

## Chapter XV. Seven Dogmas of Humeanism

In this volume I have reviewed and critiqued the evolution of the Humean conception of the self in mid- to late-twentieth century Anglo-American moral philosophy through close attention to its use in the hands of several of its leading proponents, as they have developed its foundational notion of desire in response to certain basic dilemmas this conception generates. I have tried to track the ways in which the notion of desire has proliferated from the commonsense, prereflective concept of a desire, to that of desire as a theoretical construct, to that of desire as a dispositional response, to that of an unconscious desire, to that of a behaviorally revealed desire, to that of an internally coherent system of desires, to that of cardinally and then ordinally ranked desires, to the distinction between motivated and unmotivated desires, to that between first- and higher-order desires, to that between self-directed and other-directed desires, to that between object-dependent, principle-dependent, and conception-dependent desires, to that between blindfolded and fully informed desires. And I have tried to show that none of these sophisticated epicyclic refinements of the fundamental notion of a desire solve or avoid the basic dilemmas this notion engenders. I have tried to suggest that no such future epicyclic variations can; that their solution requires a paradigm shift away from desire altogether, and toward reason as the primary foundational factor in both thought and action.

In Volume II I try to show that solutions to the three problems listed in Chapter I.7.2.2 above, in addition to several others left so far untended, require dismantling and reconstructing within a broader, Kantian framework a constellation of familiar, reductive metaphysical dogmas, inherited from Positivism, which the Humean conception presupposes virtually without question. The influence of these dogmas extends far past the confines of Humean moral philosophy. Humean moral philosophy rather takes its cue from these more widespread, Positivist metaphysical doctrines that came to define late-twentieth century Anglo-American analytic philosophy in general. I find a great deal of significance in these doctrines – as I do in Humean moral philosophy itself; and so have no interest in doing away with them. However, it is in the nature of reductive doctrines of any kind to be inherently exclusive of views, assumptions, data and strategies that interfere with the reduction; and if there is one overarching theme of this project, it is that doctrinal and conceptual exclusion is exactly the wrong direction in which twenty-first century Anglo-American analytic moral philosophy ought to be moving. So my aim in Volume II is the less bellicose one of targeting, tempering, and situating the constructive kernels of these dogmas within a larger context of assumptions with which, shorn of their reductive and exclusionary aspirations, they might more or less peacefully co-exist. To that end, I close this first, critical half of the discussion with a brief conceptual map that locates the Humean conception of the self within its network of Positivist metaphysical dogmas – dogmas which lend one another mutual support and enhance the *prima facie* credibility of the Humean conception in relation to them. And I offer a very brief preview of how I intend to temper them in the second, substantive half of this discussion.

One such dogma that provides a rationale for the Humean position may be found in the *epiphenomenalist* view of the mind that regards mental contents as nonmaterial and so causally impotent by-products of physical processes, to the extent that they exist at all. If no mental contents have causal efficacy in behavior, then *a fortiori* thoughts, beliefs, deliberation, reflection and reasoning can have none. Reason as a source of moral motivation is ruled out by fiat. But I argue in Volume II, Chapter V that this inference could not provide support for the causal efficacy of desire without further argument to demonstrate that occurrent desires are or can be interpreted as exclusively physical, whereas occurrent thoughts and beliefs are exclusively mental. And I call into question whether it is possible to demonstrate this.

A second, companion dogma is that of *mind-body materialism*, which claims that only third-personally observable physical matter exists. This is the metaphysical bedrock on which attempts to reduce desire to the exclusively physical rely. Again my aim is not to deny the existence or causal efficacy of observable physical matter, even though the concept of physical matter is starting to look increasingly primitive from the perspective of theoretical physics. It is rather to make explicit what most contemporary moral philosophy takes for granted, i.e. that first-personally observable mental states exist just as robustly and efficaciously. I undertake this task as well in Volume II's Chapter V, along with a third with which it is intertwined, i.e. *behaviorism*, the view that there are no inner states – at least none worth scientific notice; and that only those expressed in overt behavior are of interest. This dogma has a particularly robust pedigree, in psychology as well as in mid-century Positivism.

Conjointly these three dogmas bear a strong family resemblance to a fourth: what I describe in Volume II, Chapter V as the ideal of spontaneity and what neoclassical economics describes as the theory of *revealed preference*, i.e. that all inner states are revealed in overt physical behavior, whether verbal or nonverbal. In these cases as well, it is not the concentrated attention to physical behavior to which I object, but rather the doctrinal insistence that physical behavior is all there is. I argue that the anti-psychologistic constellation of epiphenomenalism, materialism and behaviorism was the expression of a reactive, mid-century aversion to psychological interiority consequent on the trauma of the second World War, which it is now time to re-evaluate.

A fifth dogma of Humeanism is the assumption that *sentential propositions are the fundamental units of meaning*, the intellectual counterpart to the passional thesis targeted in this volume, that desire is the fundamental unit of motivation. If sentential propositions are the smallest units of meaning, then – unlike desire – the motivational efficacy of reason can reach no more deeply into the self than the motivational efficacy of sentences; and – unlike desire – can play no more atomistic, foundational or developmental role in the structure of the self. I argue against this assumption in Volume II, Chapter II. Obviously I do not reject the sentential proposition that sentential propositions have meaning. But I do reject the tacit assumption that they are the most basic units of meaning; and propose in Volume II, Chapters II and III a more fine-grained analysis of subsentential constituents to supplement it. Rethinking this fifth dogma is also necessary in order to show how reason can motivate action because if brain states are causally effective, and occurrent beliefs can be identified

with brain states as mind-body materialism supposes, then occurrent beliefs can be causally effective after all. But not all occurrent beliefs can be formulated sententially because not all thoughts, ideas, images or associations are formulable in sentential terms. A more fine-grained analysis increases the chances of tracking observationally those intellectual, non-passional mental events that occurrently precipitate action.

Connected with this is a sixth dogma of Humeanism, the “*is-ought*” distinction that confines truth to the former, descriptive realm and relegates to the latter, prescriptive realm the expression of emotions and attitudes. If meaning is located in sentential propositions, and meaningful sentential propositions can refer only to physical states of affairs, then in the end, no verbally expressed act of human intellection that does not refer to a physical state of affairs can be meaningful. I argue against this dogma in Volume II, Chapters V and IX, that so-called prescriptive sentences – i.e. commands and imperatives – are in fact categorical declarative sentences of the ordinary kind that are descriptive and explanatory of ideal states of affairs; and so are syntactically and epistemically on a par with those sentences descriptive and explanatory of non-ideal physical realities. Again the aim is to supplement rather than replace the canonical assumption.

These six dogmas interlock with those two models which conjoin to define explicitly *the Humean conception of the self*. Here the implication arrows point in both directions. The Humean conception accepts desire as the foundational element in both its model of motivation and its model of rationality. In order to extend its reach as an explanatory paradigm, it interprets desire behavioristically, as revealed preference theory requires. In so doing, it links expressions of desire exclusively with physical behavior, and so gives indirect support both to mind-body materialism and to epiphenomenalism. In rejecting the phenomenal and first-personal, it confines meaning to verbal behavior and the referents of language to physical states of affairs, thus providing support both to the primacy of sentential propositions as the basic units of meaning, and to the is-ought distinction as confining meaning to the physically verifiable.

Conversely, these six dogmas lend support to the Humean conception. Behaviorism implies an interpretation of desire of the sort that revealed preference theory supplies. Epiphenomenalism and mind-body materialism together underwrite the interpretation of such desires as exclusively physical, and the interpretation of rational judgments about ideal and therefore non-verifiable states of affairs as both causally impotent and meaningless. This interpretation is given further credibility by the presupposition that sentential propositions that refer to physically verifiable states of affairs are the fundamental units of meaning.

If only third-personally observable physical behavior exists, then first-personal mental states do not. Rather, they are manifested in verbal and other physical behavior to the extent that they exist at all. If the mind is epiphenomenal and causally ineffectual, then verbal behavior that purports to express thoughts and beliefs in sentential propositions not only manifests epiphenomenal and causally ineffectual mental states of the agent, but also communicates them in an epiphenomenal and causally ineffectual manner. *A fortiori*, verbal behavior that purports to express rational thoughts and beliefs in sentential propositions that refer to ideal states of affairs manifests epiphenomenal and causally ineffectual states of the

agent, communicates them epiphenomenally and ineffectually, and refers to nothing. Therefore reason is causally, i.e. motivationally ineffectual both first- and second-personally.

So not only are rational principles impotent to motivate our behavior first-personally. In addition, second-personal appeals to reason in others are impotent to motivate their behavior. Then in particular, the second-personal appeals to reason that form the foundation of philosophical practice in the Socratic metaethical tradition are in theory incapable of doing the job to which they purport to be committed. Hence philosophical practice itself as traditionally self-represented is without practical effect. Moreover, if all our actions seek to satisfy our desires, then maximizing the satisfaction of desire, i.e. utility, is our only final end, and this end is revealed in the physical behavior in which we engage. Then in particular, our physical behavior of, for example, analyzing, arguing, criticizing, theorizing and so on, maximizes our desires to do those things, and supplies some of the more innocuous reasons why we do philosophy. Similarly, physical behavior that maximizes the satisfaction of our desires to win, shine, show off, acquire power, or subjugate others supplies some of the more noxious ones. The transpersonally rational ideal of gaining reflective consensus on a transpersonally justifiable ethics, politics or society has nothing to do with it.

Taken together, then, these seven reductive dogmas – the Humean conception and the six metaphysical dogmas with which it is interdependent – exclude by fiat the very possibility that anything other than desire might be conceptually or psychologically significant for moral theory; indeed, that any conative state of the agent other than desire might truly be said to exist. It thus makes the case for egocentric rationality by denying not only the philosophical legitimacy but also the metaphysical existence of the cognitive and behavioral capacities that constitute transpersonal rationality. Under the weight of these radically exclusionary and repressive dogmas, it is little wonder that Kantians seem at a disadvantage in making their case.

These overly restrictive and reductive dogmas are examples of what I describe in Volume II, Chapter VII as *pseudorationality*. That is, they deny, dissociate or rationalize the exclusion of the very data of moral experience that are most in need of analysis and explanation, in order to preserve the illusion of rational intelligibility for those which remain. In Chapters VII, VIII, X, and XI respectively of Volume II, I offer four detailed test cases of pseudorationality, of increasing degrees of seriousness, realism and applicability to real-life circumstances, which illustrate the problems – for self-knowledge, knowledge of others and of the world, and for a realistic and effective moral response to them – that attachment to the mere illusion of rational intelligibility can precipitate. The price of attachment to these seven reductive dogmas of Humeanism is to leave unresolved the pressing problems of moral motivation and rational justification with which most Socratic metaethicists, not only those who are Humean devotees, are justifiably preoccupied. I have tried to suggest – and in Volume II try to demonstrate – that if we want to resolve them, we must leave all of these dogmas behind.