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What is Wrong with Reid's Criticism of Hume on Moral Approbation?

In the last chapter of his *Essays on the Active Powers* (1788), Reid's discussion of Hume's theory of moral judgment focuses on two questions: how should moral judgment be analysed, and what kind of connection is there between moral appreciation and the emotions? In this discussion, only one aspect of moral judgment will be considered, namely, moral judgment as moral appreciation. What I call "moral appreciation" consists in approving or disapproving of actions, attitudes, or characters, as good or bad, right or wrong. Another important aspect of moral judgment, at least within a theory which subscribes to judgment internalism, is that this appreciation is liable to induce (under normal conditions of rationality) an action which is conformable to it. For Hume, moral judgment is a source of motivation because it includes a conative ingredient. However, in the last chapter of *Active Powers*, Reid tackles Hume only about moral judgment as appreciation, not about moral judgment as a source of motivation. He assumes that these two aspects of moral judgment, albeit related, are independent issues. Is this assumption legitimate?

The distinction between appreciation and motivation had been very clearly put by a philosopher on which Hume draws a lot and to whom Reid is also indebted, Francis Hutcheson. In the first pages of his *Illustrations upon the Moral Sense* Hutcheson terms "election" the decision "to do an action rather than its contrary or than being inactive".¹ Election does not necessarily follow approbation. Isabel can approve of Peter's conduct because his conduct is motivated by a benevolent disposition (provided that this benevolence is effectual) without being herself in a position to act under a similar disposition. In a word, we are often only spectators in the approbation of an action. This is why approbation is not immediately practical. Hutcheson claims that the dispositional qualities which determine election are different from the qualities which determine approbation. He draws a parallel distinction between "exciting reasons" and "justifying reasons". The former are the reasons which determine the "election" and make us act. The latter are the normative reasons which show that such and such an action is right or wrong, deserves our approbation or disapprobation. Hutcheson makes use of this distinction between two kinds of reasons to formulate the claim that characterises his philosophical position: "All exciting reasons presuppose instincts and affections, and the justifying presuppose a moral sense."² We can detach the distinction between exciting and justifying reasons from its Hutchesonian context and use it only to suggest that the issue of motivation and the issue of appreciation were viewed as distinct in 18th century

¹ Hutcheson 1999, p. 107.

² Hutcheson 1999, p. 112.

British moral philosophy.

Hume himself tackles the question of “approbation” and that of “election” in two different places in his *Treatise of Human Nature*. The first part of the third book is devoted to the search for the origin from which “moral distinctions” are derived. Here he tries to determine what moral approbation consists in. Earlier in his treatise (II, III, 2), Hume deals with “the influencing motive of the will”, in a word with “election”. So it seems that he has in mind the Hutchesonian distinction in the very plan of the *Treatise*. Reid, therefore, has grounds for specifically discussing Hume’s doctrine of “moral approbation”. However, if it appears that Hume’s views about “approbation” rest upon his views about “election”—as one might suspect since the “influence” argument (according to which reason alone cannot influence action or passion) is employed in both passages— then there might be a flaw in Reid’s isolating the discussion concerning the normative aspect from that concerning the motivational aspect of moral judgment in his criticisms against Hume.

In the first part of this paper, I set out Reid’s argument against Hume and underline some difficulties in it. In the second part, I show that in spite of their opposition Reid’s cognitivism and Hume’s sentimentalism share important premises in their conception of the nature of feelings.

According to Reid, moral philosophers in the 18th century were preoccupied with the question of what moral appreciation (approbation or disapprobation) consists in, and of “whether there be a real judgment included in it, which, like all other judgments, must be true or false, or whether it include no more but some agreeable or uneasy feeling in the person who approves or disapproves”.³ This controversy is strongly connected with a similar discussion in the philosophy of perception, since both are consequences of the “modern system of ideas and impressions”, that is of the “new way of ideas” founded by Locke and Descartes and continued by Hutcheson and Hume in moral philosophy. The metaethical thesis that my approbation or disapprobation of the conduct of others is reducible to the expression of my own feelings, respectively “agreeable” or “uneasy”, parallels the epistemological thesis that “ideas” are the immediate objects of the mind when it perceives. In the field of aesthetics, “the same philosophy [...] discovered that beauty and deformity are not anything in the objects to which men, from the beginning of the world, ascribed them, but certain feelings in the mind of the spectator”.⁴

The climax of moral antirealism is met in Hume’s claim (as formulated by Reid) that “moral approbation is only an agreeable feeling and not a real judgment”. Such a claim can indeed be ascribed to Hume, provided that we give “real judgment” (Reid’s expression, not Hume’s) an appropriate sense:

(1) If “real judgment” stands for a propositional attitude (susceptible of truth or falsity) about a real fact, there cannot be a moral real judgment (understood as a judgment about a moral fact) since, according to Hume, there are no moral facts. It is precisely in that

³ Reid 1994, p. 670.

⁴ Reid 1994, p. 671.

sense that Hume denies that moral approbation is a real judgment.

(2) However, this does not rule out that moral judgment includes a non-moral real judgment as one of its ingredients, in so far as it is a judgment about an action, an attitude or a character in a particular objective situation. Both the action (or attitude, or character) and the situation in which the action takes place have non-moral natural properties which can be apprehended by a non-moral real judgment. Let us call this the informational aspect of moral judgment.

(3) In another sense, if “real judgment” signifies a judgment that is phenomenologically orientated towards the external situation in which people act, that is, a judgment which is obviously about that situation, then the moral judgment is real in this weak sense. For the Humeans, there is no inconsistency between the fact that the judgment is phenomenologically “real” and the claim that it cannot be real in the strong sense since it cannot be about a moral fact.

Bearing this in mind, should we consider Reid’s exposition of Hume’s doctrine as an oversimplification? Of course Reid does not pay enough attention to the fact that Hume distinguishes two different ingredients in moral judgment: firstly, the information which is given through the channels of reason and sensation; secondly, the evaluation or the motivation which is conveyed by a particular kind of sentiment or passion. Reid focuses on the second aspect, as if Hume had analysed moral judgment only in terms of passions and sentiments. So we could object that Reid underestimates the informational role of reason in Hume’s theory. However, that objection is not relevant since, according to Hume, the informational role of reason has nothing to do with moral evaluation or motivation. Reason, by itself, is not a source of approbation or election, because that which is capable of being the source of approbation or election is something very different from reason, namely, sentiment. Therefore, Reid’s presentation of Hume’s thesis is not unfair, as is obvious from the following passage:

Take any action allowed to be vicious: wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call vice. In whichever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions, and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflection into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. Here is a matter of fact; but it is the object of feeling, not of reason. It lies in yourself, not in the object. So that when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it. (Hume 1978, p. 468)

So it seems that we have grounds for ascribing to Hume the claim that
(F) “moral approbation is only an agreeable feeling, and not a real judgment”.

As we will see, Reid's objection does not point out a flaw in Hume's argument towards conclusion F, but rather draws attention to the absurd consequences of F, that is, consequences that contradict basic truths about our moral experience.

Firstly let us reconstruct Reid's argument⁵. One of my friends claims that (M) "Such a man did well and worthily, his conduct is highly approvable."

Suppose that in the same circumstances my friend claims rather that (N) "The man's conduct gave me a very agreeable feeling."

If F is true, then M and N "must have the very same meaning". If it is true that "moral approbation is only an agreeable feeling, and not a real judgment", then when my friend says M, he means just N.

Now according to Reid it cannot be the case that M and N have the very same meaning. So we can appeal to *modus tollens*:

It is true that if F is true then M and N have the same meaning;

it is not true that M and N have the same meaning;

therefore F is not true.

For Reid, there are at least two reasons for maintaining that it is not true that M and N have the same meaning. The first reason is that M "expresses plainly an opinion or judgment of the conduct of the man, but says nothing of the speaker", while N "only testifies a fact concerning the speaker—to wit, that he had such a feeling". The second reason is that M "may be contradicted without any ground of offence", while N "cannot be contradicted without an affront", for to affirm that the speaker does not actually have that feeling amounts to charging the speaker with lying.

With all due respect to Reid, the first reason is disputable, since M *also* says something about the speaker, namely that the speaker approves of the conduct of the one that the speaker is also commenting on, just as N *also* testifies a fact concerning the object, namely that the object gave the speaker a very agreeable feeling, at least if we accept that N mentions the object as the occasion, if not the cause, of that feeling. Therefore the first reason is not utterly convincing.

We might object to the second reason that the determination of what is offensive in this matter depends on the contexts. Everyone is well aware that is quite rude, or at least hazardous, to tell a film buff, whose taste you are not acquainted with, that "Antonioni's movies are dreadful", for you might well offend a fan. We should be more cautious and just say "I do not like Antonioni's movies" or, even better, "as a matter of fact Antonioni's movies make me feel uneasy". In this way we comment only on our own subjective preferences, not on the subject-matter. I give this example to suggest, firstly, that even when we claim that we are not discussing the object but only expressing our subjective taste, this may be just a polite way to put it while the discussion is nevertheless actually about the object (this is said against Reid's abovementioned first reason); secondly, that we should qualify the Reidian view according to which disputing a "real

⁵ Reid 1994, p. 673.

judgment” is always less offensive than disputing the expression of a feeling. It appears that in some contexts (such as this one), the common practice is different from what Reid supposes. We might account for this difference by noticing that there is a significant gap between the expression of aesthetic preferences and the expression of ethical preferences. If my neighbour who loves to be surrounded by garden dwarves (and wants people to share in his enthusiasm for them) offers to present me with some for my own garden, I will decline and justify my refusal not by saying explicitly that they are ugly and ridiculous—although this is exactly what I mean—but through saying something like “Thanks, but I am not particularly keen on them”. Our disagreement in aesthetic matters does not justify our breaching politeness. If, however, my neighbour beats his dog, it would not do to say something like “it makes me feel uneasy”, it would be expected that I would disapprove of that conduct in a less euphemistic way. Here the requirements of politeness yield to the claims of morality. In order to justify that M and N are not synonymous, Reid draws on ordinary uses, but he does not take the variety of language registers sufficiently into account.

In any case, we must object to Reid that F is not a claim about the meaning of the ordinary statement M. When Hume writes that “when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it”, we should not construe this claim as an account of the ordinary meaning of moral judgment, but as a metaphysical denunciation of the projective illusion by which we colour the object with our own evaluations. Indeed Hume writes that “we mean nothing but” that we have such and such a feeling when we say that an action is vicious. However this should not be viewed as characterizing the ordinary meaning of moral propositions. When we say that this action is vicious, we do mean what we say. We do not mean that we are feeling uneasy; we mean that this action is vicious. Moral judgment is not about our feelings, but about the object of which we approve or disapprove. Hume’s point is that it is not true that this action is vicious in itself. As John Mackie puts it, Reid’s argument “is enough decisively to rule out non-cognitivist (emotivist or prescriptivist) views if they are offered as a conceptual analysis of moral thinking or as accounts of the standard meaning of moral statements”; but it “does not show that the judgments we make are objective in the sense that the distinctively moral properties they ascribe to actions are ever really found in them”.⁶ If the Humeans admit that moral judgments are about moral properties of action, they can accept Reid’s remark that when we say M we do not mean N. This does not entail that F is false, since F should not be taken as denying that moral judgments are about moral properties of action, in the sense that a “claim to objectivity” is essential to them, but as asserting that those judgments rest upon an error or rather a deeply rooted illusion.

Another way to put the same point is to notice that Reid does not take into account the difference between the Humean claim that moral judgment *expresses* a feeling, and a very different theory according to which moral judgment consists in *stating* that one has

⁶ Mackie 1980, p. 143.

that feeling.⁷ What the moral judgment does indeed state is that such and such an action or character is good or bad, and, in stating this, the “judger” expresses a particular feeling of approbation or disapprobation. This expressivist view should not be merged with a cognitivist version of subjectivism such as the one which Snare defines as follows:

A moral judgment ‘about’ an action (person) is a cognitive one about the judger’s actual special sentimental reaction to the action (person) judged. (Snare 1991, p. 21)

Reid’s argument can rule out that cognitivist version of F or any non-cognitivist version of F that does not account for the claim to objectivity ingrained in moral judgments. Thus, we should distinguish between at least three versions of F:

F1 Moral approbation is only an agreeable feeling, without any claim about the moral properties of what is approved of.

F2 Moral approbation is only the description of our having an agreeable feeling.

F3 Moral approbation is only the expression of an agreeable feeling.

Reid’s argument is relevant against F1 (naïve non-cognitivist subjectivism) and F2 (cognitivist subjectivism), but is not enough to discard F3 (expressivism).

Another weakness in Reid’s criticism is that Hume would endorse F only if it is stipulated that the “feelings” involved in moral approbation are “of a particular kind”, as he insists.⁸ It seems that Hume has in mind a kind of feeling which is a species of what he terms “calm passion”⁹ and also closely akin to “indirect passion”¹⁰. Reid does not take account Hume’s classification of the passions¹¹, as if it was not significant and necessary to the understanding of his doctrine of moral appreciation. On the contrary, in Reid’s discussion of Hume, “feelings” and “sensations” are constantly confused¹². I will not develop this point here, since it is not my aim to discuss Hume’s moral theory in detail,

⁷ Here I draw on Snare’s distinctions between various versions of subjectivism, which are very useful for the understanding of Reid’s argument against Hume, although he does not discuss it. See Snare 1991, pp. 17-18.

⁸ “An action, or sentiment, or character, is virtuous or vicious; why? Because its view causes a pleasure or uneasiness of a particular kind. In giving a reason, therefore, for the pleasure or uneasiness, we sufficiently explain the vice or virtue. To have the sense of virtue is nothing but to feel a satisfaction of a particular kind from the contemplation of a character.” Hume 1978, p. 471.

⁹ “It has been observed, in treating of the passions, that pride and humility, love and hatred, are excited by any advantages or disadvantages of the mind, body, or fortune; and that these advantages or disadvantages have that effect by producing a separate impression of pain or pleasure. The pain or pleasure which arises from the general survey or view of any action or quality of the mind, constitutes its vice or virtue, and gives rise to our approbation or blame, which is nothing but a fainter and more imperceptible love or hatred.” Hume 1978, p. 614.

¹⁰ “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.” Hume 1978, p. 276.

¹¹ On this topic, see Fieser 1992.

¹² See for instance Reid 1994, p. 672: “The modern philosophy has led men to attend chiefly to their sensations and feelings.”

but I will return to it later.

We should also notice that Reid is not fair to Hume, since he examines the absurd consequences of F without producing Hume's best argument for F. Usually we assume that in order to discuss a philosophical thesis in a relevant way we must try to understand the reasons why that thesis is upheld, especially when it is the conclusion of a long and abstruse argumentation. In THN III, I, 1, one very important reason for F is the argument of influence: "Since morals, therefore, have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows that they cannot be derived from reason; and that because reason alone, as we have already proved, can never have any such influence."¹³ The question is "whether it be possible, from reason alone, to distinguish betwixt moral good and evil, or whether there must concur some other principles to enable us to make that distinction". The answer goes like this:

- A. It is "common experience" that moral judgment has an influence on the actions and affections. There is an "active principle" within moral judgment.
- B. There are two ingredients in moral judgment, a rational one and an affective one.
- C. The rational ingredient alone cannot have such an influence, as has been shown earlier in II, III, 3. Reason, "inactive in itself", cannot play the role of the active principle.
- D. Therefore "actions do not derive their merit from a conformity to reason, nor their blame from a contrariety to it".

The point is that premise C, which is decisive, rests upon prior arguments. Reason cannot play the major role in the production of moral distinctions partly because it is unable, by itself, to provide a motivation for actions or to contradict passions. The issues of "election" and "approbation" can be discussed separately, but they are not independent of each other. In effect, the latter depends on the former, since, according to Hume, if reason alone is unable to determine election then it is also unable to determine appreciation.

I do not want to explore in detail Hume's "direct argument"¹⁴, but only to emphasise that in Hume's eyes F cannot be properly understood, and therefore cannot be adequately criticised, unless C, upon which it rests, is taken into account. Hume stresses that there is no other means of evading his argument "than by denying that principle, on which it is founded", namely the principle that "reason has no influence on our passions and action".

It is a fact that in the last chapter of the *Active Powers* Reid tackles F without discussing C. He thinks if we consider that F itself or its consequences are not consistent with basic and immediate truths we have enough ground to rebut F. As we have seen, the argument is that F entails that M and N have the same meaning; now it is a basic and immediate truth that M and N do not have the same meaning; therefore F should be rejected. F has ridiculous and absurd consequences. This move is typical of common sense philosophy, since it amounts to rejecting a philosophical claim under the pretext that it contradicts (directly or through its consequences) a common sense truth. According to Noah Lemos,

¹³ Hume 1978, p. 457.

¹⁴ See Bricke 1996, chap. 3, sect. 2.

the exact formulation of the argument from common sense is as follows:

- (1) P is a common sense proposition that I and many other know.
- (2) Theory T implies that P is false.
- (3) Therefore theory T is false or unreasonable.¹⁵

We find a similar line of argument in Reid's refutation of Hume on moral approbation:

- (1) In everyday life, it is true for everyone that P "when we say M we do not mean N".
- (2) F implies that P is false.
- (3) Therefore F is false or unreasonable.

In Hume, F is not only a premise (for the "direct argument" of III, I, 1), but also a conclusion (of the argumentation set out in II, III, 3). Reid takes it as a premise only, coming, so to speak, from nowhere.

In any case, my point in this paper is not to determine whether Reid's criticism is relevant (although I have suggested that it is doubtful), but rather to show that despite their obvious complete opposition Reid and Hume share common assumptions to which we should pay more attention. What I term a complete opposition could be presented as the opposition between subjectivism and objectivism as it has been outlined by Snare. Subjectivism is the view according to which all moral judgments are subjective in the following sense of "subjective": a judgment is subjective if disagreeing with that judgment "does not entail some party to this dispute is mistaken".¹⁶ Objectivism is the view according to which some moral judgments are objective in the following sense of "objective": a judgment is objective if disagreeing with that judgment "does entail some party to this dispute is mistaken". In a word, Reid's argument is that serious moral judgments are obviously objective and therefore that subjectivism is wrong. But the Humeans could respond that an expressivist version of F provides both a steady ground for subjectivism and a good account of the claim to objectivity.

Now my question is: even though Reidian objectivism seems to be in utter opposition to Humean subjectivism, do they not share a common premise? Reid questions F as a thesis about the role that feelings play in moral judgment. However, it appears that he does not dispute a broad view about the nature of feelings that is common to many authors in the eighteenth century, Hume and himself included.

Let us start with the Reidian distinction between two senses of "sentiment". The word "sentiment" is ambiguous. It may stand for what is more properly termed "feeling"; or it may be taken in its classical sense, in which it does not mean feeling, but rather judgment or "judgment accompanied with feeling".¹⁷ Sentiment 1 is just feeling without judgment, i. e. something very akin to mere sensation. Sentiment 2a is just "opinion or judgment", i. e. something quite different from sensation. Sentiment 2b is "judgment accompanied with feeling".

¹⁵ Lemos 2004, p. 7.

¹⁶ Snare 1991, p. 154.

¹⁷ Reid 1994, p. 674. "Authors who place moral approbation in feeling only very often use the word *sentiment* to express feeling without judgment. This I take ... to be an abuse of word."

We could draw on Reid's distinction to show that sentimentalism as the metaethical doctrine that stresses the role of moral sentiments in moral judgment is also ambiguous. Sentimentalism 1 may involve the subjectivist claim that all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of sentiments 1. Or sentimentalism may consist in a version of moral cognitivism (sentimentalism 2b) which rests on the view that sentiments 2b are the core of moral attitudes. Another (quite austere) version of moral cognitivism considers that even though moral judgments happen to include sentiments 2b, the sentiments which we find at the core of morality belong to the kind of sentiments 2a. Let us call that third view "moral rationalism". Reid rejects sentimentalism 1 as absurd, accepts sentimentalism 2b as deserving to be considered, and yet sticks to moral rationalism.

For Reid, feeling and judging are two operations of the mind "which, when we consider them separately, are very different and easily distinguished".¹⁸ This is why Reid does not consider at all a third sense of sentiment, which should not be confused with sentiment 2b:

Sentiment 3 is a mixture of feeling and judging. It is a state which is both affective and cognitive. On sentiment 3 we could build another version of sentimentalism. According to sentimentalism 3 (which could be termed "cognitivist sentimentalism"), moral judgments involve sentiments 3. For the moment we do not need to examine sentimentalism 3, since, in Reid's eyes, it cannot make sense for an obvious reason: sentiments 3 do not exist.

According to Reid, when in moral philosophy we discuss about moral "sentiments", we mean either sentiments 1 or sentiments 2a/2b. We cannot mean another kind of sentiment; nor can we mean something which would be at once sentiments 1 and sentiments 2a/2b, because that is impossible. Thus, to say that moral appreciation is a matter of sentiment is ambiguous unless we make clear either that we mean that:

F "moral approbation is only an agreeable feeling", i. e. a kind of sensation, or that, far from claiming F, we mean

G: moral approbation is a judgment, i. e. something very different from a sensation.

Here we are considering to what kind of "sentiment" moral appreciation can be reduced. For Reid, F is false, and G is true.

Now, if we set aside the question of whether moral appreciation is reducible to just one ingredient, and if we accept that moral appreciation is a complex act and includes at least two ingredients, we should notice that in saying that among the ingredients of moral appreciation there is a "sentiment" in the one who judges, we mean either H or J, depending on whether we have in mind sentiment 1 or sentiment 2a/2b.

H: Moral appreciation includes a judgment (sentiment 2a/2b)

J: Moral appreciation is accompanied with or includes a sensation or feeling (sentiment 1).

For Reid, H is true in all cases. The interesting point is that, according to Reid, J is not necessarily false. J is often true—that is, is true in most cases—and should be carefully

¹⁸ Reid 1994, p. 672.

distinguished from F. When Reid criticises F, he does not deny that we feel disgusted at the thought of a premeditated murder, he just denies that we are merely expressing that feeling as if we were not judging the action itself and the agent who is responsible for it. Let us call the “complexity thesis” the claim that moral appreciation includes two ingredients; and “reducibility thesis” the claim that among those ingredients there is one element which is the stronger and that moral appreciation is, in that sense, reducible to that element or can be considered as an expression of that element. In rejecting F, Reid does not accept Hume’s version of the reducibility thesis. In asserting G, Reid gives his own version of the reducibility thesis. However, Reid can also maintain that J: moral appreciation is accompanied with or includes a feeling, since he agrees with the complexity thesis.

Hume agrees also with the complexity thesis, since he recognises that a passion can be “accompanied with some judgment or opinion”.¹⁹ There are two ingredients in moral appreciation, a cognitive one, through which information about the situation is conveyed, and an affective one, which colours the situation with values. Hume’s point is that the weight is on the side of feeling, not of judgment. As the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* puts it, “the approbation or blame [...] cannot be the work of the judgment, but of the heart; and is not a speculative proposition or affirmation, but an active feeling or sentiment”.²⁰

Now, one might object that in order to establish that the disagreement between Hume and Reid is not about the complexity thesis, but concerns only the reducibility thesis (as I suggest), we should first make sure that both Hume and Reid contrast feeling with judgment, and in the same manner. Let us compare side by side feeling and judgment according to Reid’s views²¹:

Feeling	Judgment
(1) “must be agreeable, uneasy, or indifferent”, “may be weak or strong”	no such qualitative feel
(2) is a term of a proposition, not itself a proposition, nor expressed by a proposition; “implies neither affirmation nor negation”; “therefore cannot have the qualities of true or false”	“can only be expressed by a sentence” or proposition; is affirmative or negative; “must necessarily be true or false”
(3) no distinction between object and act	distinction between the object (of which we judge) and the act (judging)

Thus we have three basic features: (1) Feelings can be assimilated to sensations; they have a particular qualitative feel. (2) Feelings do not have any propositional content or propositional structure. (3) They are not in themselves directed at intentional objects: they are occasioned by objects, but they are not “about” those objects. My point is that

¹⁹ Hume 1978, p. 415.

²⁰ Hume 1975, p. 290.

²¹ Reid 1994, p. 671.

both Hume and Reid subscribe to this phenomenalist account of “feelings”²²—although on different grounds—when they contrast feeling with judgment.

Reid considers that the emotions of fear, hope, respect, and contempt, are not by themselves judgments (cognitive states), but comprehend both an affective ingredient (feeling) and a cognitive ingredient (judgment) which are causally related in such a way that the feeling is the effect of the judgment:

In hope, there is an agreeable feeling, depending upon the belief or expectation of good to come; fear is made up of contrary ingredients; in both, the feeling is regulated by the degree of belief. In the respect we bear to the worthy, and in our contempt of the worthless, there is both judgment and feeling, and the last depends entirely upon the first. (Reid 1994, p. 672)

The link between the disagreeable feeling of fear, and the judgment that there is some evil around, is not intrinsic and necessary. It is a causal relation which has been settled by the will of God. Judgment X is naturally followed by feeling Y, in such a way that X causes Y, if and only if “the author of nature, in the distribution of agreeable and painful feelings” has decided that X should be followed by Y “for the good of the human species”.²³ In the case of sentiments 2b (“judgment accompanied with feeling”), the relation between the feeling and the belief is causal, but not intrinsic. The constitution of our nature is such that when we have this belief, then we have that feeling. Therefore, what we call today a moral emotion should be described, in the Reidian view, as a complex in which one ingredient, the feeling, is connected with another ingredient (logically and ontologically distinct from the former), namely, the judgment, as an effect with its cause. It is typical of the phenomenalist approach to feelings that they can have a cognitive causal basis without being intrinsically connected with cognitive states.²⁴

In passing, we should note that even though it is often said that Reid draws on the Stoics, his moral cognitivism is very different from the Stoic conception of moral appreciation. According to the Stoics and their modern disciples, a passion is an implicit (and in most cases erroneous) judgment, a pre-judgment (or “pre-notion”) that we should rectify through a critical process of rational self-examination. Passions, emotions, and feelings are perturbations of the mind because they involve a wrong judgment. They would not affect the mind if they were not cognitive states. For instance, through the passion of fear, I feel that death is a danger or an evil. The fear of death is wrong because the axiological

²² My use of “phenomenalist” here draws on Tappolet 2000, pp. 129-139, although I do not apply the term to a theory of emotions, but to a theory of feelings. In Reid’s view, feelings are one ingredient within what we call emotions.

²³ Reid 2002, p. 198. The connexion between feeling and judgment cannot be necessary in the logical sense of “necessary”. Although Reid stresses the natural necessity of that connection (see Broadie 1998), I think with T. Cuneo that as far as it is instituted by God, it is contingent on the will of God (Cuneo 2004).

²⁴ See Tappolet 2000, p. 132.

proposition that death is a danger or an evil is false.²⁵ It is important to notice that the Stoic (originally Socratic) view supposes that feeling and judgment are not logically and ontologically distinct, but rather that a feeling is a confused judgment. From that point of view, Reid is not a Stoic. For him, it is not correct to say that through feelings we grasp values (for instance through fear we grasp a danger, through respect we apprehend worth, etc.), since in his conception it is only through a judgment, not a feeling (given a very strong distinction between feeling and judgment), that we can seize values.

If we focus on the feeling alone, then we find a strange entity which consists in a qualitative manner of being affected, does not point at any object, and seems to be devoid of any articulated content. For Reid, what is true of sensation (distinguished from perception) is also true of feeling:

Sensation, taken by itself, implies neither the conception nor belief of any external object. It supposes a sentient being, and a certain manner in which that being is affected, but it supposes no more. (Reid 2002, p. 199)

Hume, too, when he contrasts feeling with judgment, stresses the merely qualitative and experiential (not intentional or propositional) character of feeling:

Reason is the discovery of truth or falsehood. Truth or falsehood consists in an agreement or disagreement either to the real relations of ideas, or to real existence and matter of fact. Whatever therefore is not susceptible of this agreement or disagreement, is incapable of being true or false, and can never be an object of our reason. Now, it is evident our passions, volitions, and actions, are not susceptible of any such agreement or disagreement; being original facts and realities, complete in themselves, and implying no reference to other passions, volitions, and actions. It is impossible, therefore, they can be pronounced either true or false, and be either contrary or conformable to reason. (Hume 1978, p. 458)

The opposition between feeling and judgment also appears in the dialectical context of the essay “Of the Standard of Taste”:

The difference, it is said, is very wide between judgment and sentiment. All sentiment is right; because sentiment has a reference to nothing beyond itself, and is always real, wherever a man is conscious of it. But all determinations of the understanding are not right; because they have a reference to something beyond themselves, to wit, real matter of fact; and are not always conformable to that standard. (Hume 1987, p. 229)

²⁵ Thus the Stoics subscribe to a version of what Christine Tappolet calls the “standard account of emotions”. See Tappolet 2000, pp. 144-147.

If we detach that view from its Humean background (namely, the metaphysics of “ideas” and “impressions”) and consider it as a common distinction between two operations of the mind, Reid not only has nothing against it, but draws on it in his criticism of subjectivism. His argument against F is not that the distinction between feeling and judgment is wrong, but that morality is a matter of judgment, not of feeling. Therefore it is very important for Reid that, as he puts it, “we commonly distinguish feeling from thinking”.²⁶

I have suggested that the view that feelings are “complete in themselves”²⁷, and have no “reference to any other object”²⁸, is common to Reid and to Hume. When Reid contrasts feeling with judgment, it is obvious that he adopts that phenomenalist account of feelings. Why do they share that premise? Because both, at different points of their arguments, assimilate feelings to sensations.

Now the question is: when Hume argues that moral appreciation is the expression of a feeling, does he have in mind the expression of agreeable and disagreeable sensations and nothing more? Although the thesis that feelings are “complete in themselves” and without reference to any other object plays an important role in his demonstration that moral appreciation does not depend on reason, we must insist on the fact that, according to Hume, the agreeable and disagreeable feelings that we have when we feel moral approval or disapproval are not mere sensations, but emotions “of a particular kind”, complex, and similar to the passions of pride and humility, love and hatred. The phenomenalist doctrine of feeling, which reduces it to something like tickling, is not sufficient to account for the richness and subtlety of moral appreciation. That is not quite Reid’s objection to Hume; it is rather what Hume himself might have responded. *

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²⁶ Reid 1994, p. 671.

²⁷ Hume 1978, p. 458.

²⁸ Hume 1978, p. 415.

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