites and what is necessary to maintain them.<sup>12</sup> Only here, through the demands of a human nature, does the realm of value originate. That realm, what we have called an ‘ethic,’ is the means our natures employ—what they *create*—to secure their success. Such success, of course, is itself without value. We speak of ‘success’ here only to convey the continuation of this natural process. An ethic is a reflection of the fundamental relationship that obtains among these most basic motivators with different ethics

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<sup>10</sup> “Or what theory of morals can ever serve any useful purpose, unless it can show, by a particular detail, that all the duties which it recommends, are also the true interests of each individual?” So asks Hume, (1975, p. 280). The answer, as we shall see, must be ‘none,’ but that does not have the significance Hume seems to think that it does.

<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche puts the point well in (1982 [1954] (“The Four Great Errors,” sec. 8), p. 500).

<sup>12</sup> Precisely what the basic category of motivator is for human behavior is something for the philosopher and psychologist to determine. Obviously, given the enormous weight the ethical instrumentalist gives to them, greater clarification than I am providing here is wanted. I thank Martin Harvey and Richard Norman for impressing upon me the importance of this point.

corresponding to their different arrangements. The primary purpose of an ethic is to coordinate responses in a manner that sustains the dominance of some motivators with respect to others. This is why so much of our ethical outlook is concerned with our own motivational profile. Controlling, or moderating one's desires and emotions is a matter of keeping certain motivators in their 'proper place'. The proper place for some drive is, of course, relative. From the perspective of that drive itself, it is to be dominant. From the perspective of some other, it is to show due deference. What aspect of your nature you are concerned to keep in check is a direct function of that aspect of your nature which is dominant, and you have the ethic that you do in order to keep things that way.

## 5

Ethical instrumentalism, in the fullest sense, is instrumentalist all the way down. That is, it takes the 'instrumental principle'—that drives endeavor to take whatever means are necessary (and/or sufficient) to maintain themselves—as the fundamental operating principle of life.<sup>13</sup> Value, on this picture, is decidedly not basic. What, exactly, the ethical instrumentalist takes that to mean we shall shortly see, but what I hope the claims of Hume discussed in the previous section already suggest that he may not be an ethical instrumentalist in this sense. Before making a more earnest case for that assessment, I want to conclude these preliminary remarks about the instrumentalist position.

To say that the 'goals' that ethics serve are prior to the evaluative framework is not to say that they are not proper objects of evaluative judgment. Whatever is conceivable is evaluable, and basic drives are no exception. *How* those drives are conceived, however, is itself a direct function of those drives that determine how we see the world, which, not surprisingly, tend to be those very same drives. As a result, we tend to view our most basic

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<sup>13</sup> I understand this as a principle that applies to animate existence, not dissimilar to the Aristotelian account of the 'form' of a living thing, a thing designed to sustain itself. I do not mean to suggest that this principle is coherently applied to, say, the universe, and that the existence of hydrogen, or what have you, is a means to some *aim*.

drives rather favorably. Yet this is not always so; we are complex creatures, after all, and we often get to see some of our drives from the perspective of others and the resulting representation may not be so generous. A dark and sinister portrait of some basic drive signifies the formidable strength of some other. Slander is quite effective in the struggle for psychological success. The dehumanization of people for the purpose of subjugation is merely an extrapolation of our more basic practice of dehumanizing our drives.

Without doubt, the great bulk of the evaluations of our drives are indirect, sizing up the *product* rather than the designer; the effect rather than the cause. It is the evaluation of persons that commands most of our ethical attention. Indeed, it is the nature of people that gives rise to the consideration of drives in the first place. A person is an ethic embodied; in other words, a character. What stands out in another character, what predominates, what makes it appear to be the character it appears to be, often has as much to do with the partial spectator as it does with the animate object in view. Character appraisal is never neutral, never dispassionate. To find someone priggish or careless, insensitive or too tolerant is to engage with another actively, not passively. Such ethical assessments are as much aesthetic as they are practical, perhaps more so. The subjective perspective is ineliminable; the view is always from somewhere.

Allowing for the evaluation of character is not something that is especially distinguishing about a philosophical position on ethics. Part of what does distinguish EI from many other positions, however, is its commitment to what I will here call *poly-ethicism*, the view that there is a plurality of ethical perspectives. This idea follows naturally from the commitment to the instrumentality of value when joined to the plausible belief in the plurality of possible (and actual) basic motivational arrangements that ethics serve. Most other positions in philosophical ethics are decidedly *mono-ethicist*, expressing either an implicit or explicit commitment to the claim that there is one best, correct, or true, ethical perspective. Drawing the contrast in this way, however, may not be as illuminating as one would like.

A casual glance might suggest that by identifying ethical instrumentalism as poly-ethical, I have simply said that it is a form of ethical relativism, which is not a particularly distinguishing thing to say. More careful attention will reveal, however, that this is not what is being said at all. Ethical relativism, as far as ethical instrumentalism is concerned, is itself a particular, or ‘first-order’, ethic. It is, to put it another way, an ethical view—a view within an ethic—rather than a view about ethics. Ethical instrumentalism, on the other hand, *is* a view about ethics and its commitment to poly-ethicism is not a claim that those ethics are ‘relative’ but rather that they are *not normative*. The idea that an ethic—any ethic—could be *correct* is not one the instrumentalist finds coherent. It is not the case, the instrumentalist claims, that our most basic drives *ought* to create an ethic that *will* succeed in maintaining their dominant status. Basic drives, like everything else, can only do what they can. It is not the case that drives that cannot maintain their dominance have *failed* to do something they could have done, if they had done something differently; if they had done something *right*. Drives that create ethics that prove insufficient to sustain them are drives incapable of sustaining themselves. What works works and what doesn’t doesn’t, and that is the end of the matter.

As I will sometimes put it, ethical instrumentalism’s non-normativity can be expressed as a rejection of *morality*. As I conceive it here, morality is a (the?) normative ethic.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, arguably what distinguishes the moral perspective from most, if not all, others is not the content of its evaluations so much as its claim that such evaluations are *true* or *correct*. The idea of a normative ethic has its natural home in philosophies that put forward some such doctrine as ‘Moral Realism.’ Here the commitment to the existence of evaluative (specifically, moral) facts appears to rather naturally suggest correctness with respect to

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<sup>14</sup> It is the idea of morality as a *normative* ethical perspective that I take Bernard Williams as attempting to capture, in (1985), chapter 10 (‘Morality, the Peculiar Institution’). Nietzsche (1998), is most profitably read, I would argue, as a genealogy of normativity. For some criticism of morality so understood, see Biehl (forthcoming).

perspective.<sup>15</sup> But what is curious are the claims of normativity in the case of ethical ‘anti-realists’, those who adhere to instrumentalism, at least in the first of the senses outlined above. The commitment to the denial of evaluative facts appears to rather naturally suggest that no evaluative perspective has any claim to being ‘correct’ or privileged over any other (accept from *within* that perspective, of course). But this is not what one tends to find in the anti-realist literature.<sup>16</sup>

## 6

Consider Hume. After taking considerable pains to establish the incoherence of a rational grounding morality Hume goes on to do something rather odd. Instead of claiming that morality, being a product of sentiments, is *an* ethic, perhaps even a presently prevalent one, but nonetheless contingent, he writes as though it is the *only* ethic deserving of the name.

Morality, for Hume, is the ethic for *humans*. He puts the point this way.

The notion of morals implies some sentiment common to all mankind, which recommends the same object to general approbation, and makes every man, or most men, agree in the same opinion or decision concerning it. It also implies some sentiment, so universal and comprehensive as to extend to all mankind, and render the actions and conduct, even of the persons the most remote, an object of applause or censure, according as they agree or disagree with that rule of right which is established. These two requisite circumstances belong alone to the sentiment of humanity here insisted on. The other passions produce in every breast, many strong sentiments of desire and aversion, affection and hatred; but these neither are felt so much in common, nor are so comprehensive, as to be the foundation of any general system and established theory of blame and approbation.<sup>17</sup>

There is, of course, a certain logic to what Hume says. If there is indeed to be ‘any general system and established theory of blame and approbation’ then there must certainly be an ethic that is equally general. Given, however, the inexhaustible data of conflict and strife

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<sup>15</sup> Admittedly, though, it is not entirely obvious why realism about ethical value need commit one to mono-ethicism. Nevertheless, I will not explore the possibility of poly-ethical realism here.

<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the starkest exceptions to this are Nietzsche and Ayer. For an easily accessible ancient case, see Callicles as presented in Plato’s *Gorgias*.

<sup>17</sup> Hume, (1975, p. 272).

throughout human history, the existence of such a universal ethic is, to say the least, doubtful. Doubtful, anyway, if you think that ethics are products of human sentiments.

This is not to deny that people have shared concerns. Many people don't want to die, at least not from unnatural or avoidable causes. Many also want to be free, as much as possible, from the interference of others in charting the direction their lives take. Many, as well, care deeply about their reputation; how they are thought of by others matters. That these and many other concerns are shared explains how we can speak intelligibly of societal or cultural values at all. Indeed, we can go so far as to say that there would not even be something recognizable as a society or a culture without such significant unity of purpose.

But societies and cultures are fluid things, ever subject to change. This is because the people that comprise them—and shape them—differ, amongst themselves and over time. None of the concerns just mentioned, nor any other, is shared equally by everyone. Many people don't care about reputation, or care less, or only care about what *certain* people think. Nor does everyone want autonomy, at least not all the time or in every circumstance. Many people seek to join organizations into which their identity dissipates, take jobs that don't require initiative, and find partners that will dominate them to some degree or other. And many people don't mind dying, not enough anyway to keep them from acting in ways that increase the probability (nor, for that matter, the probability that others might die as well). In free societies, people do not become police officers, firemen, or soldiers because they have no choice. They do it because they are moved to; more so, anyway, than those who don't.

People differ in attitude; they are concerned about different things and to varying degrees. These are, to the ethical instrumentalist, *ethical* differences. Such difference, for the anti-realist, is undeniable. But Hume is not denying *that*. What he is saying is that such differences show that the ethical concerns involved are not *moral*. The fact that people can differ on such matters suffices to show that the outlook from which they are operating is not

so ‘comprehensive’ to provide the ‘foundation’ for system that permits *praise* and *blame*.

What kind of system is that? A system that incorporates the claim that those who uphold the system have done well—have behaved *rightly*—while those who transgress the system have made a mistake, for which some sanction or punishment, though by no means necessary, is nevertheless appropriate. In other words, a normative system.

To those who have acquired a certain philosophical taste—to ethical instrumentalists—this as an ungainly concoction; a gruesome hybrid of philosophical styles. Given Hume’s evaluative anti-realism, there seems no *room* for him to claim that those who don’t abide by some particular ethic nevertheless *ought* to, where this is not simply the overly exuberant expression of sentiments by one who already embodies that ethic. It is precisely in virtue of his evaluative anti-realism that leads us to agree with Christine Korsgaard when she admits that thinking of Hume as “representative of a theory of normativity might seem perverse.”<sup>18</sup> But why is it not in fact perverse? Why is he a *moralist*?

The answer, I’m afraid, will sound depressingly trite: that’s just how his most basic ethical outlook presented things to him; he *wanted*, in a manner of speaking, his ethic to be the only conceivable one. Behind the banality, however, lurk ideas and conceptions that are rather instructive. Foremost among these is Hume’s conception of his philosophical project itself.

As Hume’s *Treatise* draws to a close, Hume finds himself signing the praises of the morally just life, a life that he claims will undeniably leave one happy and satisfied. But with ever the preacher’s rhetorical flourish, Hume chastises himself for crossing the boundary from anatomist to painter, from one who provides “exact knowledge of the parts, their situation and connexion,” to one who can “design” with “elegance or correctness.”<sup>19</sup> The

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<sup>18</sup> Christine Korsgaard, (1996). Korsgaard ultimately rejects Hume’s theory in favor of a more Kantian one. But, and this, I take it, is her point, the perversity—to the ethical instrumentalist, anyway—is that there is a theory of normativity there to consider at all. It will be obvious that the form, if not so much the content, of the ensuing discussion of Hume can be directly traced to Korsgaard’s work.

<sup>19</sup> Hume, (1978, p. 621).

*Treatise*, Hume assures us, is an anatomical work, but he cannot forebear recommending his labor to those more eager for paintings:

And thus the most abstract speculations concerning human nature, however cold and unentertaining, become subservient to *practical morality*; and may render this latter science more correct in its precepts, and more persuasive in its exhortations.<sup>20</sup>

Hume's division of labor, and the relation between the two, might well raise some eyebrows. Indeed, it borders on the incoherent. What, exactly, are we to make of the idea that the (presumably correct) anatomy of 'human nature' is *subservient* to aesthetic exhortation while at the same time constraining such exhortation to standards of correctness? Very little, I would say. As conceptual artists go, Hume can be bettered. However, I want to linger longer at the exhibition; Hume's work is not without value.

## 7

Moral philosophy, Hume tells us, is really "the science of human nature."<sup>21</sup> And that 'science,' continuing the theme just established, can be carried out in either of two ways, as the practical endeavor to "make us *feel* the difference between vice and virtue...excite and regulate our sentiments,"<sup>22</sup> and as the theoretical enterprise which takes "human nature as a subject of speculation; and with a narrow scrutiny examine[s] it, in order to find those principles, which regulate our understanding, excite our sentiments, and make us approve or blame any particular object, action, or behaviour."<sup>23</sup> It is this second, theoretical enterprise, that Hume takes to be 'subservient' to the first, practical endeavor. What he means by this is revealed at the end of the second *Enquiry*.

And though the philosophical truth of any proposition by no means depends on its tendency to promote the interests of society; yet a man has but a bad grace, who delivers

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<sup>20</sup> Hume, (1978, p. 621). Emphasis in the original.

<sup>21</sup> Hume, (1975, p. 5).

<sup>22</sup> Hume, (1975, p. 6).

<sup>23</sup> Hume, (1975, p. 6).

a theory, however true, which, he must confess, leads to a practice dangerous and pernicious... The ingenuity of your researches may be admired, but your systems will be detested; and mankind will agree, if they cannot refute them, to sink them, at least, in eternal silence and oblivion. Truths which are *pernicious* to society, if any such there be, will yield to errors which are salutary and *advantageous*.<sup>24</sup>

Fortunately, for Hume anyway, he is convinced that his theoretical speculations are themselves advantageous, and therefore safe from such dismissal. But as he has just so eloquently pointed out, being advantageous is not in itself any indication of truth. So, are Hume's speculations about human nature true?

This, for reasons to be given later, may not be the best question to ask. For the moment, let us be more cautious and consider just what advantageous speculations Hume takes to be offering. The centerpiece of Humean anatomy is the psychological mechanism of 'sympathy,' the process that makes the communication of sentiments between people possible. The centrality of sympathy, particularly with respect to an *analysis* of morality that has hopes of enjoying general assent, is most clearly seen in Hume's answer to the 'sensible knave.' There Hume argues that the society's abhorrence of vice and knavish types will cause the knave, when he considers it, to abhor himself, and this, in the more "noble natures," at least, will induce "a certain reverence for themselves as well as others, which is the surest guardian of every virtue."<sup>25</sup>

*True* knaves, of course, have a knavish nature, not a noble one, and of this type Hume must concede that if "his heart rebel not against such pernicious maxims, if he feel no reluctance to the thoughts of villiany or baseness," then we must admit that "he has indeed lost a considerable motive to virtue; and we may expect that his practice will be answerable to his speculation."<sup>26</sup> But even in these unfortunate extremes, we of more noble countenance can rest content in the knowledge that such knaves are themselves "the greatest dupes, and have sacrificed the invaluable enjoyment of a character, with themselves at least,

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<sup>24</sup> Hume, (1975, p. 279). Emphasis in the original.

<sup>25</sup> Hume, (1975, p. 276).

for the acquisition of worthless toys and gewgaws.”<sup>27</sup> And with this Hume rests his case: the operation of sympathy will succeed in the great majority of people to transmit and foster love of virtue and hatred of vice. Given the main posit of his theory can be accepted without threatening the cause of virtue, there is, so far as Hume is concerned, no good reason not to believe his theory.

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Given what Hume has said about the relationship between practical and theoretical philosophy, we can be excused if we begin to wonder if it isn't Hume who is being duped. Indeed, it does not seem unfair to say that Hume's 'theoretical' speculations are themselves colored by his 'practical' aspirations. Why else, for instance, would Hume talk as though sympathy would spread only *moral* attitudes? Why does he seem to give this psychic mechanism a particular evaluative 'valence'? Can't knaves communicate their attitudes to others as well? Of course they can. In any event, we *believe* they can, which explains why many fear that sentencing young, impressionable first-time criminals as though they were criminal veterans, (and thereby housing them with such) is just as likely, if not more so, to lead to more hardened criminals than contrite ones. Less dramatically, though perhaps closer to home, is the concern we have that our children not fall in with the wrong crowd. Sympathy operates, no doubt, but not in the inevitably moralistic fashion Hume would have us believe. Assuming Hume actually believed it, why? Could it be that he found it useful or agreeable to believe?

I have no doubts that he did. This is not to say that he didn't think that it was also true; he may well have. But it is to say that what he took to be true was what was useful or agreeable to take as such. There is danger of misunderstanding the point being made, however, a misunderstanding that Hume's philosophical picture may well foster.

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<sup>26</sup> Hume, (1975, p. 283).

Given Hume's talk of the 'subservience' of the theoretical to the practical, we may be led to think that Hume's first-order ethic—morality—is actually driving his more 'abstract' speculation, that is, his philosophy proper. I am not convinced, however, that this is the most useful way of looking at things. Recall that Hume identifies (moral) philosophy as the "science of human nature." By understanding philosophy as (a form of?) science, he takes the aim of it to be the discovery of truths. He takes it, for instance, to be a truth about human psychology that evaluative judgments have their source in human sentiments. He also takes it as true that sympathy is the mechanism by which sentiments—and therefore values—are communicated and spread. These are perhaps the most central commitments of what we can here call the 'Humean' philosophy of value. What I want to suggest is that Hume's 'scientific' conception of philosophy inevitably led him to go from thinking he had discovered truths about the source of values in human nature to thinking he had discovered *evaluative truths with respect to human nature*. Hume's scientific philosophy, I am suggesting, leads him to move from the belief that many people tend to gravitate towards a shared ethical conception, one that is conducive to commodius living, to the belief that it is in some sense *wrong* for someone to buck the trend—an indication of a "perverse and unpliant disposition."<sup>28</sup> Such a person, a knave, is in some sense not *true* to his nature as a person, which is to be 'in sympathy' with others. But in moving from the one to the other belief, Hume is as guilty as anyone of moving vulgarly from an 'is' to an 'ought.'

How could *Hume* do such a thing? I believe it was the priority he placed on truth, taking it to be the goal of the philosophical enterprise, that led him into this muddle. Indeed, I believe it was this rather high estimation of the value of truth—the ultimate value, in fact—that prevented him from seeing just how significant another 'truth' about human nature he took himself to have discovered could be. That people will disregard 'pernicious' truths in favor of advantageous falsehoods Hume did of course think significant, for he thought that

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<sup>27</sup> Hume ,(1975, p. 283).

it could lead people to dismiss what (theoretical) philosophers had to say. But it is possible to think this truth far more significant than that. So significant, in fact, that it can lead us to think of philosophy itself in a very different way than as the pursuit of truth.

## 9

Ethical instrumentalism, I said at the outset, is a philosophy of value. Part of what that means is that it gives a philosophical account of value. In this respect, as we have seen, it is not dissimilar to the ‘Humean’ philosophy of value, particularly since they both centrally involve the claim that value is the product of sentiments and the like. But ethical instrumentalism is also importantly different than ‘Humeanism,’ and one very useful way of getting at that difference is in terms of the relative priority the two philosophies give to truth. That difference in priority becomes perspicuous when the ethical instrumentalist takes some suitably neutered version of Hume’s truth about belief and construes it as nothing less than the manifestation of the ‘instrumental principle’ (sec. 5 above). People, including societies, being but bundles of drives and motivations, operate according to the very principle by which those constitutive drives do: one does what one can to sustain oneself, to ‘flourish’. If that requires, at the level of a thinking being, belief in falsehoods then that is what one will attempt to believe. On the instrumentalist picture, believing the truth, like everything else, is of purely instrumental value.

It is important that this point not be misunderstood. Ethical instrumentalism is not offering an ‘instrumental’ conception of truth, where what is true is in some sense what is useful. What it claims rather is that the fixation of belief is, like all other psychological matters, governed by the instrumental principle. But the consequent of that is that though beliefs can be assessed as true or false there is simply no content to the claim that one *ought* to believe this or that. To repeat, one can only believe what one can: if one needs to believe

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<sup>28</sup> Hume, (1975, p. 280).

what is true in order to survive then one will only survive if one can believe what is true. If, in such a situation, one cannot believe what is true then one will fail to survive but one will not thereby fail to believe what one ought. Not, of course, unless one can make sense of the idea that one ought to survive. Ethical instrumentalism takes it as basic that one cannot.

Instrumentalism, once unleashed, is difficult to keep in check. Ethical instrumentalism might be usefully thought of as a philosophical approach that takes it as pointless to try. Indeed, EI takes the instrumental principle to apply to itself no less than to everything else. The result, what ethical instrumentalism *is*, is a conception of philosophy as the most general and abstract ‘ethic’—a *conceptual* framework within which everything else, from facts to values and everything in between, is made understandable. And this is why it can be called a *philosophy of value*: its self-conception demands that it see its own existence as evidence, not of its truth, but of its (instrumental, of course) value.

## 10

Philosophy, according to ethical instrumentalism, is more an aesthetic enterprise than a scientific one. In one sense, then, ethical instrumentalism construes itself along the lines of Hume’s ‘practical’ species of philosophy, employing the results of science proper only instrumentally. But though it sees science as a means to its success, rather than seeing itself as doing extra-empirical work for science, its framework is so abstract as to be quite like Hume’s ‘theoretical’ species of philosophy as well. But ethical instrumentalism refuses to construe itself as providing abstract *truths*. It is content to leave truth to the empirical domain and in the hands of scientists. Ethical instrumentalists would rather paint pictures.

The picture I have been trying to paint here has been that the picture we get from Humeanism is a jumbled one, lacking in symmetry. By conceiving of value as a product of human nature it encourages the idea of a rich tapestry of ethical possibility; different styles of

life and achievement subject to an equal variety of rankings. Ethics, so conceived, is the competition of life presented in its most mesmerizing—and artful—form. But this picture gets upended with the intrusion of normativity; the idea that one of these possibilities is the correct one. That, somehow, Nature has rules that show which ethics should win and which shouldn't, whether they actually win or not. Presenting a picture like this, I have suggested, is not so much philosophizing as it is moralizing; attempting to do philosophy from within one's first-order ethic by marshalling psycho-philosophical 'truths' in defense of one's values.

Humeanism, or the art of moralizing, would appear to be alive today. I will briefly mention one example here. Simon Blackburn, perhaps the foremost 'neo-Humean' of the day, often appears to strike an instrumentalist pose, frequently speaking of 'particular kinds' or 'styles' of ethics and of the plurality of human concerns. Nevertheless, one cannot escape the sense that he understands 'ethics' as a human practice with a proprietary universal ambit, which is to say a normative practice, as opposed to a naturally—and necessarily—fractured human enterprise that all human beings nevertheless—and necessarily—engage in. Hence he gives us the following:

And we can certainly attempt, as Nietzsche does, to revalue our values: in other words to rethink whether some conventionally accepted goods or virtues really are so. But none of this amounts to a wholesale rejection of ethics. It is still making a move *within* ethics: changing the key, not refusing to play the tune. And in fact our reflections suggest that the rejection of ethics is not really an option... Certainly people may moralize too much and too quickly and about the wrong things. But people may also be too slow to praise good behaviour, or to feel anger at behaviour that deserves it: cruelty, ingratitude, injustice of all kinds.<sup>29</sup>

That all evaluative judgments emanate from within an ethic, even those which are seemingly *about* an ethic, is one with which any anti-realist will concur. In that sense, there is indeed no escape from our ethical perspective. However, the thought that our praise or anger is *deserved*, where that means something more than a forceful repetition of our ethical stance, *is* escapable. Blackburn's words suggest a world where cruelty, ingratitude, and injustice are

*wrong*—in the sense that  $2+2=5$  is wrong, that is, to say incorrect—rather than a world in which he will not tolerate such behavior. For the instrumentalist, by contrast, there is only tolerance and intolerance. “Deserves’,” as Clint Eastwood’s character Will Munny in the film *Unforgiven* says, “got nothin’ to do with it.”

Putting the instrumentalist’s point in this way may not appear to present it in the most favorable light. Why object to thinking of injustice as wrong in this loaded sense? As Blackburn himself is often at pains to remind us, however, living within an ethic is a matter of the choices that we make. The ethical instrumentalist encourages us to see these choices as wholly *our own*, without appeal to what lies beyond us. And in so thinking, we more easily remember that our ethical judgments, in not being fixed by any external standard, are not static. What has counted as cruelty, ingratitude, and injustice has changed as we have changed. We make no *mistake* when we are moved to live one way rather than another.

I suspect that Blackburn falls into the rhetoric of normativity by way of his preoccupation with relativism. As we have noted before, anti-realism about value rather naturally suggests a plurality of ethical possibilities. And here the figure of the ethical relativist intrudes to warn against deploying one’s values towards another, for as, as relativists are wont to say, all different ethical systems are in some sense ‘true’ the appropriate attitude to take is one of tolerance rather than intolerance. The relativist’s challenge aims to shake one’s confidence in one’s own ethic. Blackburn, however, will have none of it, or at least very little of it. The relativist position is itself an ethical position, one among many, and not determined to be the correct one merely on the basis of such plurality. But Blackburn, or at least his rhetoric, often overreaches. Consider his diagnosis of the relativist’s error.

[E]xposure to other people, or other cultures or times can make us change our minds. They do it differently—yet we cannot condemn them, or find it in our hearts to maintain the superiority of our ways. So we become a degree more tolerant. And this is often exactly as it *should* be. I suspect that the freshman relativist generalizes too rapidly from this kind of progression, assuming that because it is as it *should* be in some cases, it must be so in all cases. So that simple exposure to alternative opinion should be enough to

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<sup>29</sup> Blackburn, (1998, p. 21). Emphasis in the original.

dissolve any allegiance we hold to our own attitudes or principles. The error comes in forgetting the qualification that we cannot condemn them, or find it in our hearts to maintain the superiority of our ways. *When this is true, toleration is indeed the right upshot.* But it is not always true.<sup>30</sup>

Blackburn speaks here in the language of normativity, not of instrumentalism. If he were to speak the latter he would say that when we *cannot* condemn others; when we *cannot* find it in our hearts to maintain the superiority of our ways, then toleration *is* the upshot.

‘Toleration’ *just is* a matter of one’s sensibility being such that one cannot condemn or find it in one’s heart to maintain the superiority of one’s ways. Our sensibilities do not *cause* tolerance or intolerance. But more importantly for the point at hand, neither do our sensibilities *justify* tolerance or intolerance. They are simply tolerant or they are not.

Ethical instrumentalism, as I said earlier, is not to be confused with relativism. But nor is it in competition with relativism. It is rather a philosophical framework within which the interplay of first-order ethics, relativism included, can be understood. And here I find one of its primary attractions over Humeanism. By conceiving oneself as aiming for philosophical truth, the Humean is too easily permitted to be an (first-order) ethical bully while operating behind a veneer of impartiality and detachment, precisely in the manner of the scientist.<sup>31</sup> Of course as an instrumentalist, my problem with this picture is purely aesthetic. I have no quarrel with bullies per se—they are often far more interesting and entertaining than the faint hearted—but I reject the mask as unseemly. I would rather a clash of values to be billed as just that, without the pretense of one or the other having truth on their side. By dismissing the notion of philosophical truth as being for the most part uninteresting—and normative truth as simply incoherent—ethical instrumentalism permits ethical conflict to proceed unvarnished.

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<sup>30</sup> Blackburn, (1999, p. 217-18). Emphasis added.

I have just spoken of *my* problem with Humeanism, and of its being aesthetic. I did so to draw attention to what I nevertheless hope by now might be plain. Humeanism, from the perspective of ethical instrumentalism, is not *wrong*. One does not make a mistake in philosophizing about value in the Humean way. One simply expresses one's philosophical sensibility when one does so, a sensibility that the ethical instrumentalist does not share; indeed, one she could not share without thereby becoming a Humean. Humeanism is a philosophy that takes truth as the central value; ethical instrumentalism places greatest weight on the concept of value itself. Which you are drawn to is a matter your own particular nature. There is no question of which philosophy one ought to practice; philosophers, like everyone else, can only do what they can.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> I do not mean to suggest that I see Blackburn (or Hume) as an ethical bully.

<sup>32</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the British Society for Ethical Theory 2004 Conference, at the University of Kent, Canterbury. Many thanks to the audience for helpful discussion. Special thanks are also do the following for discussion and criticism: Bernard Baumrin, Vittorio Bufacchi, Dolores Dooley, Stephen Finlay, Martin Harvey, David Hemp, Mark Nelson, Tony O'Connor, Mark Sheehan, and David Shein.

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