Moral Agency and Free Choice: Clarke’s Unlikely Success against Hume*

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Hume argued against claims about the role of reasoning in moral thought that had been defended by moral rationalists. In doing so, he criticized the doctrines of the rational intuitionist Samuel Clarke (1675–1729). Clarke has not received much attention from contemporary moral philosophers, and given that rational intuitionism has long fallen out of favor, he may seem an unlikely thinker to defend. Nevertheless, attention to his writings reveals some interesting arguments. By considering how Clarke could respond to Hume’s attacks, I believe we can make progress in understanding the nature of moral agency and what it is for reasons to have a justifying as well as an explanatory role.

I begin with a brief sketch of Hume’s moral philosophy. Hume writes, “Moral excite passions, and produce or prevent actions” (Treatise 457). He means to call our attention to the causal power that moral considerations have upon our passions, judgments, and actions. A politician who is offered a bribe decides she must refuse it on moral grounds. This is a causal conjunction of events. Hume believes that while moral philosophy may lead us to a reflective approval of the relevant causal connec-

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2 I will be focusing on the relevance of Clarke’s ideas for secular moral philosophy, although I recognize that these ideas are for him embedded within a theological framework.

3 Moral distinctions concern the morally relevant features of people’s actions, characters, and circumstances.
tions\(^4\), the main task for the moral philosopher is to explain how it is that such connections generally hold true for us. Investigating the natural psychological principles by which morally relevant causes lead to their effects is the task of the "anatomist", he claims, rather than that of the "painter". Hume writes,

There are different ways of examining the Mind as well as the Body. One may consider it either as an Anatomist or as a Painter; either to discover its most secret Springs & Principles or to describe the Grace & Beauty of its Actions.\(^5\)

The philosopher of human nature, like the anatomist, aims "to reduce the principles, productive of natural phenomena, to a greater simplicity, and to resolve the many particular effects into a few general causes, by means of reasoning from analogy, experience, and observation" (Enquiries 30). Hume’s aim in A Treatise of Human Nature is to provide a general, naturalistic and causal account of mental operations and human action, and to fit an analysis of the nature of moral distinctions into this account.\(^6\) I will argue that in this project he fails to analyze an important aspect of the nature of moral distinctions. We often conceptualize moral considerations as reasons for action, and we appeal to moral reasons in order to justify what we decide to do. Hume, however, would seem to admit that there are moral reasons for action only in the sense that considerations of a certain sort explain what we do. As I have suggested, he understands our reasoning about morals in terms of the causal effects of this reasoning upon our passions, judgments, and actions. Hume thinks a painter’s exhortations to virtue should themselves be analyzed in terms of their causes and effects. There is no distinct (non-causal) justifying role for moral reasons to play, viz., as rational grounds for drawing conclusions about what we ought morally to do, regardless of the effects such rational considerations actually have or would have upon our sentiments and behavior. We can understand Hume’s arguments against rational intuitionism as attempts to establish this point.

Hume’s exclusive emphasis on the explanatory role of reasons as mental causes, and his criticism of rationalistic accounts of justifying reasons have attracted some contemporary philosophers. Annette Baier, for example, follows Hume in arguing that normative theories of the purported claims of reason should be replaced by a

naturalistic moral psychology.\(^7\) I hope to bring out some shortcomings of this approach. I will argue, against Hume, that holding a view of explanatory reasons as causes is compatible with holding at the same time a non-causal conception of justifying reasons. When we claim that an agent would be justified in acting for certain reasons, and that she would be unreasonable if she does not do so, our judgment does not concern the role those reasons play in causal explanations. I do not wish to deny that moral reasons have an explanatory role, or that in their explanatory role they are to be viewed as causes. What I will take issue with is the idea that a causal analysis of the effects of moral distinctions upon us thoroughly analyzes the nature of moral reasons in their justifying as well as their explanatory roles. That is, what I regard as implausible is the idea that we can exhaustively study the normativa status and content of moral reasons, including the ideals and principles upon which they rely, by attending to their explanatory role. Hume’s arguments against rational intuitionism show that he believes this idea is not implausible, that to the contrary, a philosophy that rejects it is seriously misguided. I will follow Clarke in opposing him.

Clarke argues that a view of moral distinctions as nothing but natural causes of our judgments and actions is incompatible with the commitment to our own agency that is required in moral deliberation. He thinks, first of all, that we naturally view ourselves as metaphysically free agents, that is, as uncaused causes. He also thinks that because we view ourselves as metaphysically free, we face the moral problem of deciding which principles are those that ought to guide our actions. Now implicit in the standpoint of moral deliberation, he claims, is a commitment to our freedom in a second sense—a moral sense. Our moral freedom consists in the capacity we have to choose to act on those principles we regard as most reasonable and fitting. Clarke maintains that the commitment we maintain to our own freedom as moral agents is unavoidable insofar as we recognize ourselves as facing moral choices and is incompatible with at the same time viewing ourselves as influenced by natural causes to deliberate and choose as we do. I will argue that because Hume is inattentive to the importance of this aspect of the standpoint of agency, he fails to capture what it is for us to view reasons as figuring in moral justifications.

Clarke’s understanding of what is involved in the exercise of moral freedom is metaphysically complex. He claims that through reason alone we can become aware of immutable “relations of fitness” which underwrite correct value judgments and moral motives. These relations concern the fitness of certain actions to particular circumstances, such as that we “so deal with every Man, as in like circumstances we could reasonably expect he should deal with Us\(^8\)”, and that we “endeavor to promote in general, to the utmost of our power, the welfare and happiness of all men” (II, 621). Clarke argues that these duties arise naturally and conspicuously from the proper relations of a creature to his fellow-creatures (II, 622). Although these relations of fit-

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\(^4\) Christine M. Korsgaard argues that this reflective approval generates a kind of normativity. See The Sources of Normativity (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), 61–66.


\(^6\) When I refer to Hume’s view as naturalistic, I do not mean that he attempts to define moral distinctions or other normative notions as natural properties. Hume does not subscribe to the kind of reductive naturalism Moore vigorously attacked. Rather, he offers a psychological account of our moral sense and of moral motivation. Moreover, he thinks of psychology as a natural science. His naturalism is, nonetheless, an ethical naturalism. He is interested not in reducing our ethical concepts to non-ethical ones, but in explaining how we have come to use them as we do.


\(^8\) Samuel Clarke, A Discourse Concerning the Being and Attributes of God in vol. II of Works, 4 vols. (1738; New York, 1978), 619.
ness can be perceived or intuited by reason, their content is not determined by its activities. They present a metaphysically independent order of values of which we, as rational beings, can become aware. Clarke's view, then, is that rational intuition of an independent order of values gives us access to the content of morality. Our (correctly perceived) moral principles and ideas are true by virtue of their correspondence to a fixed metaphysical order. We can know, based on our own rational reflections, that moral judgments that correspond to relations of fitness are true. Clarke thinks relations of fitness are plainly evident to reason, and that widespread agreement on and commitment to moral principles that express the content of these relations confirms this. He also holds that the existence of this independent moral reality makes the claims of morality universally available to and binding for all rational beings. On the basis of our clear perception that certain moral principles are true, we are justified in inferring that all rational beings, including God, must be bound by them; the obligation of rational beings to abide by these principles is, he argues, "morally necessary".

I do not find in Clarke's writings, or in the writings of other rational intuitionists, a convincing defense of the metaphysical thesis that the content of moral reasons is drawn from rational intuition of an independent order of values. But Clarke's claims about the nature of moral necessity can be considered apart from the metaphysics of his rational intuitionism. The necessity with which morality obligates us means, he claims, that our rational apprehension of the basic truths of morality necessarily provides us with motives. I hope to bring out the sense in which Clarke's view of the nature of our motives as justifying reasons contrasts with Hume's view of motives as the naturalistic causes of our passions, judgments, and actions.

Hume argues that rational intuition of an independent metaphysical order of values cannot possibly constitute the source of moral distinctions. His argument goes as follows: It is the nature of morals to excite our passions, that is, to provide us with motives, and thereby to produce and prevent actions. Reason is utterly impotent in these matters. Thus moral distinctions cannot be based on reason (Treatise 457). Hume actually presents two quite different versions of this argument (Treatise 456-470). Briefly, they are:

1. The rational intuitionists claim that we can know a priori both that there are rational relations of fitness and that they provide us with motives, but this cannot be so. Motives are causes and no causal connections can be known a priori.

2. A posteriori investigation of the ultimate causes of judgment and action also supports the conclusion that reasoning alone never provides us with motives. Reason is slave to the passions. (Hume argues that there is no evidence of immutable and necessary relations of fitness. That is, there is no reason to think that a causal account of moral judgment and action requires positing the existence of such relations.)

Thus while the first argument aims to establish that we cannot know a priori that rational relations of fitness will always (i.e., necessarily) provide us with motives, the second argument claims there is reason to believe that rational relations of fitness in fact never provide us with motives. I will evaluate each argument in turn and whether it meets its target in Clarke's moral philosophy.

I. Hume's first argument: causal connections cannot be discovered a priori. Hume's identification of reasons as causal influences raises some difficult questions that Hume himself attempts to answer: How do moral distinctions have their impact? What can we know about their causal power? Hume believes the rational intuitionists argue that we can answer these questions on the basis of reason alone. He interprets their claim that relations of fitness determine the will a priori as the claim that we can know a priori that by virtue of exercising our rational faculties we will recognize moral reasons, and that these reasons explain certain of our judgments and actions by causing them. For instance, if a stranger's suffering presents us with reason to assist him, then we know a priori that if we consider rationally the predicament of a stranger in need, his suffering will cause us to come to his aid, or at least to judge that we ought to. Hume argues that relations of fitness could be "universally forcible and obligatory" only if they cause all rational persons to judge (if not to act) accordingly.

Tis one thing to know virtue, and another to conform the will to it. In order, therefore, to prove, that the measures of right and wrong are eternal laws, obligatory on every rational mind, 'tis not sufficient to shew the relations upon which they are founded: We must also point out the connexion betwixt the relation and the will; and it must take place and have its influence; tho' the difference betwixt these minds be in other respects immense and infinite. (Treatise 465)

Hume believes, however, that this cannot possibly be established a priori, for no causal connections can be known a priori (Treatise 466).
The details of this argument are provided by his theory of the nature of causal connections.

On the standard interpretation, Hume's investigation of causality leads him to the conclusion that the necessity of causal connections is grounded in the mental activity of the observer, not in any real relations that hold between objects. He argues that the necessity of correct causal inferences inheres in nothing but a "felt determination of the mind" in inferring effect from cause, given experience of their constant conjunction. The practical necessity or obligation we may ascribe to our practical conclusions is also subject to this analysis. According to Hume, the existence of a moral obligation depends on the existence of our idea of a necessary connection between certain features of a situation, our determining what virtue requires, and our (possibly) undertaking the required action. This means that the judgment that an agent is obligated to do some action is nothing but the habitual connection an observer, the self or another, draws between certain features of a situation and feelings of disinterested approval and expectation regarding the associated action, feelings which serve to produce or prevent actions.

It is important to see that Hume is not arguing that if relations of fitness could be demonstrated as a priori relations among ideas, it could not come to pass that they necessarily determine the will. Once a priori relations are called to our attention and habits of mind formed which grant them psychological prominence, it is possible that a necessary connection could form between the idea of these relations and our judgments or actions. The fact that we encounter a felt determination of our thought can come to constitute proof of necessary connections between objects or events, be they material or mental. Hume's point against the rationalists is that we cannot possibly know a priori what will cause what. He writes,

If we reason a priori, anything may appear able to produce anything. The falling of a pebble may, for aught we know, extinguish the sun; or the wish of a man control the planets in their orbits. It is only experience, which teaches us the nature and bounds of cause and effect, and enables us to infer the existence of one object from that of another. Such is the foundation of moral reasoning, which forms the greater part of human knowledge, and is the source of all human action and behaviour. (Enquiries 164)

All of our knowledge of necessary connections must be grounded in the experience of habitual associations, something Hume thinks the rational intuitionist cannot admit.

As the preceding makes clear, Hume's argument against rational intuitionism draws upon his more general thesis that no causal connection can be inferred a priori. But the rational intuitionists have an understanding of the sense in which reasons constitute motives different from Hume's. They claim that reasons constitute motives in that we can see, based on the exercise of our faculty of reason, that certain reasons are justified and hence that we ought to be guided by them. This is true, they claim, regardless of whether we actually act or even feel inclined to act in accordance with our justifying reasons, that is, regardless of whether our justifying reasons causally influence us. Reasons entail motives only in the sense that the agent who understands that reason recommends acting in a particular way (i.e., that he has a reason to so act) cannot rationally ask, "But why should I do that?" The expressions "having a reason" and "having a motive" turn out on this view to be more or less interchangeable. Clarke writes,

"Reason and Motive are in Effect two Words for the same Idea, only when it related to Thoughts we call it Reason, and when it related to Actions or Motives we call it Motive; though in this last Case, we often call it Reason as well as Motive; for I may say, a Man had no Reason, or a good Reason, for so doing, as well as say, that he had no Motive, or a good Motive, for so doing."

If prudence is required by reason, for instance, reason can lead us to see that prudence ought to guide our judgments and actions. We have a reason or motive to be prudent even if nothing causes us to act that way.

The dispute between rational intuitionism and Humean naturalism does not amount merely to a verbal dispute about the meaning of "motive". The issue is a larger one concerning the nature and possibility of moral justification. The rational intuitionists' view of the nature of moral agency and free choice.

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11 Hume thinks that a "natural" obligation, by contrast, depends on the presence of a natural passion or interest rather than a moral appraisal (Treatise 518).

12 "There is no known circumstance, that enters into the connexion and production of the actions of matter, that is not to be found in all the operations of the mind; and consequently we cannot, without a manifest absurdity, attribute necessity to the one, and refuse it to the other" (Treatise 404).

13 Clarke, An Essay Towards Demonstrating the Immateriality and Free-Agency of the Soul (London: J. Shuckburgh, 1760), 109–110. There is some dispute about whether Clarke was in fact the author of this text. This passage, however, clearly fits with ideas expressed in his other works.

14 It may seem odd to say that one can have a motive that provides one with no inclination to act. Consider, however, what we might mean when we say, "four people had a motive to murder Jones". We might believe that this is true even while we believe that some of the four may not even have considered murdering Jones. I thank a reader for Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie for suggesting this helpful clarification.
practical reason is that it can be used to justify our acceptance of certain principles as principles that ought to guide us. It does so by leading us to see clearly the truth of these principles based on the rational relations of the ideas they contain. Moral principles and the reasons they express do not need to be demonstrated as causes in order to count as (rational) motives, i.e., in order for it to be true that they obligate us. The considerations that comprise the moral truths we can discover via rational intuition obligate us regardless of what causes us to exercise our reason and thus to discover moral truths, or whether we are inclined to act or judge as we ought to. Indeed, the truths of morality might be such that we have obligations we have not yet recognized, and which therefore cannot influence what we do.

II. Clarke’s distinction between moral motives and physical causes. Let us look more closely at Clarke’s distinction between motives and causes. The relevant contrast, as he sees it, is between moral motives and physical causes. This distinction can be found in various of his writings, but primarily in the first of his Boyle Lectures of 1704, entitled, “A Discourse Concerning the Being and Attributes of God”. There Clarke argues that moral motives are the reasons or reasonable grounds for judgment and action, impressed upon us by our rational intuition of relations of fitness. Physical causes, on the other hand, are the causes of events in the natural order. The moral order of ideas is distinct from the causal order of natural events.

On Clarke’s view, that which accords with rational intuition is for us “morally necessary”, that is, obligatory. Rational intuition of relations of fitness necessarily determines the will of a rational being, and in doing so gives rise to a motive. But as I have claimed, what Clarke means by claiming this is just that rational intuition can justify a reason for action. A moral motive is nothing but the rational conviction that certain reasons are justified and hence that we ought to be guided by them; it is the acknowledgment that there is something one ought to do (or avoid doing). To say that rational intuition gives rise to a motive is to say that our conviction that we ought to do something is confirmed as rational by reference to our understanding of the content of a moral principle, a principle that expresses relations of fitness. We affirm that

we ought to save the life of a stranger because that is the right thing to do. Clarke’s argument continues by way of an analogy with our grasp of mathematical truths. He writes, “Assent to a plain speculative Truth [e.g., that twice two equals four], is not in a Man’s Power to withhold […] ‘tis the Necessity of his nature to do it”17. So also, he argues, our belief that we ought to act in accordance with what we clearly perceive to be a moral truth, is a requirement of rationality, a matter of moral necessity. He says, “[T]he one he ought to do, and it is as much his plain and indispensable duty; as the other he cannot but do” (II, 613). Clarke is advancing a conception of moral agency analyzed in terms of what he takes to be the rational implications of our clear understanding of certain moral principles. If an agent does not acknowledge that she ought to comply with the basic principles of morality, we conclude she is being unreasonable; “Men may dissemble and conceal from the world, the judgment of their own conscience; nay, by a strange partiality, the may even impose upon and deceive themselves” (II, 616).

The necessity of moral obligation, however, does not threaten our “free agency”, according to Clarke. He thinks the moral necessity generated by our apprehension of relations of fitness can and should be distinguished from the “necessity of fate”, that is, from the causal order of nature, and thus we can see that it is compatible with (and used to characterize) our liberty (II, 531, 572). Clarke’s view contrasts sharply with Hume’s focus on the causal production of mental and physical events. According to Clarke, rational assent to ethical truths should not be construed as a cause of our actions or of any other events; it concerns “something beyond and totally different from, the Genus of Motion”19. What is grasped through intuition is that certain considerations

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15 Physical causes should be distinguished from the broader conception of cause put forth by Hume. Below I show how Clarke’s distinction can be applied as a criticism of Hume’s conception as well.
16 Clarke, Works II, 565. As we have seen, for Clarke these orders are metaphysically distinct. All Clarke needs to say is that they are conceptually distinct.
17 Clarke, A Discourse Concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion and the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Revelation, Works II, 613.
18 His assertion could be construed as a causal claim open to empirical investigation only if the two components to the equation (our rational understanding and our “assent”) could be picked out as separate events and correlated by empirical methods. But he presents assent to what he believes are basic ethical truths to be conceptually inseparable from a rational understanding of them. There may still be a causal claim involved, however. Clarke may believe that there is a causal connection between the existence of an independent order of values and our perception of it. I defer discussion of this point.
19 Nevertheless, Clarke’s view that rational necessity is not physical necessity is compatible with acknowledging the existence of a felt determination of the mind corresponding to the order and succession of our ideas. The rationalist can concede to Hume as valid his description of the succession of our thoughts and the felt determination of connections among them. Clarke writes: “Thinking has in-
count as rational grounds for particular moral conclusions. Clarke believes we can understand and apply principles that give content to this idea. This is what constitutes our freedom as moral agents. As Clarke puts it, this “something beyond” is the very subject of free agency.

Clarke claims the subject of free agency is confused by the fact that the idea of an “act of volition” (or the idea of “self-motion”), as he also refers to it ascribed to free agents is ambiguous. In accordance with his distinction between moral motives and natural causes, Clarke distinguishes two senses of self-motion. The first sense of act of volition, or self-motion, construes it as the “beginning of action”. Clarke does not deny that our actions are caused in the natural order of events. The physical cause of our actions, he argues, is this power of self-motion. Clarke also affirms that the physical causes of our actions are related to the judgments of the understanding. We observe a regularity between our power of self-motion (the beginning of action) and the last judgment of our understanding, but he argues that we should not infer that judgments of the understanding cause self-motion.

The true, proper, immediate, physical Efficient Cause of Action, is the Power of Self-motion in Men, which exerts itself freely in consequence of the last Judgment of the Understanding. But the last judgment of the Understanding, is not itself a physical Efficient, but merely a Moral Motive, upon which the physical Efficient or motive Power begins to Act. (II, 565)

The operation of the power of self-motion as the physical cause of our actions is consequent upon the judgments of the understanding, but is not determined by it (except “morally”, that is, we ought to act in accordance with our rational judgments). Clarke claims construing deed Succession and Modes, and many other things in common with Motion; and so has every thing, with every thing: the thing I affirmed, was not that Thinking has no Property that Motion has; but that it has something in its Idea, which Motion has not; that it has something beyond, and totally different from, the Genus of Motion: And this, I still affirm, every Man has an intuitive Certainty of […]” Works III, 899. See also Clarke’s Third Defense, 825–832.

On Clarke’s view, principles emerge in the activity of searching for and giving reasons. I would like to thank Jerry Schneewind for helping to clarify this point.

Clarke argues that an agent’s liberty consists in “his being an Agent, that is, in his having a continual Power of choosing, whether he shall Act, or whether he shall forbear Acting. Which power of Agency or Free Choice […] is not at all prevented by Chains or Prisons: For a Man who chooses to indeavour to move out of his Place, is therein as much a Free Agent, as he that actually moves out of his Place” (II, 565–6). Schneewind points out that Clarke appears to make the first use of the term “agency” in its modern philosophical sense. The Invention of Autonomy, 313.

judgments of our understanding (or anything else) as deterministic causes of action would be incompatible with the liberty we possess in virtue of our power of self-motion in this first sense.

Our natural liberty is not threatened by self-motion as the physical cause of our actions, however, for empirical investigation of self-motion as the physical cause of action fails to produce any prior determining cause. Clarke thinks that while our actions are caused, they are not causally determined by prior events. As a cause of motion, we know the power of self-motion must be the property of matter, but as such we have little idea of it (II, 555, 558). We observe that our bodies are endowed with this power, but have no insight into its principle or operation. In this regard, Clarke agrees with Hume (cf. Enquiries 68). Just as Hume claims we have no idea of necessary connection as a real relation between objects, Clarke claims that as properties of matter, the will and other properties of the soul are “unknown properties” (II, 563–4). Clarke (unlike Hume) concludes that self-motion should be regarded as a spontaneous cause, “a Power of Acting without being antecedently acted upon” (II, 559).

Apart from being considered as a property of matter, the power of self-motion also has a second sense. It can be examined as a property of the soul or mind, namely, as a property of our faculty of reason and understanding. Clarke writes that self-motion or an “act of volition” in this second sense can be equated with the “last judgment of the understanding”: a judgment or decision to act. He writes, “For, the last Judgment of the Understanding, is nothing else but a Man’s final Determining, (after more or less Consideration,) either to Choose or not to

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20 There is a similarity between Clarke’s idea of self-motion as the beginning of action, and Chisholm’s idea of agent causation (“immanent causation”). See Roderick M. Chisholm, “Human Freedom and the Self”, in Free Will, ed. Gary Watson (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982), 24–35. On the idea of agent-causation in Clarke and Thomas Reid, see William L. Rowe, “Responsibility, Agent-Causation, and Freedom: An Eighteenth-Century View”, Ethics 101 (January 1991), 237–257. See also Rowe’s Thomas Reid on Freedom and Morality (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1991). Rowe analyzes Clarke’s concept of agency solely in terms of the first sense of self-motion (self-motion as the physical cause of action). He does not address the significance for Clarke of self-motion in our faculty of what I identify below as the second sense (self-motion as a property of our faculty of reason and understanding). As I read Clarke, self-motion is a property of the understanding and agency. As I read Clarke, self-motion is a property of the understanding and agency. Exploration of the second sense of self-motion may help to answer puzzles Rowe raises about the role to be assigned to an agent’s motives when she acts with libertarian freedom (“Responsibility, Agent-Causation, and Freedom”, 257).
Choose a thing; that is, 'tis the very same with the *Act of Volition*" (II, 565). He then reminds us that an act of volition (self-motion) in this second sense should be carefully distinguished from the beginning of action: "Beginning of Action, consequent upon the last Judgement of the Understanding, is not determined or caused by that last Judgment, as by the physical Efficient, but only as the Moral Motive" (II, 565). This leads to an important point. Clarke argues that in contrast with the mysterious case of self-motion as a property of matter, as a property of our faculty of reason and understanding we can understand the nature of the power of self-motion and its principles of action. It is the power or capacity with which a moral agent finds reasonable motives (reasons) and bases her choices upon them. Our ignorance of efficient or physical causes does not interfere with our ability to grasp the reasonable grounds of action, or with our capacity to understand that as agents faced with deliberative problems about how we ought to act, we rely on such grounds. As suggested above, Clarke claims it is in virtue of having the ability to choose in accordance with reasons that an agent is an agent at all. He says that "agency" and "free choice", "are precisely identical terms" (II, 566).

Clarke believes we are firmly committed to a view of ourselves as free agents endowed with self-motion as spontaneous physical causality. He thinks the awareness we have of our power of self-motion in this (first) sense gives rise to the problem of how one ought to choose among possible courses of action.23 Now Clarke is clear that a normative question about what to do cannot be answered with a prediction based on evidence, it demands a decision based on reasons.24 Moreover, the task of rational decision making forces us to think of our minds as active rather than passive faculties; we must think of ourselves as free to draw conclusions about how we ought to act based upon reasoned deliberation, rather than viewing our will as determined by the "passive reception of impulse" (II, 558). In fact, when faced with practical decisions, we cannot avoid viewing ourselves as capable of this. As Stuart Hampshire puts it,

> It is essential to human action, and it is a necessary condition of human freedom, that it should be imposible that while I am deciding what to do, and while I am therefore working towards the state of being certain what I shall do, I should at the same time ask myself the question – ‘Knowing myself as I do, what am I in fact likely to do?’

Because we take ourselves to be free to act, it makes sense and is meaningful for us to reason about how to act. In doing this we ascribe to ourselves the power of self-motion in Clarke's second as well as his first sense, that is, the power of self-motion as a judgment of the understanding.26 We exercise that freedom by deliberating in accordance with reasonable principles and drawing conclusions about what to do that we think are supported by such principles. Clarke thinks that once we survey possible reasons for action and come to understand which actions are most fitting, we realize that it is morally incumbent upon us to act on our best judgment of the moral merits of the alternatives. Only that course of action could be justified. We need not and cannot confirm that our free and reasoned choice is the physical cause of our actions and further judgments, but the choices we make and our affirmation of the reasons behind them are important nevertheless: they comprise our moral agency.27

24 Clarke claims that if we do not ascribe to ourselves the power of volition as a property of our faculty of reason and understanding, we could not choose either property of our faculty of reason and understanding, (II, 556-5).
25 Although Clarke does not carry this through to its potential anti-realist conclusion, his argument anticipates Immanuel Kant's famous argument in the third section of the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*. There Kant describes two standpoints. The empirical standpoint is that from which we understand events in the causal order of nature. The practical point of view is the one from which we deliberate and decide how to act. According to Kant, it is only from this latter point of view that we think we can and must regard ourselves as free. His argument is that we need only ascribe to ourselves "self-motion" in what Clarke describes as the second sense, self-motion as a property of our rational faculties. From an empirical point of view, we can affirm the possibility of physical determination. Kant also argues that the very *content* of morality can be generated from the supposition of our autonomy, the standpoint of practical reason. Here Kant and Clarke...
Clarke's notion of a physical cause is admittedly narrower than Hume's conception of causal connections, and it may seem that Clarke's argument that moral agency is associated with a view of ourselves as unencumbered by physical determinants in the natural order (self-motion in the first sense) could be accommodated by Hume in view of his broader, deflationary conception of causality. Recall that for Hume, causal connections are nothing but regularities from which we draw inferences. In his view, an action is caused by an agent if it can be explained by (bears a discernible connection to) the agent's character; it fits into a regular pattern of the agent's behavior. That is, on Hume's view, the aspect of agency regularly connected with action as its cause has to do with the agent's having a character. The existence of causal connections between an agent's character, her will, and her action can be asserted without affirming the stricter idea of physical causality which Clarke thinks is a threat to the presuppositions of moral agency. The regular connections we notice between an agent's character and her actions are no threat to moral responsibility, Hume argues. He thinks that the possibility of moral agency does not presuppose that we think of our deliberation and choice as free of the causal influence of feelings we habitually associate various character traits. He thus disputes Clarke's idea that agency requires freedom in the second sense (the freedom of reason and understanding).

According to Hume's understanding of the moral point of view, the relevant causal connections are those that hold between character traits that constitute virtues or vices, and the actions regularly associated with these traits. Virtuous character traits cause in us a peculiar sentiment of approval (and the vices, disapproval): it is the approval a "judicious spectator" or impartial observer would feel when considering the possible benefits of these dispositions for persons who have a "particular connexion" with the agent. More exactly, a character trait is picked out as virtuous by the approval we feel when we sympathetically identify with those persons who will benefit from the agent's disposition to act in the associated ways. As moral agents, then, we act virtuously when we display a settled tendency to take a course of action that benefits or is useful to ourselves and those persons most affected by what we do. On Hume's understanding, in contrast with Clarke's insistence on the freedom of moral agency, the possibility of moral agency relies on the existence of regular (causal) connections between character traits and actions.

In response, Clarke would argue that a view of our choices and actions as regularly guided by the sentiments of disinterested approval and disapproval still falls short of the view of ourselves as free agents that we must take up when deliberating about how to act. The issue is not whether our actions can be causally explained by reference to our psychological tendencies (although, as we have seen, Clarke thinks they cannot). It is rather that as we deliberate about the reasons we have, we cannot accept that our sentiments cause us to draw the normative conclusions we reach. Clarke's view is that no regularity can be established between a free agent's deliberative perspective on her choice and the causes of her choice as these lie in her character, sentiments, or anything else in the natural order. The fact that reliance upon a particular sentiment has led us to the right course of action in the past cannot serve as an adequate guide to deliberation. What we want to know is whether we now have a justification for acting on our feeling of approval or disapproval. Our ability to make this assessment does not require us to understand the efficient or physical causes of our deliberation or the likely effects of our deliberation upon our sentiments and behavior. Of course, Hume might agree that the agent's point of view should not be confused with that of the observer. The agent's "reason" is given not by an inductive generalization, but simply by the feeling of disinterested approval itself; to think something a good reason to act is to feel a cer-

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28 Treatise, 581, 602. On the role imagination and sympathy play in generating these sentiments in us, see Rawls, Lectures in the History of Ethics, 84–96, and Elizabeth Radcliffe, "Hume on Motivating Sentiments, the General Point of View, and the Inculcation of 'Morality'”, Hume Studies 10 (April 1994), 37–58.

29 For a discussion of the active interest Hume thinks we take in cultivating our own virtue, see Charlotte Brown, "From Spectator to Agent: Hume's Theory of Obligation", Hume Studies 10 (April 1994), 19–35.


31 For an argument of this sort see Thomas Nagel, "Moral Luck", in Moral Questions (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979).
tain pleasurable sensation connected with the prospect of that action. Clarke, however, would object to this “passive” construal of our moral agency. The fact that consideration of some course of action is causally connected with my experience of a feeling of disinterested approval does not in itself provide me with a sufficient reason for choosing that course of action. I can still ask whether I have good reason to rely upon that feeling to guide me. To determine this I must consult normative principles about which course of action is morally defensible. Free agency is a point of view from which we affirm that nothing but one’s reasonable judgment of the merits of the alternatives ought ultimately to determine one’s choice.

As we have seen, the rational intuitionists claim that the content of moral truths is fixed by an independent moral order. But I believe their basic point does not depend upon this metaphysical claim. Whether or not one accepts their intuitionistic metaphysics, one could accept the following claim as valid: the natural causes of our moral reasoning and the effects of this reasoning on our judgment and behavior do not determine the normative status of our deliberative conclusions. As moral agents we are sometimes confronted with the problem of which grounds for action are grounds we can endorse as morally justifiable. This forces us to go beyond observing how we feel given certain causal inputs. We are pressed to view our actions as grounded in considerations we can reasonably defend. This requires us to formulate reasonable moral principles to spell out the claims we make about where our obligations lie. Our moral autonomy consists in this activity.

Let us briefly examine the implications of Clarke’s position on the nature of our justifying reasons for his view of the content of morality. Clarke believes it is in the nature of morality to correct for our tendency toward partiality. Our “absurd passions, and corrupt or partial affections” (II, 612) make our sentiments unreliable as guides for assessing the moral merits of particular options. Persons tend to favor themselves, and their own families, cities and nations. But moral reasoning reveals, for instance, that by the public benefit must not be understood the interest of any one particular nation, to the plain injury or prejudice of the rest of mankind; any more than the interest one city or family, in opposition to their neighbours of the same country: but those things only are truly good in their own nature, which either tend to the universal benefit and welfare of all men, or at least are not destructive of it. (II, 610–11)

32 An anonymous reader for Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie helped me to formulate this point.

33 Hume also recognizes the importance of the “artificial” virtues of justice, i.e., the virtues of impartiality (equity, fairness, fidelity, et cetera). The passages I focus on are only part of the story. For an interesting recent discussion of Hume on justice, see Jacqueline Taylor, “Justice and the Foundations of Social Morality in Hume’s Treatise”, Hume Studies 24 (April 1998), 5–30.
to demonstrate a priori that the rational grounds for our “acts of volition” (the reasons for our choices) are or must be causes of the motions of our bodies, for what makes our reasons justifying reasons is not determined by whether or how they cause us (or anyone else) to act. Embracing a view of ourselves as capable of choosing the grounds on which to act, turns us toward a view of the merits, not the psychological causes and effects, of particular choices, and these merits are assessed by appeal to reasonable moral principles. Hume neglects the stance from which this assessment takes place. He thus misconstrues rational intuitionism and his first argument fails to meet its target.

III. Hume’s a posteriori argument against rational intuitionism. Hume believes that rational intuitionists cannot sensibly reject altogether the idea that the content of moral reasoning can be understood by analyzing its causes. The rational intuitionists must argue, he thinks, that the relevance of the study of causes must hold at least with regard to every de facto “well-disposed mind”. To understand which reasons are justified, we must look to what causes the virtuous person to reach conclusions about how to judge and act. How else could we give content to the idea of moral reasons? The rational intuitionists must be able to show that the cause of the virtuous person’s judgments and actions is her rational recognition of relations of fitness. For example, the virtuous agent, it might be claimed, keeps her promises or repays her debts because of the causal influence of her rational recognition that those with whom she contracted are her equals, and that that is how she would expect them to deal with her. Therefore, the rational intuitionists must at least show how it is possible for an agent’s actions to be caused by the fact that she has justifying reasons, but they cannot do so, thinks Hume. Here is his view of the matter: A posteriori investigation of causes reveals that reason alone never constitutes the ultimate motive (cause) of moral judgment or action. He writes, “Reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them” (Treatise 415).

Hume argues that since the power and necessity of causes correspond to no impression we receive passively from our perception of real relations, the fact that we find causal connections between events at all tells us something about the nature and activity of our thinking. Hume thinks it points to the power of associations and their repetitions in structuring our understanding and directing our thoughts. He argues that the most basic and general principles of the mind are three basic principles of natural association, “viz., resemblance; a picture naturally makes us think of the man it was drawn for. Contiguity; when St. Dennis is mentioned, the idea of Paris naturally occurs. Causation; when we think of the son, we are apt to carry our attention to the father” (Treatise 662). Hume claims the causes of these principles are “mostly unknown, and must be resolv’d into original qualities of human nature” (Treatise 13). These general principles are among the few causes of mental operations that Hume the philosopher of human nature aimed to uncover.

In addition to natural principles of association, Hume also describes philosophical relations as principles of mind that lead us to unite simple ideas to form complex ones. Hume writes, “All kinds of reasoning consist in nothing but a comparison, and a discovery of those relations, either constant or inconstant, which two or more objects bear to each other” (Treatise 73). This comparison and discovery, or “philosophical reasoning”, may proceed in the absence of natural associations. Philosophical reasoning covers “any particular subject of comparison, without a connecting principle [of natural association]” (Treatise 14). Hume uncovers seven principles of mind which he argues lead us to form the complex ideas described by philosophical relations, four of which he regards as knowable a priori. The four relations are: resemblance, contrariety, degrees in quality, and proportions in quantity or number. His claim is that reason alone can determine whether ideas stand in these relations. Hume’s challenge to the rational intuitionists is to point to a rational relation that is not reducible to one of these four relations. He believes it has not been and cannot be done.

Shoul’d it be asserted, that the sense of morality consists in the discovery of some relation, distinct from these, and that our enumeration was not compleat, when we comprehended all demonstrable relations under four general heads: To this I

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34 Similarly, Hume could argue that the rationalist should argue that we cannot explain what causes a person to act rationally without invoking justifying reasons.

35 They are: resemblance, identity, space and time, quantity or number, quality, contrariety, cause and effect.

36 Actually Hume says that, “Three of these relations are discoverable at first sight, and fall more properly under the province of intuition than demonstration” (Treatise 70). In the Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding, Hume claims the province of demonstration concerns only the proportions of quantity or number (165). Arithmetical reasoning is the prime example of this. But I leave open the question of whether on Hume’s view this provides the only real example of demonstrative reasoning.
know not what to reply, til some one be so good as to point out to me this new relation. ‘Tis impossible to refute a system, which has never yet been explain’d. In such a manner of fighting in the dark, a man loses his blows in the air, and often places them where the enemy is not present. (Treatise 464)

Now we have seen that Hume has not ruled out the possibility that empirical investigation could discover that a priori reasoning is consistently followed by certain interests and passions, and even that there is a causal connection between them. Does this amount to a concession to the rational intuionists? Why doesn’t this grant to the rationalists that they could possibly establish their case? Perhaps it turns out in fact that rational intuition of relations of fitness must be appealed to in order to explain how we come to form certain fundamental moral motives (i.e., psychological tendencies). Maybe our acquisition of such motives is a brute fact that can be causally explained in no other way. Clarke would reject this idea, but rational intuitionists who accept that from an empirical point of view we can explain action causally on the basis of motives could take a different position. In fact, W. D. Ross and G. E. Moore argue just this point. If they are right, Hume must admit that sometimes philosophical reasoning gives rise to passions, which in turn guide subsequent judgments and actions.

Hume’s theory cannot rule out this empirical possibility, yet he rejects it nonetheless. Hume believes that his experimental method of investigation reveals that philosophical relations, unlike natural relations of associations and the pleasures and pains to which they give rise, are not fundamental or original, and hence inexplicable, principles of mind. He argues that even if we find that philosophical reasoning is followed by passion and action, we can still investigate the cause of this entire chain of events (mental and physical), and trace it Naturalistically to more fundamental principles of mind. Who could doubt that there must be some interest or desire that draws us to engage in abstract reasoning, particularly where morality is concerned?

It is certainly plausible to think that moral reasoning must be learned. Experience must lead us to formulate its fundamental ideas and principles. Clarke would agree with Hume about this. Clarke’s view is that the idea that moral truths are grasped through rational intuition is compatible with the idea that morality is learned. Mathematical truths also have to be learned. Relations of fitness may not be immediately or obviously self-evident. He claims,

[M]en have great need to be taught and instructed in some very plain and easy, as well as certain Truths; and, if they be important Truths, that then men have need also to have them frequently inculcated, and strongly inforced upon them [...] (II, 618)

Rational intuitionism is compatible with the idea that we come to form certain ideas about right and wrong, obligations and duties, etc., through a natural and gradual process of learning, and through reinforcement of what we have learned.

In the spirit of Hume’s naturalistic project of tracing operations of the mind to their most basic causal principles, we are urged by Hume to ask, what gives rise to philosophical reasoning? Or perhaps, how does moral learning take place? Hume believes empirical study reveals that practical deliberation and action always follow given passions or interests (Treatise 413–18). In other words, the passions always ultimately account for our moral agency. They are, Hume maintains, the true influencing motives of the will. But what Hume shows, if he is right, is just that reasoning about the moral fitness of possible actions is caused, and caused by the influence of some passion. This does not defeat the rational intuitionists’ claim that this causal story does not determine that or how reasons justify, or even what causal role they might play. Their arguments for that claim stand.

I think the rational intuitionists could accept Hume’s claim that something – an interest, a desire – must prompt us to exercise our reason and to obey its dictates, and thus it cannot be reason alone that leads us to morality. But on their view it is reason alone that leads us to moral truths in the sense that it can only be reason that enables us to see moral truths as truths, and to understand that they are justified for us. Once we formulate fundamental moral (or mathematical) truths clearly, Clarke argues, we can grasp them as true and necessarily binding upon us. In virtue of our reason, this can appear to us “as plain and conspicuous as the shining of the Sun at Noon-day” (II, 619). This may be so even if we never exercise our faculty of reason without the promp-

37 Cf. Rawls, Lectures in the History of Ethics, 81f.
39 See Sir David Ross, The Good and the Right (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1930), ch. VII, and G. E. Moore, Principia Ethica (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1903), 178f., 217–219. Unlike Ross and Moore, Clarke thought that rational relations of fitness also determine the will of God. Surely in Hume’s favor is the fact that we could not have the right kind of evidence for that conclusion.
40 Clarke argues that a system of rewards and punishments are necessary “to maintain the practice of virtue and righteousness” (II, 629). See also II, 641–2.
ting of our passions, and never do a moral action without non-moral incentives.

Clarke would differ with Hume on how it is that a study of the virtuous person can help us to understand what count as moral reasons. Instead of looking to the emotive causes and the emotive and behavioral effects of the virtuous person's deliberations, he would urge us to look at the considerations the virtuous person would cite when thinking clearly. That is, we should look to the principles the virtuous person would cite as relevant and reasonable. Clarke holds we all have some understanding of which principles these would be. We need only consult our own understanding of what morality requires of us. The basic truths of morality are within our reach. Of course, our grasp of these truths is a matter different from establishing when it is that a rational agent does actually act for moral reasons. Questions about the causal explanation of action, however, are addressed to the observer's stance, that is, the explanatory point of view. Clarke's moral philosophy is oriented to normative questions posed from the agent's point of view. We can know, he thinks, which reasons would provide justification were we to act on them. That is the province of moral thought. How confident I should be that the moral reason I affirm will in fact be my reason for acting is something Clarke thinks we are not in a position to determine.

Clarke's rational intuitionism does not fit the target of Hume's second argument any better than it fits the first. This leaves Hume simply with the assertion that we cannot make sense of philosophical relations of the sort the rational intuitionists defend. But the rational intuitionists claim, I believe convincingly, that our ability to understand and apply moral ideals and principles is evidence enough that we can make sense of reason's justifying role in moral thought. In this sense, we are all familiar with the importance of our freedom as moral agents. This freedom consists in the exercise of our capacity to deliberate and choose in accordance with reasonable principles of morality, and in so doing to appeal to morality in justifying our conduct.